

## **Report:**

### **EU - India relations: A partnership beyond trade**

On November 27th, EUROPEUM's Brussels Office under the representation of Think Visegrad Brussels and in cooperation with CEPS organized a public event titled "EU - India relations: A partnership beyond trade". Panelists of the discussion were Mrs. Alica Kizekova, Senior Researcher, Institute of International Relations Prague, Mr. Zsolt Trembeczki, Research Fellow, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs (HIIA), and Mrs. Fanny Sauvignon Researcher, Foreign Policy Unit, CEPS.

The discussion commenced with opening remarks from Stefania Benaglia, Head of the Foreign Policy Unit at CEPS. She briefly outlined the current state of affairs in EU – India relations and mentioned the ongoing negotiations on a trade agreement that would have a profound impact on the economies of both blocks. She also discussed the importance of enhanced frequency of high-level political contacts and the outcomes of the recent Trade and Technology Council meeting. There is an enormous potential for a strengthened partnership between the EU and India that can have a significant impact on a geopolitical level facing evergrowing competition with China and tensions with Russia after the escalation of the Russian war in Ukraine.

Following that, Alica Kizekova provided an overview of the trade relations between the Czech Republic and India. She underscored the challenges faced in accessing the Indian market and emphasized the need to establish hubs. While some companies have independently ventured into this market, there was a consensus that a more concerted effort is required at both the national and European levels. Criticism was voiced regarding Europe's predominant focus on China, which has left a significant knowledge gap about India, hindering the continent's ability to comprehend the country's culture and its interactions both internally and externally.

Ms. Kizekova then introduced a second point addressing the risk of democracy backsliding globally. It was noted that there is a general trend of countries transitioning from free to partially free status. In the Indian context, concerns were raised about the rise of populism and extremism in the government. While acknowledging the need for caution, Ms. Kizekova highlighted the necessity for increased communication with the general population, as most EU-India relations are currently confined to dealings with the elite. This prompted contemplation on bridging the gap between communities and elections. Furthermore, panelists scrutinized the terminology "Global South," emphasizing the importance of making distinctions among different regions falling under this umbrella term.

Mr. Zsolt Trembeczki then steered the discussion towards the shift in Indian foreign policy, transitioning from a non-aligned stance to establishing strong strategic cooperation with the United States, while limiting bilateral ties with China. Understanding India's foreign policy becomes imperative for the EU, particularly in light of the intense regional competition between India and China.

It is however important for India to participate in platforms of regional cooperation alongside China, such as BRICS or SCC, as otherwise, India would voluntarily give up on having a voice at the table. Later on, Mr. Trembeczki also came back to the previous statements about democratic backsliding in India and worldwide and expressed confidence in the low probability of India becoming an autocracy due to the high fragmentation and autonomy of regions within the country.

Ms. Fanny Sauvignon, again, emphasized the European Union's need to deepen its understanding of India, including its culture, economy, and priorities. She stressed India's position amid the power struggles between Russia-China and the EU-US, asserting that the EU's mission is to demonstrate the unique values it can bring to India. This understanding, she argued, would also enable the EU to enhance its relationship with the global south, given India's leadership role in certain areas. Ms. Sauvignon discussed the current state of India, also noting concerns about backsliding, very visible in the media with one-sided narratives, especially on the federal level, and added to the discussion the potential role of the EU in strengthening democratic values through closer relations.

Shifting the focus to environmental issues, Ms. Sauvignon discussed the experience with the green transition in the EU and how the continent could set norms and standards to influence other countries in the pursuit of zero-emission economies. This should be supported especially through projects under the Global Gateway, EU's cross-continental strategy to boost investments and connectivity with other regions. Addressing EU carbon emissions generated abroad due to the continent's consumption was also discussed, with an emphasis on leading the private sector in facilitating the transition.

To summarize, all speakers agreed that the EU should invest much more in establishing closer contacts and strengthened diplomatic relations with India as this could benefit both the economies of the EU and its Member states and the EU's role on the global stage. To achieve this, the EU will also have to invest in people-to-people contacts and foster a greater understanding of India and its people also outside of the political dimension.

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