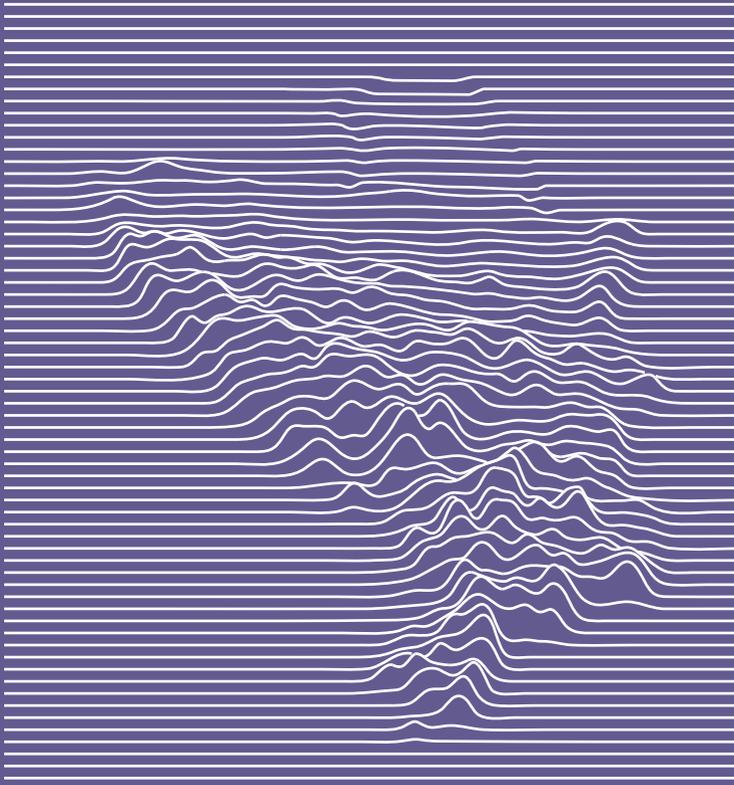


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**The Conference on the Future of
Europe: How could Visegrad be the
voice for the Western Balkans?**



by Marie Jelenka Kirchner, Duško Lopandić and Adnan Ćerimagić

September 2021

The Conference on the Future of Europe: How could Visegrad be the voice for the Western Balkans?

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As part of the cooperation among think tanks from the Visegrad Group and the Western Balkan countries, a project was launched in order to facilitate the establishment of the Think Balkans network based on the idea of the Think Visegrad, a cooperation framework of think tanks in the Visegrad countries. This short paper will give an insight into the operation of Think Visegrad and outline challenges and recommendations for the Think Balkans initiative based on the outcomes of the study visits of V4 experts in the Western Balkan countries' capitals. These study visits allowed the experts to share the idea and benefits of the Think Visegrad with the government and state officials of the Western Balkan countries and gather information about their expectations and concerns as well.

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Executive Summary

Earlier this year, European leaders kickstarted the Conference on the Future of Europe which is a year-long decentral process to collect ideas for a shared European way forward. The process of the Conference is designed to be integrative, democratic, and egalitarian, however, is flawed seriously in terms of inclusion. Candidate states in the Western Balkans who are promised European accession have been excluded from the Conference.

Consequently, Western Balkan governments, parliamentarians and citizens do not have the same opportunity, if any, to contribute their visions or share their concerns on the necessary discussion on the European future. That is problematic for several reasons, exclusionary towards future members and short-sighted at the end of the EU.

Even if their membership aspirations have not yet been fulfilled, Western Balkan countries are part of Europe already and as such are closely linked to European

politics, markets and societies. Any of the big challenges of today – whether it concerns the climate crisis, financial stability, resilient supply chains or global migration – need European responses of which the Western Balkans are a part.

Therefore, the region needs to be included in the Conference on the Future of Europe for the remaining months. Citizens, civil society organizations and think tanks should have the opportunity to participate in low-threshold events with the arising ideas contributing to the final resolution.

Parliamentarians from the region should organize and partner with parliamentarians from both the European Parliament and EU member states to draft shared agendas then later presented by EU parliamentarians in the formal procedure.

Governments in the Western Balkans could take a proactive approach, backed ▶

- ▶ by supporters from EU members states, such as the Visegrad-4. The EEAS has shown in the past weeks that it is willing to be a partner to the Western Balkans, and such offer should be taken advantage of to organize meetings or events to work and think together.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has just started and picks up pace slowly. It is not too late for the Western Balkans to join in and make their voice heard. However, EU partners and support will be needed – just as the EU will need to include the Western Balkans into their strategic and long-term planning if it wishes for the own agenda to be lastingly and sustainably successful.

Introduction

The European Union must change. In view of rapid changes of societies, with the technological revolution, climate change and environmental threats, with new challenges to humanity such as pandemics, the EU must adapt to the years to come. Despite the EU's many shortcomings and inadequate responses to different challenges, all of us need appropriate European answers to new problems and crises.

The European continent - a small area on the Western edge of Greater Asia - has been a centuries-old source of great human achievements, but also a source of evils and catastrophes, such as the two World Wars and colonization. The concept of the nation-state emerged in Europe, as did the idea of deep state integration - one of the most innovative and original political, institutional and legal endeavours in recent history, of which the European Union is a key incarnation. However, the EU has been presented by its critics as an amalgam in

which true national identities are lost and which prevents nation-states from taking their future into their own hands. By others, the EU is criticized to be a neoliberal project that favours the already privileged and rich classes or states in various ways at the expense of a less lucky majority whether those would be its own citizens, marginalized groups and migrants or refugees¹. Despite all the criticism, Europe still needs the EU. If the EU did not exist today, we would have to invent it rapidly.

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) is an opportunity for today's generations to seek solutions and provide answers to the questions of the future. However, the first paradox in the design of CoFE is the choice of countries included. In fact, none of the Western Balkan countries - even those negotiating EU accession - is formally involved in the work of the CoFE. Discussing the future of Europe, yes, but not with all members of that shared future?

