

DEUTSCH-BRITISCHE GESELLSCHAFT

64th Young Königswinter Conference

Wednesday 24th July – Sunday 28th July 2024, Berlin

Conference Report



What sort of democracy are we striving for?

1. Societies are becoming more polarized. How strong are our liberal democracies?
2. Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?
3. The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?

Programme

Conference Venue

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Date

24 - 28 July 2024

TOPICS

1. Societies are becoming more polarized. How strong are our liberal democracies?
2. Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?
3. The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?

Wednesday, 24 July 2024

From 12:00	Arrival and check in
13:00 – 14:00	Light Lunch at EAB
14:00 – 15:00	Get to know your fellow participants EAB garden or lunch room
15:00 – 16:30	Opening of the conference By THOMAS MATUSSEK , Ambassador ret. Chairman of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft e.V. and the Conference Co-Chairs DR BIRGIT BUJARD , Deputy Chair, Young Königswinter Alumni e.V. Executive Manager, Institute for Political Science and European Affairs, University of Cologne JOHN KAMPFNER , Journalist and Author Welcome by MANUEL KNAPP , Director of Studies, Europäische Akademie Berlin Opening discussion: After the elections - what will change and what must change? Dresscode: Smart Casual
16:30	Group photo take and Coffee break
17:00 – 18:30	Introductions to the study group topics by selected participants <i>Group I:</i> Florian Gieseler / Ellie Catherall <i>Group II:</i> Luise Marie Zehle / Finn Provan <i>Group III:</i> Mehdi Kocakahya / Calum Matthews
19:00	Walk to the Ambassador's residence Höhmannstr. 10, 14193 Berlin-Grunewald
19:30	Dinner hosted by KIERAN DRAKE Deputy Head of Mission, British Embassy in Berlin Dresscode: Business Casual
as of 21:30	Time off

Thursday, 25 July 2024

from 07:00	Breakfast
08:15	joint walk to S-Bahn station Grunewald, transfer to Federal Ministry of Finance, Wilhelmstraße 97, 10117 Berlin
09:20	arrival at Federal Ministry of Finance
10:00 – 11:30	Lecture with regard to the topic of group II: "Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?" <u>Speaker:</u> DR NICOLAUS HEINEN Director General, Financial Policy and Economic Fundamental Questions, Federal Ministry of Finance
11:30	Return to EAB with S-Bahn
13:00	Lunch at EAB
14:00 – 15:30	Lecture with regard to the topic of group III "The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?" <u>Speaker:</u> CHARLOTTE FREIHSE Project Manager Upgrade Democracy; Digitalization and the Common Good, Bertelsmann Foundation
15:30	Coffee break
16:00 – 17:30	Lecture with regard to the topic of group I "Societies are becoming more polarized. How strong are our liberal democracies?" <u>Speaker:</u> ALEXANDER SCHÄFER Legal and Policy Officer, Inspire, Debate, Engage and Accelerate Action (I.D.E.A), Presidential Advisory Service, European Commission
Rest of day	<i>Spare time</i>

Friday, 26 July 2024

from 07:00	Breakfast
9:00 – 10:30	Study group sessions for Topics 1 + 2 begin Selection of Chair and Rapporteur
10:30	Coffee break
11:00 – 13:00	Study groups
13:00	Lunch at EAB
14:00 – 15:00	Study groups/ preparation of reports
15:00 – 16:00	Presentation of working group results for Topic 1
16:00	Coffee Break
16:30 – 17:30	Presentation of working group results for Topic 2
17:30 – 18:30	<i>Spare time</i>
18.30	joint walk to S-Bahn station Grunewald, transfer to dinner venue Schleusenkrug Biergarten Müller-Breslau-Straße 14b, 10623 Berlin
19:00 – 21:00	Dinner with an introduction to the Young Königswinter Alumni e.V.
as of 21:00	Time off