The EU and Europe are not synonymous, as is evident when it comes to the present or prospects of the Western Balkans - the "EU's inner backyard". The question of the future of the Western Balkans is at the same time a question of continuing the enlargement process, which underlies the basic idea of European integration. EU enlargement, a continuum since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, is a geopolitical project to serve European interests, and at the same time a clear indicator of the vitality of European integration, as a whole. The present and the future of the EU and the Western Balkans are closely linked, and the benefits of WB membership in the EU go in both directions.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the position of the Western Balkans region in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, especially from the perspective of the Visegrad Group, which see EU enlargement as a natural path in further evolution of integration. ►

¹ In an extensive literature on the subject, see, among others, Perry Anderson, *The New Old World*, Verso, London, 2009; Laurie Baussagnet, "The EU and the Question of Democracy" in: Renaud Dehousse (ed), *The European Union, The French Documentation*, Paris, 2014, 77-85; Vivien Schmidt, *The Eurozone's Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy: Can the EU Rebuild Public Trust and Support for European Economic Integration?*, *European Economy*, discussion paper 015, September 2015; T. Lenz and K. Nikolaydis, "EU-topia? A critique of the European Union as a model", *Culture, Practice & Europeanization*, 2019, Vol. 4, no. 2, 78-101.

► This paper is divided as follows. *In the first part*, we point to the broader context of the European Union's existential crisis and new political issues and trends, as well as the internal dynamics in the EU, which, after "Brexit", led to the initiation of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In the second part, we consider all the framework topics discussed at the Conference - nine of them - as well as their importance and impact on the Western Balkans, including specific issues where WB participation can have important and beneficial consequences for the EU, such as migration issues, economic cohesion, infrastructure construction, enlargement issues etc.

In the third part, we consider how the Visegrad Group countries can encourage WB participation in the CoE debates, including the governmental and parliamentary dimensions, as well as the civil society participation.

Our paper *concludes with suggestions* addressed to the governments of the Visegrad Group States, as well as to the Western Balkans countries. Our general proposal is that the governments and civil society of the WB take an appropriate part in discussing and conceiving EU policies that will directly affect their future.

I. EU AND THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

-

What does the European future hold? It is hard, if not impossible, to predict. But the response to emerging geopolitical tension and competition, or to remaining global divides and wealth or stability gaps and, most recently, to the global pandemic does not particularly encourage optimism to foresee a bright future ahead.

A lack of united and strategic planning, as well as little capacity to act as Europeans hampers the EU's ability to react to the

multiple and simultaneous crises of today. The Union seems equally ill-equipped to respond to the diminishing attractiveness of its own, neoliberal market and governing order with more attractive, alternative models of governance and state functioning.

Although not an easy task, the following chapter sketches the crisis-ridden context out of which the idea for the Conference on the Future of Europe was born.

1. A new future? The context

-

The institutional design of the European Union with power sharing between intergovernmental (namely, the Council of European Union) and supranational (the European Commission and the European Parliament) institutions has proven to be difficult to navigate through,

especially in cases when quick action and crisis response are required.

The European Commission is often criticised for offering big speeches and almost Utopian programmes. Recently it was criticised for the geopolitical strategy ▶

► of Ursula von der Leyen’s Commission agenda². The long-term budget 2021-2027 and the recovery mechanism “Next Generation EU” which is closely linked to the EU Green Deal and Digitalization agenda are an important signal for renewal, however these are not undisputed among member states.³ Where money comes in, solidarity is challenged.

This was also seen during the financial crisis of 2008/2009. The resulting economic, political and social crisis – especially in the European South – has left its marks, as have the asymmetric relations between EU member states.

The different struggles of member states in the South (especially Greece and Italy) compared to those of wealthier, demanding states (especially Germany) hurt the fragile sense of Europeaness and gave futile grounds to accusations based on stereotypes, nationalism and past wounds. The discussion on “European identities” seemed to be off the table for now, and the

self-acclaimed normative Union crumbled.

The number of supporters of anti-EU, populist movements or parties is growing. As is the rejection of open and diverse societies. Strong racist, Islamophobic, Anti-Semitic, Homophobic and misogynist narratives make the base for right-wing populists throughout Europe⁴. “The EU” and “those in Brussels” seem to serve these groups a fabulous scapegoat.

Equally, democratic governments and liberal parties find themselves under attack from populist groups and the right-wing electorate who accuse “traditional parties” of manipulative and authoritarian practice. Conspiracy theories are in vogue. In many places, the political response – unconsciously or not – has been an adaptation of populist rhetoric into the general mainstream. Many have argued that such could be seen in the EU Commission’s agenda to “Protect the European Way of Life”, part of which is devoted to migration policy.

² European Parliament, “The von der Leyen Commission’s priorities for 2019-2024”, 28 January 2020. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2020\)646148](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2020)646148)

³ European Commission, “Recovery Plan for Europe”, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en

⁴ Richard McMahon, “Is Alt-Europe possible? Populist radical right counternarratives of European integration”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2021.1919865

The so-called migration crisis in 2015 has arguably provoked all kinds of feelings throughout Europe, ranging from outpouring support and solidarity from Europeans all the way to hate crimes and violent attacks towards refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. The European reaction(s) to migration, especially after 2015, has increased Euro-scepticism at all ends. While all too many fear – or fuel – the alleged replacement of Europeans or European traditional values (whatever that entails), others feel betrayed by the European normative promise as a result of hostile and inhumane border management.

Even if the official EU rhetoric continues to speak in favour of diversity, the perceived need to link the protection of European values to the migration portfolio shows that the right-wing mindset of “defending Europe” has planted its seeds well into the heart of the European political mainstream. Liberal values and human rights are under scrutiny and their contestation comes well from within the Union.

The Brexit campaign relied heavily on racist slogans and an anti-immigrant campaign and positioned itself against the European premise of “unity in diversity”. Besides the economic impact and the

severe blow for Europeans who believed in the path dependency of Europeanization, Brexit has shown more than anything that the European project is in dire need for reframing and transformation.

The member states of the EU, and its people, are faced not only with these internal crises and challenges, but also with the global context of the 21st century. Ongoing conflicts in the wider EU neighbourhood, from Belarus and Ukraine to Syria and Libya pose challenges for the EU foreign policy.

While the change in the White House might have brought transatlantic cooperation back on track, challenges ranging from Russia and China to climate change will need to be addressed with concrete instruments and steps.

The climate crisis is an example. The European Commission positions itself and the EU as the leader against the global climate crisis, but businesses and governments in the member states find it difficult to change global trade routes, transport habits or energy production drastically and ambitiously. Linking the funds from the new Covid Recovery Fund and the long-term budget to climate friendly ►

► conditions has been a recent success for the EU Green Agenda.

The EU's reaction to wars and violent conflicts have been criticized, again from all sides, either because of a lacking capacity to act or because of the EU's tendency to prefer stability over (chaotic) transformative processes as was seen during the Arab Spring.⁵

In recent years, the discussion on (Western) Europe's post-colonial responsibility has been sweeping into the wider debate on the EU's role in the world and growing awareness has begun to slightly impact policy in both member states and Brussels.

The biggest geopolitical questions, of course, are linked to big powers such as Russia and China. Torn between

economic interests, security concerns and strategic interest, EU member states find it hard to unite on a common stance to either of these global competitors.

The outbreak of the global pandemic aggravated not only all existing struggles of the EU, it also revealed the global vulnerability of the European trade and market order which relies heavily on production overseas in China or South East Asia.

The EU policy towards Western Balkans, with the manifold challenges in that region that are of special interest for this paper, reveal cracks both within internal EU policy, institutional design and the European identity, as well as flaws in external policy.

In the Western Balkans⁶, the EU is no

⁵ Hatab, S., "Deepening democracy or stabilization? European neighbourhood policy (ENP) and the "Arab spring", *Review of Economics and Political Science*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 20-37, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1108/REPS-10-2018-009>

⁶ "Western Balkans" include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Kosovo is not recognised, among other, by Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as by five EU member States (Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania and Cyprus). In the EU and regional documents it is designed with asterisk and a footnote saying "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence."

longer considered the uncontested power of influence.⁷ China has been getting into position to gain a foothold in the region and the to-and-fro and unkept promises (namely EU membership) at the side of the EU sees governments or political groups reconsider their direction of strategic planning. Russia continues to be an important external factor influencing anti-EU sentiments by strategic engagement with corresponding narratives⁸.

The ongoing quarrel in Brussels about the conditions of membership, paired with a catalogue of expectations that not even all member states live by, raises levels of frustration throughout the region. At the same time, EU enlargement is, like no other topic, linked to the question of European identity and the question of where-to in the European future.

None of these are easy questions to tackle. Avoiding them however compounds the seemingly never-ending

list of challenges to European integration and feeds more than anything into the narrative of those objecting European integration altogether. Brexit has shown however that it is not all that easy or desirable to just dash off with the EU and there certainly exists more than enough willpower within the EU to initiate progress and change.

The big questions of today have not just arisen in the last 20 years. Questions about the EU's identity, about institutional design, about power sharing and national sovereignty and about (European) legitimacy are as old as the Coal and Steel Community. However, in a changing global environment one crisis hunts the next and without responses to these old questions it will be hard to find solutions other than inadequate band aid-responses.

All this has led EU leaders to call for and organise the Conference on the Future for Europe.

⁷ Shopov, V., "Decade of patience: How China became a power in the Western Balkans", ECFR Policy Brief, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/decade-of-patience-how-china-became-a-power-in-the-western-balkans/>

⁸ Hatab, S., "Deepening democracy or stabilization? European neighbourhood policy (ENP) and the "Arab spring"", Review of Economics and Political Science, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 20-37, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1108/REPS-10-2018-009>

2. Basic facts on the Conference on the Future of Europe

2.1 A road to the Conference

To explain the origins and motives that led to the organization of the “Conference on the Future of Europe” three aspects need to be taken into account.

First, the international (European) and internal context in which the evolution of the European Union has taken place in recent years, especially the emergence of a trend of “multi-crisis”, discussed in previous chapter of this paper.

Second, the existence of an internal debate on the future development and policies of the EU, which was conducted in the official bodies of the Union (European Council, European Commission), and which began in the period immediately after the referendum on Brexit in 2016. This debate was completed by some individual political

initiatives at a high political level, such as proposals by French President Macron.

Third, the practice of “European citizens’ initiatives” which were introduced into the EU legal system by the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, as well as the experiences and traditions in the EU of organizing wider preparatory meetings (conventions, conferences) within debates leading to EU treaty reforms.⁹

Relatively soon after the referendum on Brexit, a debate on the future of the EU of 27 members was initiated within the bodies of the European Union.

On 16 September 2016 the European Council adopted the so-called *Bratislava Declaration*. It was followed on 25 March 2017 when the presidents of all three main EU institutions adopted the “*Rome*

⁹ See Article 11, paragraph 4 of the EU Treaty (TEU) and Article 24, paragraph 1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU).

Declaration”, outlining the main lines of development of the Union in the post-Brexit period. In the context of the debate on EU development, the Rome Declaration emphasized:

“We pledge to listen and respond to the concerns expressed by our citizens and will engage with our national parliaments.”¹⁰

Within the European Council, several important documents were then adopted, including the Leadership Agenda titled *“Building the Future Together”* (October 2017)¹¹ and the *“Strategic Agenda 2019-2024”* (June 2019).¹²

In March 2017, the previous European Commission, led by Jean-Claude Juncker, published a *“White Paper on the Future of Europe”*, which described five possible scenarios for the development of the EU until 2025.¹³

Finally, in September 2017, in his speech at Sorbonne, French President Macron launched a new “European initiative” on a “sovereign, united and democratic Europe”.¹⁴ Later on, Macron renewed his European initiative on several occasions and before the 2019 European Parliament elections. He also announced procedures for consulting citizens, as to democratize the process for proposing reforms in the EU.

This all is in line with the EU Treaty of Lisbon, its article 11, paragraph 4, which provides that one million of citizens of the Union could, with their initiative (petition), request for the European Commission to initiate a legislative proposal within the competence of the EU. Based on this article, aimed at strengthening “direct democracy”, more than a dozen different initiatives have already been submitted. ▶

¹⁰ European Commission, “Rome Declaration of the Leaders of 27 Member States and of the European Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission”, 25 March 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_17_767

¹¹ Council of the EU, “Leader’s Agenda: Building our future together”, October 2017. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21594/leaders-agenda.pdf>

¹² Council of the EU, “EU Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024”, June 2019. <https://eu2019.fi/en/priorities-and-programme/strategic-agenda>

¹³ European Commission, “White paper on the future of Europe - Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, COM (2017) 2025”, 1 March 2017. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/white-paper-future-europe_en

¹⁴ Elysee, “President Macron gives speech on new initiative for Europe”, 26 September 2017. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>

▶ Another similar attempt to involve citizens in the debate on the future of the EU had been launched by the European Commission when the “White Paper on the Future of Europe” with the title “Dialogue with Citizens.”¹⁵ A summary of this debate was published in April 2019 in the European Commission’s report to the European Council in Sibiu.¹⁶

Finally, based on Macron’s initiative, consultations of European citizens were organized in all EU member states in the period from April through October 2018.¹⁷

Traditionally, reform efforts in the EU have been agreed during negotiations within “intergovernmental conferences” which, as a preparatory exercise, take place in a form of broader gathering under different names like convention or a conference.