Saturday, 27 July 2024

from 07:00	Breakfast
09:00 – 10:30	Group discussions on Topic 3 begin
10:30	Coffee break
11:00 – 13:00	Group discussions on Topic 3/ preparation of reports
13:00	Lunch at EAB
14:00 – 15:30	Presentation of working group results Plenary session
	Dresscode: Smart Casual
15:30	Coffee break
16:00 – 17:00	Continuation of presentation of working group results
18:00	joint walk to bus stop Taubertstr., transfer to Caprivibrücke (departure point of the boat)
19:00 – 21:00	Boat trip through the historical centre of Berlin with a buffet
	Dresscode: Smart Casual
22:00	End of Conference

Sunday, 28 July 2024

from 07:00

Breakfast and check-out

THE CONFERENCE HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE BY THE KIND SUPPORT OF:



Auswärtiges Amt



British Embassy
Berlin

Königswinter Stiftung



DEUTSCHE BÖRSE
GROUP



**Rud Pedersen
Public Affairs**

:RUD PEDERSEN GROUP

west**energie**

Topics for the 64th Young Königswinter Conference 2024

Topic 1: Societies are becoming more polarized. How strong are our liberal democracies?

With the rise of fake news and conspiracies, is there/should there be a limit to freedom of opinion when it comes to the defense of democracy?

The role of young voters and social media: what are the impacts on future elections?

What is more important in elections, to have a democratic process or a democratic outcome? How do we make sure more people feel represented by their governments again?

Which electoral system is better at dealing with populism, proportional representation or first past the post?

Topic 2: Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?

In order to face the challenges arising from climate transition, demographic change and the transformation of our economies, do we have to work harder, less or smarter?

Different generations have different priorities when it comes to work, life and salaries. Instead of pitting generations against each other, how can we learn and benefit together to facilitate the transformation for everyone?

Digitalisation, investments in infrastructure, climate transition, climate justice: how to go about it (incentives vs bans) and who is paying for it

How do states have to change in light of these fundamental questions of transformation? How much of the burden should be carried by the state, as opposed to the individual?

Topic 3: The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?

Consequences of the elections in the European Parliament, the US and the UK

In light of multiple crises around the world, have we taken our eyes off the fight against global warming? How do we prepare for an increasingly disrupted and disruptive global climate that has the potential to exacerbate geopolitical unrest?

Defending democracy in practice: under which circumstances would you join the army? How do we defend democracies from threats from within?

Do we need to introduce a year of National Service?

Report

Background

The 64th Young Königswinter Conference took place in Grunewald at the Europäische Akademie Berlin (EAB) from 24-28 July 2024. Around 45 participants, half German and half British, came together to delve into the overarching theme of 'what sort of democracy are we striving for?'. Focus areas across the four days included: today's threats to our liberal democracies, such as polarisation and populism; economic and financial questions in an age of transformation; and what democracy means in practice. Participants came from varied professional backgrounds with diverse subject matter expertise. From politics to business, academia, diplomacy, science, finance, the public sector, the media, and more, the conference provided the opportunity to share personal opinions, engage in challenging conversations, identify new ideas, and foster meaningful understanding among UK-German youth. All whilst having fun and making new friends, of course.

2024 presents a bumper year of elections, with almost half of the global population heading to the polls. Much of the conference conversation centred on the results of the UK and EU elections earlier in the summer, as well as the predictions for the US vote in November. Everyone agreed that none of these political moments exists in isolation, however, and so many discussions focused on how liberal democracies, such as in UK and Germany, should face up to the wider geopolitical challenges in today's ever more contested and unstable world - from the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, including questions of national service; tackling climate change, including climate justice; harnessing the technological transformation, including AI and digitalisation; financial and economic shifts, particularly with demographic change; and managing polarisation and the popularity of populism, including the rise of social media and the often associated disinformation streams.

Throughout the conference, the need for closer cooperation between the UK and Germany - bilaterally and via international fora - to overcome these challenges was clear. Following the new UK government's promise for a reset on relations with its European partners, the conversations at the Young Königswinter Conference came at a perfect time: an opportunity to foster people-to-people links, for now and for the future.

Wednesday, 24 July 2024

Opening of Conference

"If you want things to remain as they are, everything has to change" (Il Gattopardo, Tomasi di Lampedusa). This is how the Chairman of the Deutsch-Britische Gesellschaft, Ambassador ret. Thomas Matussek, opened this year's conference. He reminded the group of the growing number of threats - both internally and externally - facing Europe today, putting into question the relative peace, prosperity and flourishing liberal democracy we have all enjoyed since 1945. There is no choice but to find solutions. The EAB Director of Studies, Manuel Knapp, welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of cross-border connections in today's unstable world. He encouraged the group to make the most of the networking opportunities during the conference, a sentiment shared by the Conference Co-Chairs, Dr Birgit Bujard and John Kampfner.