Some have been successful, others not. To draft the *Treaty on European Constitution*, in the beginning of the 21st

century, the “*Convention on the Future of Europe*” was organized from 2002 to 2003. Despite great ambitions and resources dedicated to this exercise, the outcome in the form of the *Constitutional Treaty* was rejected in 2005 referendums in France and the Netherlands. With this frustrating memory of failure, it is no wonder that the EU follows a more cautious approach this time, including the name of consultations.

2.2 Circumstances around the Conference

The initiative to launch the Conference on Future of Europe almost immediately followed the election of the European Parliament in 2019 and the constitution of the new composition of the European Parliament and the European Commission, as well as the election of a new President of the European Council.

¹⁵ European Parliament Research Service, “Preparing the Conference on the Future of Europe”, 2019. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644202/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)644202_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644202/EPRS_BRI(2019)644202_EN.pdf)

¹⁶ European Commission, “Citizens ‘dialogues and citizens’ consultations Key conclusions”, 30 April 2019. A special European Commission document related to the EU Strategic Agenda (report to the European Council) was published under the following title: European Commission, *Europe in May 2019 a more united, stronger and more democratic Union in an increasingly uncertain world*. https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/comm_sibiu_06-05_en.pdf

¹⁷ European Parliament Research Service, op.cit. pp. 5-6.

The elections for the European Parliament showed that pro-European political forces (centre parties) in EU member states had a significant political advantage over Eurosceptics and populists. This situation facilitated proposals to continue the debate on wide-reaching EU reforms.

In November 2019, France and Germany circulated an informal document or the so-called *non-paper* on key issues and guidelines for organizing the “Conference on the Future of Europe”.¹⁸ It included a proposal that the Conference may start in May 2020 and work in two phases until the first semester 2022.¹⁹ In December 2019 this proposal was supported by the European Council.

In January 2020 the views of the European

Commission on the Conference were set out in a document.²⁰ Then the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic disrupted all plans for 2020, including the start of the Conference. However, in June 2020, the Council of the EU adopted its official positions on the Conference, which were amended in February 2021.²¹ The document contains the views of member states on the goals and scope of the Conference, guidelines, organization, and its functioning. In January 2021 the European Parliament adopted its positions on the Conference.²²

On 10 March 2021, the presidents of all three main EU institutions adopted their *Joint Statement* which contained the main agreed elements on the organization, work, management, topics and goals of the Conference.²³ ▶

¹⁸ Politico Europe, “Conference on the Future of Europe Franco-German non-paper on key questions and guidelines”, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe.pdf>

¹⁹ This deadline is not accidental, bearing in mind that it coincides with the French presidency of the EU. It is not unimportant that the presidential elections in France will be held in the same year, in which one of the bearers of “pro-European” initiatives, Emmanuel Macron, will try to point out the results in this area.

²⁰ European Commission, “Shaping the Conference on the future of Europe, Communication, COM (2020) 27 final”, 22 January 2020.

²¹ Council of the European Union, “Presidency, no. 9102/20”, 24 June 2020; “General Secretariat, No. 5911/21”, 3 February 2021.

²² European Parliament, “European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP))”, 2020. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.pdf

²³ European Commission, “JOINT DECLARATION ON THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE ENGAGING WITH CITIZENS FOR DEMOCRACY– Building a more resilient Europe”, March 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/en_-_joint_declaration_on_the_conference_on_the_future_of_europe.pdf

▶ The outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the state of emergency that followed, with all the restrictions, delayed the start of the Conference for an entire year. Thus, instead of in May 2020, the Conference on the Future of Europe was launched on 9 May 2021 in Strasbourg.²⁴

2.3 Objectives of the Conference

-

According to a joint Statement of the presidents of the three main EU institutions, the Conference should enable a wide range of participants, including citizens of EU member states, as well as representatives of various political and other organizations, NGOs, national parliaments and others, to propose answers and solutions regarding a number of current issues of European Union.

Objective of the Conference is to adopt “recommendations” or a final report of the Chairpersons, to be reached in a process

that is a form of direct democracy, with the aim of strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the Union.

2.4 The methodology and the work of the Conference

-

The issue of organizing or chairing the Conference was one of the most controversial topics. Unlike the former 2002 Convention on the Future of Europe, chaired by the former French President, Giscard d’Estaing, this time the Conference is chaired by the “triumvirate” (i.e. “joint presidency”) which consists of the presidents of the three main EU institutions: the European Parliament, the European council and the European Commission.

The Executive Board of the Conference consists of representatives of three main

²⁴ Politico Europe, “On Europe Day, EU kicks off ‘conference’ on its future”, 9 May 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/conference-future-europe-eu-strasbourg-macron-ursula-von-der-leyen>

institutions, in addition there will be four more observers. Observers are also three representatives of “COSAC” along with representatives of the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Decisions of the Executive Board shall be adopted by consensus. A special secretariat has also been established.

According to the Rules of Procedures of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Conference Plenary is composed of representatives from the EU: the European Parliament, the Council, the European Commission, twenty-seven national parliaments, citizens of the EU and representatives of the Committee of Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee will take part, as well as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy when the international role of the EU is discussed.²⁵ In addition, other interested representatives (key organizations, for example) may be included in the debate. Debates and the work of the Conference

will include numerous events, digital debates, citizen panels, gatherings at the national, regional or local level and more.