Both emphasised the conference as a diverse and inclusive forum, where respectful disagreement and challenge would be encouraged, as an opportunity to listen and learn from one another.

Opening Discussion

After the elections – what will change and what must change?

The session opened with a discussion about the implications of recent and upcoming elections in the EU, UK, and Germany, with a particular focus on German perspectives of the UK Labour Party's victory and potential shifts in the UK political landscape. Participants debated the differences between the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system and Germany's proportional representation, noting that while Germany's system fosters stability and broader representation, it complicates nationwide policy-making and could be risky given the strength of the AfD in certain states. The conversation also touched on political culture, comparing the UK's performative and often elitist politics with Germany's preference for stability and less charismatic leadership, highlighting a public desire for evidence-based changes and increased political trust.

The discussion further explored how to rejuvenate liberal democratic institutions amid rising populism and disillusionment. Simplistic narratives from parties like the AfD gain traction due to dissatisfaction with complex political issues like climate change and migration. There was a consensus on the need for democratic parties to deliver tangible results without compromising their principles. The conversation also emphasised the importance of local governance, as seen in Prime Minister Starmer's engagement with metro mayors, and the role of cultural and educational initiatives in bridging political divides. Additionally, the participants noted the historic roots and recurring patterns of populism in both the UK and Germany, stressing the necessity of addressing difficult questions to prevent further shifts to the right.

Study Group Introductions

Two participants of each study group were asked to present their initial thoughts on their topic.

Group 1 – Societies are becoming more polarised. How strong are our liberal democracies?

The first presenter emphasised the critical role of education in sustaining liberal democracy, particularly focusing on young people who will eventually become voters. He highlighted the importance of media literacy and the ability to critically analyse texts, noting that many young people lack these skills. This deficiency leads to what is described in "reinforcement theory", where individuals ignore opinions that challenge their beliefs. However, he remains hopeful as he sees young students, in his experiences as a teacher, creating their own ethical guidelines and recognising their power in production and consumption, suggesting they do have the necessary tools to uphold democratic values.

The second presenter argued that liberal democracies are currently weak because they rely on public support, which is waning due to perceived failures in delivering justice, human rights, and rule of law. Populism, according to Cas Mudde, emerges from these failures and threatens

democracy by undermining institutions and increasing inequality. The presenter noted the rise in socio-economic and health inequalities, driving people toward populism, with social media acting as a catalyst for this shift. She also mentioned that the first-past-the-post system could be contributing to the rise of the far right, as people feel their marginalised voices are not heard. Despite this, the presenter pointed to France as an example of young people rallying to defend democracy. She observed that the UK's younger generation is less inclined towards the far right compared to other European countries, with a gender divide showing young men more likely to vote far right than young women. She suggested leveraging technology to engage young people with democratic values, questioning whether liberal democracy can thrive within a capitalist framework and if there is a perfect liberal democracy in existence.

Group II – Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?

The first presenter discussed their professional experience working for a Scottish public agency and the evolving concept of prosperity beyond economic growth. She emphasised the importance of a 'wellbeing economy,' focusing on improving citizens' wellbeing - rather than merely increasing GDP, which often overlooks factors like inequality and long-term sustainability. Scotland is shifting its economic priorities toward achieving net-zero emissions, promoting nature-positive behaviours, and enhancing population wellbeing - including addressing income and wealth equality, gender pay gaps, and ensuring a real living wage. This approach involves requiring companies to prove their commitment to these goals before receiving funding, raising the question of whether this policy serves as an incentive or a ban. What is certain is that these shifts from traditional economic metrics to more holistic and sustainable criteria reflect a significant change in how prosperity is measured and pursued. Only time will tell if the approach can also pay off.