2.5 Topics to be discussed at the Conference

Topics to be discussed at the Conference should emerge from the Council’s EU Strategic Agenda, European Commission policy guidelines, as well as topics and issues that are related to the crisis of Covid 19 pandemic. These topics are, inter alia, building a healthy continent, fighting climate change & environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality, intergenerational solidarity, Europe’s digital transformation, European rights and values, including rule of law, migration challenges, security, the EU’s role in the world, the Union’s democratic foundations and how to strengthen democratic processes governing the EU, cross-

²⁵ See Article 16, “Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe”, 2020. <https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/9340/sn02700.en21.pdf>

- ▶ cutting issues related to the EU's ability to deliver on policy priorities, such as better regulation, application of subsidiarity and proportionality, implementation and enforcement of the *acquis* and transparency. Of course, citizens may raise additional issues that matter to them.

The European Parliament has proposed to also include more specific proposals related to the political process and elections in the Union, such as the establishment of transnational lists for elections to the European Parliament or the existence of the so-called "Leading candidate" on the lists (the so-called *Spitzenkandidat*) for the election of the European Parliament.

Much more important, it seems, is the position of the Council of the EU, that the Conference proposals should refer to areas "where the European Union already has the competence". This is contrary to the European Parliament resolution which left the possibility for the Conference to contain also amendments to the EU basic treaties.

The Joint Statement of the three presidents pointed out that the proposals would be considered within the Plenary Sessions "without a predetermined outcome and without limiting the scope to pre-defined policy areas".

2.6 Deadlines for the work of the Conference

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Given the delay in the start of the Conference, it will take place over a year and not, as planned, over two years. Conference plenary sessions will be held at least once in six months. As initially planned, the Conference will be completed in the spring of 2022, that is, during the French presidency of the European Union.

II. WHY DOES THE CONFERENCE MATTER FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?

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So far, the European Commission reiterated its rhetorical commitment to enlargement and the Western Balkans many times. During her 2020 State of the Union speech, Ursula von der Leyen said:

"[...]the Future of the whole region [Western Balkans, note by the authors] lies in the EU. We share the same history, we share the same destiny."²⁶

The exclusion of the Western Balkans in the process and structures of the Conference on the Future of Europe is therefore a missed opportunity to send an important signal and to translate such positive messages into concrete actions. Instead, the EU has been slow to acknowledge that the Western Balkans could contribute to the discussion and shaping of the European Future.

EU-Western Balkans relations need to be understood as a two-way street in which both sides benefit – if differently – from strong ties. Whatever happens in the EU – positive or negative events or trends alike – impacts the development in the Western Balkans. Similarly, developments in the Western Balkans contribute to the wider European future and present. The topics up for discussion at the Conference on the Future of Europe show that well.

Different thematic areas of the Conference on the Future of Europe will be discussed in this chapter with an aim to show in which way the exclusion might affect the Western Balkans and why it would be necessary to find ways for the region's inclusion.

²⁶ See Article 16, "Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe", 2020. <https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/9340/sn02700.en21.pdf>

1. Role of the Western Balkans in the Conference

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The Conference on the Future of Europe is fully focused on the future of the EU. It is also fully driven by actors from the EU.

As it has been mentioned, above, the Conference is placed under the authority of the three EU institutions, represented by the President of the European Parliament, the President of the Council and the President of the European Commission, acting as its joint presidency.

All other avenues to impact the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe, Citizens' Panels and decentralised events, are in principle organised in the EU and driven by the EU participants.²⁷

The future of the EU, however, will undoubtedly have an impact on the world around it. It is clear that for different reasons the entire world cannot be involved in the Conference. These reasons range from practical to logical.

It is difficult to explain why it makes sense to leave the Western Balkans out of the discussion on the future of the EU. It means, leaving out countries that have been given the perspective of full EU membership.

Since the governments in the region and the societies are expected to join the EU soon, both the demands for accession as well as their membership will likely be shaped by discussions taking place in the Conference.

Therefore many in the EU and the region have called for the inclusion of governments, parliaments and civil society from the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Already in December 2019 young people from the Western Balkans took part in the Skopje Youth Summit organised by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights. In their joint "Declaration Against Nationalism" they expressed their "demand to exercise our right to actively shape our future and therefore to take part in the Conference on the Future of Europe."²⁸

In its resolution of 15 January 2020, the European parliament expressed its opinion

²⁷ Conference on the Future of Europe, "What are the components of the Conference?", 2021. <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about>

²⁸ Skopje Youth Summit, "Declaration Against Nationalism", 5 December 2019. <https://summit.yihr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SKYS-declaration.pdf>

that “the Conference should seek ways of involving representatives of the EU candidate countries in discussions on the future of Europe”.²⁹

In April 2020, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Dialogue Southeast Europe and the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe started their series of workshops and discussions in the Western Balkans on the Future of Europe. According to organisers these are aimed to offer a place to “discuss numerous questions such as the finality of EU integration, democratic trends, Social Europe, European culture, religion and identity, economic and monetary union, and many more.”³⁰

In October 2020, a group of young people from the Western Balkans took part in a conference organized within the framework and programme of the German

Presidency of the Council of the European Union. They produced a background paper titled “One Way Ticket No More – Seven Ideas for a Prosperous Western Balkans”, in which they demanded that “the Western Balkan region should also be included in the Conference on the Future of Europe.”³¹

The Belgrade based think tank European Policy Centre (CEP) published a discussion paper titled “The Conference on the Future of Europe: Is the EU still serious about the Balkans?”³² in October 2020.

Confronted with the reality of that time that the Western Balkans would almost certainly be excluded from the Conference on the Future of Europe, CEP argued that “even without a formal invitation to accompany the CoFoE process, the Balkan countries should organise themselves at the political and societal levels to follow the Conference and mirror its activities ▶

²⁹ European Parliament, “European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament’s position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP))”, 2020. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.pdf

³⁰ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, “Western Balkans Perspectives on the Future of Europe”, 28 April 2020. <https://soe.fes.de/news-list/e/western-balkans-perspectives-on-the-future-of-europe>

³¹ RYCO, “One Way Ticket No More: Seven Ideas for a Prosperous Western Balkans”, October 2020. <https://www.rycowb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/One-Way-Ticket-Not-More-Seven-Ideas-for-a-Prosperous-Western-Balkans.pdf>

³² European Policy Centre (CEP), “The Conference on the Future of Europe: Is the EU still serious about the Balkans?”, October 2020. <https://www.thinkforeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe-Is-the-EU-still-serious-about-the-Balkans.pdf>

▶ with similar initiatives.” Adding that “civil society networks in the region should build on their already existing cooperation and look for funds to organise ‘Balkan Citizens’ Consultations’, which can accompany the CoFoE process as it unfolds. Such a broad mobilisation would prove the Balkan countries’ strong will to approach the EU and a certain dose of political maturity.”