The second presenter explored the concept of a transformative age, highlighting the century shift in the world's largest companies from oil and banking to pharmaceuticals, luxury goods, and tech - reflecting changes in societal needs and economic priorities. The presentation focused mainly on the global economy and the need for sustainable investment, emphasising that everyone, mainly through their pension fund, is connected to these large corporations. The presenter noted that finding effective green and sustainable investment solutions is challenging and that regulations must be global rather than limited to regional contexts. Transition-focused solutions are essential, involving collaboration with problem-causing companies to develop future-proof practices. Governments play a critical role in this process, but face difficulties making decisions that might impact living costs, such as higher taxes. Balancing regulation and innovation will be crucial in addressing these global challenges, with capitalism being a significant part of the problem.

Group III – The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?

The first presenter focused on the upcoming US elections, particularly examining the candidacy of Kamala Harris and her potential appeal to women, Black, and youth voters. The current political landscape includes heavy use of social media, rampant disinformation, and critical swing states. The outcome of the election will significantly impact both domestic and international affairs, with

a widespread worry of an erosion of democratic values and processes. Engaging with voter priorities will be essential to navigating these challenges and ensuring a fair and impactful election result.

The second presenter addressed the concept of national service in the UK and Germany. In the UK, the Conservative Party proposal during the general election campaign to reintroduce national service sparked debate, and unfortunately the issue quickly degenerated into a culture war, shutting down the opportunity for a mature discussion on how to cope with the Armed Forces' dwindling personnel numbers. Germany, with its *Zeitenwende* for defence spending, is also considering a national service scheme, albeit on a voluntary basis. A national citizen service was also mentioned as another option to increase youth involvement in voluntary service across the country. Key questions posed by the presenter by way of a reflective conclusion revolved around effective communication of defence needs, learning from other countries, and implementing national service in a way that garners public support while addressing personnel shortages and upskilling the military. The subsequent discussion touched on the role of hard power in defending democracy and public comfort with such measures.

Evening Programme

The group was honoured to be invited to dinner at the British Ambassador's Residence in Grunewald. We were hosted by Kieran Drake, Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy in Berlin.

Thursday, 25 July 2024

Lecture with regard to the topic of group II: "Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?"

Dr Nicolaus Heinen

Director General, Financial Policy and Economic Fundamental Questions, Federal Ministry of Finance

Dr Heinen introduced the topic by noting that with Germany increasingly impacted by geopolitical shifts, the federal budget for 2025 and a growth initiative are rightfully key focus areas for the Ministry of Finance today. He stated that the country is navigating an age of transformation, characterised by growing interdependencies and challenges such as demographic change, decarbonisation, geopolitical shifts, and digitalisation. As the German population ages, there is a pressing need to incentivise an increased labour supply to mitigate public finance pressures. Efforts are also directed towards achieving carbon neutrality, which demands substantial investment in green industries despite economic uncertainties. Additionally, Germany seeks to bolster its economic growth amidst global geopolitical changes by forging more free trade agreements and partnerships, while simultaneously aiming to enhance its domestic productivity, through digital innovation and AI.

To address some of these challenges, Dr Heinen detailed how Germany is leveraging its position as the strongest and most stable country in the Eurozone by employing a dual-pillar fiscal policy strategy. The first pillar focuses on making the supply side of the economy more competitive, encouraging both government and private investment without exacerbating inflation. The second pillar emphasises fiscal resilience, maintaining a buffer in stable times to ensure preparedness for future crises, particularly those with an international dimension. This strategy involves adhering to the debt brake and aiming to reduce the debt rate to 60% by 2027/28. By fostering domestic resilience through prudent public spending, Germany aims to effectively navigate upcoming economic storms.

A lively Q&A discussion followed, addressing a wide array of issues, to which Dr Heinen was happy to respond. According to his answers, industries in Germany look to the government for advice and solutions, leveraging officials' private sector experience and networks, with external engagement being vital. The state can set frameworks for green transformation, but it should minimise subsidies and bureaucracy to foster market-driven innovation. To attract tech companies, Germany has introduced initiatives like tax incentives for private investment. Prioritising growth is essential for funding transitions and maintaining investor confidence. Germany's AAA rating reflects trust in its decentralised model and fiscal diligence. Growth is a result of social mobility tools funded by taxes. Despite perceived disconnects, private sector investment continues to drive the German economy, which aligns with the government's decentralised strategy. Germany aims to balance supply efficiency with security, retain talent, and address AI's impact on knowledge work. The Finance Ministry will continue to face challenges in communicating its fiscal strategies amidst increasingly politicised debates.