In March 2021, when the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe had been signed, a Brussels based think tank, the European Policy Centre (EPC), noted that with exclusion of the Western Balkans, “the EU sends the wrong political signal to a region it has promised a European perspective.” And went even further to label it as a “misguided decision” which “reinforces doubts in the Balkans that the is not serious about its closest neighbours.”³³

The EPC called for stakeholders at different EU levels to “even if unofficially ... find ways to include Balkan political leaders and representatives of citizens as observers in the Conference proceedings.”

Despite calls of the European Parliament, some Member States and above-mentioned organisations, the Western Balkans are excluded from the Conference on the Future of Europe. This comes despite the fact that discussions, ideas, proposals and conclusions of the Conference will have an impact on the future of the region.

According to the digital platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe, discussions are taking place around ten main areas of interest. These are (1) Climate change and the environment; (2) Health; (3) A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; (4) EU in the world; (5) Values and rights, rule of law, security; (6) Digital transformation; (7) European Democracy; (8) Migration; (9) Education, culture, youth and sport; and (10) Other ideas.³⁴

An overview of what is being discussed in each of these areas, as well as in which ways these could have an impact on the Western Balkans will be discussed in the following chapter of this policy paper.

³³ European Policy Centre (EPC), “The Conference on the Future of Europe: Mind the gaps!”, 12 March 2021. <https://epc.eu/en/Publications/The-Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe-Mind-the-gaps~3c8fe8>

³⁴ Conference on the Future of Europe, “Topics we’re talking about”, June 2021. <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes>

2. European democracy and institutions

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“A new push for European democracy” was one of Ursula von der Leyen’s promise when taking office as Commission President in December 2019. Since then, the European Democracy Action Plan has been published in December 2020. It “seeks to strengthen the resilience of EU democracies in the face of challenges, addressing the areas in which our systems and citizens are most vulnerable”.³⁵

A strong focus in the Action Plan lies on countering disinformation campaigns and foreign interference which are highlighted as key threats to European values and liberal democracy. Investments into resilient democracies are to take place at European and national level.

The debate on the democratic quality or deficit of the EU is as old as the EU. In recent years, with tendencies of growing

extremism and the rise of right-wing groups, and authoritarian tendencies emphasized by some governments in response to the Covid19-pandemic, this debate becomes ever more important.

Throughout the EU, growing groups of citizens feel betrayed by democratic systems for different reasons and reject liberal values and equality. On the other hand, extremist parties and political leaders with authoritarian leadership traits come prepared to exploit those sentiments. One of the most visible consequences of this anti-European populist wave was the UK’s referendum on *Brexit*.

But the populist stance towards Europe has shifted in recent years from a firmly anti-European attitude towards a narrative of European brotherhood to “defend” the “real Europe”. Hungary’s paid newspaper campaign in summer 2021 in different European newspapers is a prime example of this alternative emerging European narrative.³⁶

³⁵ European Commission, “European Democracy Action Plan”, December 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

³⁶ Euractiv, “No thanks: Some Europe newspapers refuse political ads from Hungary’s Orbán”, 2 July 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/no-thanks-some-europe-newspapers-refuse-political-ads-from-hungarys-orban/>

► In its official communication, the EU recognizes the importance of participative elements to strengthen democracy. The Conference on the Future of Europe is designed as such a participative instrument to bring citizens into the discussion on the whereabouts of European development. But by late June 2021, 20,693 participants have joined with ideas, comments or events. It could be argued that this is a relatively small portion of the 447 million inhabitants of the European Union. To compare: the European Commission alone employs about 32 000 people.³⁷

The Conference on the Future of Europe is expected to discuss problematic tendencies of backsliding, how to respond to them, with what instruments and by which institutions. These discussions might lead in different directions. Some of the potential questions in the Conference:

How is democracy understood in different parts of Europe today? Where are traditional models contested, and why?

What contributes to growing scepticism towards democracy or governments among citizens? And how are questions of wealth, (in) stability and democratic quality connected?

Some argue that to tackle the big question of European democracy, one first needs to acknowledge that one singular definition on the foundations of the European project does not exist. Others argue that in place of an outdated Western Europe vs. the rest of Europe distinction, a discussion on the future of European democracy needs to overcome those old patterns of othering.

These discussions are important, and one could even argue fundamental for the future aspirations of the Western Balkans states to become members of the EU.

Now, both the Western Balkans and the EU are engaged in pointing fingers when it comes to the state of democracy. The EU demands Western Balkans to democratise, with illiberal tendencies being an important obstacle to quicker accession. At the same time, some in the Western Balkans

³⁷ European Union, "EU-Verwaltung - Bedienstete, Sprachen und Standorte", 2021. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/figures/administration_de

are pointing to democratic backsliding in the EU to reveal the double standards of EU accession criteria.

The Conference on the Future of Europe, with an aim to develop ideas that would strengthen EU's internal democracy, could open a path for the increased readiness in the EU to enlarge.

Challenges to democracy in the region are vast and manifold. But authoritarian governments, corruption, organized crime and disinformation campaigns do not only weaken the countries internally. The proximity to the EU means that the effects of such structures easily spill into the EU. Even the strictest border regime cannot hinder misinformation to enter the EU, only thorough investments in and vivid discussions about democracy, participative structures and opportunities can suspend dangerous trends of backsliding.

Furthermore, the broader debate on European democracy might benefit from a perspective that looks at shared challenges and solutions together with

the Western Balkans. The European Democracy Action Plan makes a reference to the importance to include the "European neighbourhood and Enlargement region", but it is about time that the "enlargement region" is not only regarded as a separate part to the rest of Europe.³⁸

3. European values, fundamental rights and rule of law

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The vagueness of the term 'European values' has regularly allowed leeway for European states. Take the non-discrimination based on sexual orientation as an example. It was in 1997 and with the Amsterdam Treaty that the shared goal was introduced to:

"Combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation."