Lecture with regard to the topic of group III: "The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?"

Charlotte Freihse

Project Manager Upgrade Democracy; Digitalisation and the Common Good, Bertelsmann Foundation

Ms Freihse began her presentation by looking at how disinformation campaigns have significantly impacted major political events such as Brexit, the 2016 US elections, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the 2023 Brazilian Congress attack. She believes that these events highlight the influence of social media platforms and the complexities of information dissemination, including their occasional passivity in mitigating false narratives. Academics categorise information disorders into misinformation (false information without harmful intent), disinformation (manipulated content), and mal-information (false information intended to harm). Disinformation campaigns are driven by political, financial, and foreign motivations, utilising tactics like coordinated efforts across platforms, manipulated media, and exploiting societal divisions to erode trust and polarise communities.

The effects of disinformation on political discourse are profound, leading to voter manipulation, increased polarisation, and diminished trust in mainstream media. The use of AI in disinformation, as seen in the 2023 Argentinian elections, underscores the need for clear platform policies and

transparency from political entities. Despite efforts to combat misinformation, such as in the EU elections of 2024, significant challenges remain. Recommendations to address disinformation included systemic monitoring, fostering public awareness, enhancing media literacy, ensuring transparent content moderation, and enforcing regulations like the DSA and DMA in the EU. An integrated approach involving long-term efforts and international cooperation among politics, civil society, and academia is essential.

A thought-provoking Q&A ensued. The discussed highlighted issues related to media and digital literacy, explored the power of doppelgänger campaigns, reflected on the balance between fact-checking and free speech, and suggested strategies on how to reach people who have lost faith in mainstream media through an integrated and inclusive approach. There was debate on using disinformation tactics actively, and how to manage populist parties' online presence. The conversation also covered the problem of no-consequence misinformation online, the role and responsibility of social media platforms, and challenges in online political campaigning. The concentration of economic power in media was linked to the need for robust public broadcasting to ensure diverse and unbiased reporting. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of a comprehensive approach to addressing disinformation, which includes tackling its root causes. Finally, the discussion touched on making politicians accountable and the power of resilient newsrooms to counter disinformation narratives.

Lecture with regard to the topic of group I: "Societies are becoming more polarised. How strong are our liberal democracies?"

Alexander Schäfer

Legal and Policy Officer, Inspire, Debate, Engage and Accelerate Action (I.D.E.A), Presidential Advisory Service, European Commission

Some research may indicate that societies across Europe are increasingly polarised, which would raise concern about the stability of liberal democracies, while other authors (e.g. Steffen Mau) also emphasise a broad (topical) consensus within societies. Mr Schäfer introduced his lecture with a statement that the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, made in Strasbourg on July 18, 2024, which highlights a commitment to protecting democratic values amid internal and external threats. The EU's foundational values, as outlined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, emphasise, inter alia, respect for human dignity and democracy. The Treaty's Article 10 - as one of the provisions on democratic principles - underscores that the European Union subscribes to a representative model of democracy and the need, also in the light of other Treaty provisions, for a diverse yet cohesive democratic framework.

Conceptually, affective (identity-based) and ideological (opinion-based) polarisation may be distinguished, while both forms pose a challenge to cohesion and stability of democratic societies. Significant polarisation is evident in issues like climate change and immigration, at varying levels across different countries. Political populism with its Manichean logic and us vs. them narrative ('the pure people vs. the elites') may be understood as a form of political polarisation and data suggests that populist parties in Europe (31 countries) could double their vote share in the last 30 years.

Mr Schäfer shared analysis to show that expansion of electoral and liberal democracies since the 1950s has been notable, though there has been a slight decline in recent years. Populist governments are, according to studies, particularly prone to democratic backsliding, which undermines the integrity of democratic institutions. To address this issue, strategies include promoting democratic values, enhancing citizen participation, guarding against foreign interference, and collaborating with international partners. Key EU measures such as the Defence of Democracy Package and the Media Freedom Act aim to uphold democratic norms. Additionally, the EU uses mechanisms like the Article 7 procedure and the Conditionality Regulation 2020/2092 or the Rule of Law reports to address potential rule of law and human rights concerns among Member States.