Until today, however, same-sex marriage is still only available to partners in 16

³⁸ European Commission, "On the European Democracy Action Plan", 2020, p. 21. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0790&from=EN>

► countries, starting with the Netherlands in 2001. Other types of partnerships (such as civic unions) are available in 13 countries, the latest newcomer to the group being Montenegro where life partnerships are recognized since July 2021. Fifteen countries continue to have a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage in place, 7 of whom are EU member states (all from Central and Eastern Europe).³⁹

This is just one example to show how the practice of European values differs in European countries. Especially LGBTIQ have come under attack by populist movements in recent years as being part of an alleged ideological agenda to destruct traditional models of life. Because of state discrimination against the LGBTIQ community, the European Commission issued an infringement procedure against Hungary and Poland just recently.

Discussions during the Conference on the Future of Europe might address this issue

as well, under a bigger thematic cluster of rule of law. To counter systemic threats against rule of law among its members, the EU has already developed a rule of law mechanism. This includes annual rule of law screenings. The element of budget conditionality is still controversially contested among members.⁴⁰

In the new EU enlargement methodology, rule of law is a crucial criterium for accession as part of the “fundamentals” cluster. Rule of law has been and will remain a cornerstone of the EU’s engagement in the Western Balkans. It is, like the state of democracy, considered one of the key reasons why some well-established democracies in the EU are sceptical towards enlargement. If the EU would be able to agree and develop instruments that would help member states become assessed more critically in regard to rule of law and also to improve, then this would help Western Balkans’ bid to join the EU.

³⁹ ILGA Europe provides detailed annual overviews on the status quo of the human rights situation of LGBTIQ people in Europe and Central Asia. See ILGA, “Annual Review 2021”, 2021. <https://rainbow-europe.org/sites/default/files/annual-report/Annual-Review-Full-2021.pdf>

⁴⁰ European Commission “2020 Rule of law report. Questions and answers.”, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1757

4. Education, culture, youth and sport

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For the most part, education, culture, youth and sport are the responsibility of member states, but the EU has a long tradition of supporting youth exchange and education programmes. Erasmus+ is an umbrella programme for all projects related to education, youth and sports in Europe. For the period of 2021-2027, over 26 billion Euros have been allocated to the programme, almost doubling the previous budget⁴¹.

Within the EU, the importance of youth exchange and education has long been recognized as a driving force behind the creation of European citizens, dissemination of European values and strengthening of European democracy.

Furthermore, the importance of high-quality education based on digital, green and innovative standards has become

a pressing priority for the EU. A European Education Area has been introduced to be established by 2025:

“to foster cooperation between European Union (EU) Member States to further enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national education and training systems.”

Erasmus+ will be part of the European Education Area. The general idea of the European Education Area, which is part of the broader EU recovery programme, is to:

“develop a holistic approach to EU action in education and training to create a genuine European space of learning, which benefits all learners, teachers and institutions.”⁴²

Not only the aspect of exchange is crucial, but also the guarantee of high quality, digital and innovative education as the EU recognizes with the planned European Education Area. ▶

⁴¹ European Commission, “Was ist Erasmus+?”, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about_de

⁴² European Commission, “European Education Area”, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area_en

► In the programme, the Western Balkans are recognized as a vital part of that area – however as part of the EU’s foreign policy and geopolitical agenda, rather than from a domestic interest. The importance of investing into the youth has been recognized in the Western Balkans, or the EU approach to the region, too. As part of the Berlin Process, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office is constantly highlighted as the most successful outcome of said process. Today, North Macedonia and Serbia are Programme countries of Erasmus+, meaning that citizens from these two states are eligible for all actions of Erasmus+. Partner countries can only take part in some actions and are subject to specific conditions. In the Western Balkans this applies to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* and Montenegro. Talking about the shared future, it would be important to integrate all of the Western Balkans as programme countries into the Erasmus+ structures.

Discussions at the Conference on the Future of Europe could lead to new ideas and proposals that if or when implemented will, like the current EU

policies and programmes, have impact on the Western Balkans as well. Being there, sharing their perspective and their ideas would therefore be beneficial for the Western Balkans and the EU. That said, it would be of particular importance to ensure the inclusion of young people from the Western Balkans into the process of Conference.

5. Climate change and the environment

The climate emergency is one of the most pressing issues of today. Extreme weather and natural disasters constrain the life of Europeans already, and the impact of climate change will become more and more palpable in time to come.

The Fridays For Future Movement has shown that there is public will and commitment to counter the change, however the citizen’s mobilisation has resonated only mildly in national legislation across Europe so far. Instead of radical climate policy, industries which rely on fossil fuels and heavily pollute the earth

remain funded (or bailed out during the pandemic). Consumption is considered as a way out of the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, or – if at all – considered a necessary evil to keep the world running.

Climate change needs to be fought at a global level, and the EU Green Deal shows that the EU has, at least at the declarative level, understood that.⁴³ Also, throughout the history the EU has often pushed more innovative and green policies onto reluctant member states. At this point in time, reluctance is outright dangerous. It is only a matter of time, before even the richest states and the best insurance company in Europe run out of money to leverage damage caused by climate disasters.

Some argue that what would be needed now is a radical U-turn towards innovative technology, sustainable energy production and cut of pollution. Ideally, global programmes could be coordinated.

The EU Green Debate needs to include the Western Balkans since it is part of the

European space. The level of pollution in the entire region is far worse than in the rest of Europe and seriously hampers the quality of life of citizens. It also impacts the EU.

At the same time, this transformation brings the opportunity of innovative investments for the region. While it might pose a real challenge to re-organize established industry sectors or road networks in Western Europe towards sustainable alternatives, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans needs to be applied immediately to all aspects of development. Where radical adaptation is needed, it can often be easier to build something from scratch rather than fully restructure it.

Within the green discussion on the future of Europe, the issue of connectivity pops up regularly, and especially in relation the Southeast Europe which remains geographically cut off the rest of Europe due to an insufficient transport infrastructure. In all these debates, Europeans (anywhere) should never forget ▶

⁴³ European Commission, "The European Green Deal", 2019. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0002.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence. This applies to any other further mentions of Kosovo* in this paper

- ▶ how small the Western Balkans are in relation to the European Union, that the region lies not outside the EU, but is in fact surrounded by member states and that all countries are already massively interconnected with European markets and societies.