The Q&A discussion explored several issues related to populism and democracy in the EU, EU Member States and other countries. Key points included concerns about whether left-wing populists are as concerning as right-wing ones, the effectiveness of the European Commission in engaging with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and the challenge of fighting disinformation. The conversation also touched on the implications of conditionality regulations for EU enlargement, the European Commission's innovation in handling AI, and the impact of Article 7 measures on populism. It examined the popularity of populist governments compared to traditional liberal democracies, and how different electoral processes affect populism. The discussion also addressed the role of neoliberal economics in driving polarisation, the importance of socioeconomic agendas, and the complexities of treaty changes and election thresholds. Finally, it considered the trade-offs between liberal freedoms and security, noting that Western democracies must be mindful of the appeal of such trade-offs in other political systems.

Friday, 26 July 2024

Study Group Sessions

The study group sessions focused on balancing theory with practical applications, clarifying terminology, and drawing insights from lectures. Participants examined problems, challenges, and solutions through case examples and scenario-modelling. The sessions encouraged leveraging expertise from various fields in preparation for the group presentations, fostering a diverse and constructive environment for debate. Additionally, ChatGPT was utilised to stimulate discussion and enhance engagement.

Presentations on Topic I: "Societies are becoming more polarised. How strong are our liberal democracies?"

Group A

Liberal democracies are defined through their commitment to both perfectionist liberalism, which emphasises core values, and political liberalism, which focuses on the mechanisms and tools of governance (Nussbaum, M.C. 2011). To illustrate the challenges faced in forming opinions today, a Menti poll experiment simulated the quick decision-making encountered on social media.

Context is crucial for understanding and evaluating information, particularly for younger individuals who may lack the necessary life experience to fully grasp the implications. A case in point is how young people might interpret inflammatory content, such as radicalisation videos, without adequate context. This raises questions about whether some level of censorship or mandatory contextual information is needed to support more informed opinions across all age groups.

Key questions revolved around the role of context in shaping opinions and whether it can sometimes mislead or distort views, as seen with potentially biased historical figures. Additionally, the effectiveness of long versus short statements in communicating ideas was questioned, along with the challenge of addressing revisionist history and the importance of diverse perspectives in understanding the past. It is crucial to scrutinise not only illiberal but also ostensibly liberal figures, as even respectable voices can legitimise extreme views. The underlying issue is determining trustworthy sources and maintaining vigilance across all political spectrums.

Group B

The rise in populism should not be attributed solely to flaws in electoral systems, as these systems have remained relatively stable for centuries. Instead, the focus should be on the underlying factors driving change within political cultures and delivery mechanisms. Political culture plays a crucial role; shifts in norms and attitudes - such as the increase of combative politics in the UK and the decline of the moderate middle in Germany - can undermine liberal democracies if disruptors exploit these changes. The media landscape also impacts political culture differently in the UK and Germany. To address populism, governments can either do nothing, adopt a pragmatic approach, or take dramatic actions. The key to safeguarding democracy lies in effective political delivery, maintaining accountability, and upholding the rule of law, including protecting voting rights, impartiality of the media and the judiciary, and parliamentary integrity.

Key questions revolved around why people turn to populists. The group suggested that this is often a response to feeling marginalised or unheard. This reaction might be more emotional than rational. The challenge for centrist parties is to address popular grievances without adopting populist strategies and to effectively communicate the value of liberal democracies. Engaging the public more deeply, possibly through mandatory voting or extending voting rights, could improve representation. Additionally, the balance between stable and unstable political leadership is crucial, as both extreme stability and instability can be problematic. There's also a debate about whether to embrace emotional appeals or leave them to populists, and the importance of civic education in understanding political systems. Finally, populism should be viewed as a method of delivery rather than a comprehensive philosophy.

Presentations on Topic II: "Economic and financial questions in an age of transformation: how do we handle it?"

Group A

For things to stay the same, everything must change. The group highlighted that the need to adapt is underscored by demographic shifts, climate change, and rapid technological advances.

As the worker-to-pension ratio doubles by the century's end, the presentation focused on how societies must address reduced labour force participation and the impacts of climate change on the economy. The current predicament forces workers to balance between working harder or working smarter. While working harder is unsustainable due to burnout, demographic changes, and diminishing returns, working smarter involves engaging more people in meaningful work and leveraging technology for efficiency. Intergenerational justice and gradual adaptation are key to navigating these transitions, ensuring that efforts benefit everyone while fostering social cohesion.

Several questions arose from this presentation, notably how can we complement GDP measurements to better reflect economic and social well-being? Intergenerational justice is crucial, as wealth gaps and generational disparities persist, exacerbated by a political focus on short-term rather than future needs. The discussion also included the role of wealth taxes versus income taxes, fostering environments that accommodate diverse personal and professional needs, and balancing efficiency with the appreciation of arts and human value. Furthermore, the group reflected on how to address gender inequality and ensure that societal values align with equitable compensation for essential roles, as highlighted during the pandemic. Innovative approaches, such as environmental footprint taxes, might also offer new solutions to current financial challenges.

Group B

The presentation addressed the shifting responsibilities in climate action, highlighting a perceived imbalance where individuals are often asked to make significant sacrifices compared to industries and corporations. For instance, regulations like the Boiler Ban and Klimageld illustrate the personal costs of climate policies, while trade-offs between economic security and urgent climate needs remain contentious. The group also focused on whether climate action necessitates the end of free trade, with examples such as GB Energy showcasing efforts to promote renewable energy investments while balancing protection and partnership roles.

The role of investment is certainly crucial, with the state currently funding many initiatives but facing slow progress due to risk aversion. The National Wealth Fund (NWF) case study underscores the challenge of funding future technologies amid high risks. Discussions emphasised the need for policies aligning with profit, collective public-private action, and firm commitments. Questions raised included the potential failure of the NWF, the balance between incentives and bans, the need for financial literacy, and the impact of community involvement in investments to foster personal engagement and mitigate vulnerability.

Evening Programme

The group spent the evening at a Biergarten next to the Berlin Tiergarten, where we learned more about the Young Konigswinter Alumni group.

Saturday, 27 July 2024

Group Discussions on Topic III: "The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?"

The conversations examined democracy through the lens of (i) elections, (ii) climate change, and (iii) the defence of democratic values. The discussion around the elections in the US, UK, and EU highlighted foreign policy issues like Israel-Gaza and Ukraine, alongside pressing matters such as immigration, economic security, and climate change, with an emphasis on the need to depoliticise the migration debate. Climate change was discussed from political, social, economic, and international perspectives. The conversation on defending democracy included themes of patriotism versus pacifism, military recruitment versus retention, and the increased politicisation of security concerns, particularly regarding Ukraine. Current conflicts were viewed as choices, prompting debates about EU military cooperation, NATO's future, and the implications of a potential Trump presidency. The differences in military perspectives and attitudes between the UK and Germany were noted, stressing the need for balanced thinking about security and defence, without leaning towards extreme militarisation.

Presentations on Topic III: "The year of decisions – what does democracy mean in practice?"

Group A – Elections

The group presentation emphasised the importance of 2024 as a bumper election year, particularly noting polling day in America as a pivotal moment with various potential outcomes. The presentation explored democracy through the lens of European Union elections, which often serve as secondary to national elections and a platform for protest votes. Despite centrist parties generally maintaining control, their vote share (and thus potential influence) is shrinking. The UK political landscape was described as both changing and unchanging, with a Starmer government characterised by stability and gradual progress. Major election issues in the US include the economy, equality, political stability, global security, and climate change. Divergence in opinions between the US and EU was noted, with misinformation persisting even among the wealthy in the US, particularly regarding Trump's impact on business.

The presentation also highlighted the influence of the US election on congressional and senate compositions, emphasising the importance of party majorities in legislative bodies. Economic strategies were discussed as differing significantly between potential administrations: a protectionist approach under Trump could benefit the US economy in the short term but might harm long-term international trade relations. In contrast, a Harris administration might aim for steady economic policies. The response of European companies to US protectionism, potentially adopting similar measures, was identified as a key geopolitical concern. The group agreed that Harris is perceived as a more stable candidate, especially in Europe, where maintaining liberal democratic values is essential. The sentiment that Americans often eventually make the right choices only after they've tried everything else underscored the complex and evolving nature of democratic processes.

Group B – Climate Change

The group addressed the challenges societies face in tackling the climate crisis, suggesting a holistic approach to seeking solutions. The presentation highlighted that climate change is often deprioritised, in favour of tackling more immediate concerns, despite its profound and disproportionate impact worldwide. The discussion emphasised the need for better integration of social and political responses to climate challenges and questioned the role of news prioritisation in shaping our reactions. The debate also covered the tension between adaptation and mitigation, noting the high costs of addressing climate change but arguing that inaction could be even more costly. Economically, the presentation stressed the need for substantial investment in climate change solutions, both through domestic policies like tax incentives and international measures such as green bonds and stricter financial regulations.

The presentation also explored the implications of climate change on the international order of statehood, highlighting how both self-reliant states and those moving towards multinational organisations face significant threats. It proposed that in response to the risk of statelessness due to climate impacts, a global passport system could facilitate resettlement. The need for a new authoritarian climate enforcement body was also discussed, emphasising that liberal democracies must work together on a global scale with enforceable targets and consequences for non-compliance. Finally, the discussion acknowledged the ethical and practical complexities involved, noting that no single solution is sufficient and that concerted international effort is essential.

Group C – Defending Democracy

The presentation focused on the multifaceted role of national service and military involvement in both peacetime and wartime contexts. During times of peace, national service is recognised for its potential to enhance social mobility and provide valuable skills beyond combat roles, including in areas such as cybersecurity. The discussion often came back to how national service could be expanded to address modern threats and technologies, rather than solely focusing on traditional combat roles. Historical factors and past conflicts, particularly in Germany, influence contemporary attitudes towards military service, underscoring the need for reforms to make national service more attractive and inclusive, and to integrate diverse segments of society into these roles.

In times of war, the discussion highlighted the humanitarian aspect of national service, which aims to engage those interested in contributing to national defence without being on the front lines. The presentation also raised questions about what we are fighting for, emphasising that current efforts are not only about defending borders but also upholding democratic ideals. Issues such as the effectiveness of compulsory military service, the impact of demographic changes, and the balance between civil and military roles were addressed. The group also raised the importance of technological and crisis-responsive training, improved communication strategies, and flexible policies to make military service a viable option for all individuals, along with the role of national service in fostering social cohesion and preparing for future challenges, including climate change.

Closing Discussion: UK-DE & UK-EU relations, now and in the future

Participants noted that the current phase in the relationship between the UK and its European partners (including the EU) is characterised by a slow but steady re-set. For the moment, the emphasis is on positive tone rather than profound substance. With the new Labour government, the UK is pursuing a gradual adjustment within the framework of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and the Windsor Framework (WF), while also exploring more ambitious measures. Key areas of focus include sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) regulations, touring artists, and qualification recognition. A security pact, encompassing energy security, economic security, and migration, is also a priority. The EU, particularly Brussels, is maintaining a positive stance, though there are concerns about divergence and the UK's perceived history of cherry-picking benefits.

The discussion highlighted the contrasting perceptions of Brexit in Germany and the UK. In Germany, Brexit remains a central issue in UK-DE relations, while in the UK it features less prominently, with the Labour manifesto rarely mentioning it. A notable exception is in Scotland, with Brexit remaining closely linked to the independence debate. Participants agreed that the EU needs to manage perceptions carefully to avoid the impression that the UK is benefiting disproportionately from the EU. Erasmus and defence have been identified as key areas for future focus, and Starmer's commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights has been received positively. The debate also touched on the complex interactions between UK-EU relations and devolved administrations in the UK, highlighting that the Liberal Democrats were the only four-nations party to uniquely advocate for EU re-accession in their manifesto. Public opinion on Brexit across Europe remains mixed, with conflicting views on whether the UK should, could, or ever will rejoin the EU.

Lastly

The closing of the conference was celebrated with a boat trip through the city of Berlin.

Grace Barningham

Brussels, August 2024