The region is on the green radar of the EU – but since green agenda is expected to take a significant part of the discussion within the Conference the Future of Europe, including Western Balkans is a win-win situation. The exclusion of the region from the Conference is contrary to the European agenda, and the topic of environmental protection and sustainable solutions forward illustrate this perfectly.

6. A stronger economy, social justice and jobs

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The European economy is in an important period of transformation towards the new economy of the 21st century. It is under the influence of major technological changes caused by general digitalization as well as the orientation towards a sustainable economy that has fewer negative effects on climate and is increasingly oriented to new scientific and technological solutions.

Considering the careful use of natural resources, the application of renewable energy sources, “clean” technologies, reducing carbon emissions (low carbon economy) and preventing further environmental pollution through waste, are the basis of the EU policy that includes the so-called European Green Deal. This implies a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions in the EU by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. Greenhouse gas emissions should be neutral by 2050. Among other things, new

vehicles should not emit prohibited gases in 2035, the target in terms of renewable energy sources is 40% by 2030, while a very ambitious program of natural soil renewal and afforestation in EU countries is planned.

These changes will be supported by a new comprehensive financial package for economic recovery after the pandemic (Next Generation EU) as well as multi-annual budget funds (until 2027) focused on modernization and innovation. Up to 30% of funds intended for aid to other countries will be directed to climate goals.

In addition to economic development, the key issues in the EU discussed by the *Conference on the Future* are related to employment as well as social rights. In this sense, further strengthening of the internal market and various training and support measures for young people in order to find employment are a necessary addition to a comprehensive climate program. In the framework of the “*European Pillar of Social Rights*”, the European Commission has envisaged 20

measures to achieve better conditions for training, gender equality, working conditions (benefits, social dialogue, etc.), social protection (minimum income, assistance for children, assistance to the disabled, access to basic services and others).

The area of the Western Balkans, which is in fact economically integrated in the EU (high share of trade with the EU, origin of foreign investments, large companies from the EU operation in the WB, local banking system belonging to EU banks, etc.) in practice still lags behind the level of economic cohesion compared to the EU average. In 2020 COVID - 19 plunged the WB countries like the rest of the world into deep recession. Economic activity contracted by an estimated 3.4%. Since the start of the pandemic, 139,000 jobs have been lost and between 165,000 and 336,000 people in the region have been pushed into poverty.⁴⁴

However, economic activity is expected to expand 4.4% in 2021 and 3.7% in 2022 and in 2023. ▶

⁴⁴ World Bank, Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, No. 19. Spring 2021, page 2.

► The economic and social difficulties of the Western Balkans, despite the progress made in recent years, are particularly visible when compared to the results of the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and later. After almost 20 years of intense reform and Europeanization efforts, the WB remains among the poorest regions in Europe with living standards in 2018 between 30 and 40% of EU27 average GDP per capita⁴⁵. In other words, the process of convergence of the WB towards the EU27 has been proceeding extremely slowly. Some of the effects of this situation are seen in the very high emigration numbers from the WB countries, especially of the youth population, resulting with possible long-term depopulation of the region.

The European Commission has directed certain funds from the IPA budget as a

form of emergency one-time assistance to WB countries in the fight against the COVID pandemic 19.⁴⁶ In addition, the European Commission has prepared an “Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans” which includes 9 billion from IPA funds for the period until 2027, as well as a special “WB Guarantee facility” that would potentially raise investments of up to EUR 20 billion in the same period.⁴⁷

However, the EU allocations of grants to its member States in SEE (Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Romania and Slovenia) in comparison with the WB *will be up to 11 times higher in the next seven years*. As a result, *“the socio-economic wall between the EU territories around the WB will rise even higher”*⁴⁸.

Therefore, it would be necessary that all programs of modernization and financial

⁴⁵ Matteo Bonomi, “EU enlargement policy and socio-economic convergence in the Western Balkans”, ISDCS, Policy Paper No.52 / 2020, Skopje, October 2020, 23 p.

⁴⁶ It is about 3.3 billion euros, which includes support for the development of health infrastructures in the previous period, and with IPA funds and loans from the European Investment Bank. See Council of the EU, “Infographic – COVID-19: EU support for the Western Balkans”, 1 June 2021. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/covid-support-western-balkans-health-vaccines/>

⁴⁷ See European Commission, “An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans COM (2020) 641 final”, 6 October 2020.

⁴⁸ Dusan Reljić, “The EU’s quest for strategic autonomy in the Western Balkans: why it flopped”, in: Matteo Bonomi (ed), In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?, IAI, Rome, 2021, p. 37.

support for WB be as harmonized and integrated as possible with European projects such as European Green Deal, digital strategy, innovation, research, education, etc., with the aim of aligning current WB convergence trends with the EU average. This will be possible only if EU funds are evenly opened to beneficiaries from the Western Balkans.

Discussions during the Conference on the Future of Europe will touch upon some or all of these elements. Having the voice of the Western Balkans at the Conference, arguing in favour of solutions laid here, therefore seems crucial.

7. Digital transformation

Digital technologies have already become a central part of the social and economic activities of the modern world, as demonstrated during the COVID 19 pandemic. Digital technologies affect not only communications but also the way each individual works and lives. The development of digital technologies will play a key role in the transformation of European economies and societies in order to achieve climate-neutral goals by 2050.

During the last year and this year, the European Union has strengthened measures related to the rapid digitalization of the economy and society, including the adoption of the so-called “*Digital Compass*” which sets the main development goals of the EU in this area until 2030.

In the same context, it is envisaged that at least 20% of all public investment based on the post-covid reconstruction and development plan (*Next Generation EU*) and the budget by 2027 will be oriented towards digitization projects. ►

► As part of its digital development strategy, the EU aims to achieve, inter alia, “*digital sovereignty*”, which includes the digital single market, the development of autonomous digital technologies and solutions, including cybersecurity and the development of 5G and 6G digital mega-links.

The European Commission has already proposed rules on digital services, a strategy for developing the *data* economy. A special debate at the international level concerns the taxation of Internet companies for the profits they make from digital activities. EU activities also relate to the development of artificial intelligence, new digital technologies (such as supercomputers, quantum technologies and cloud computing).

European digital targets for 2030 (digital compass) include up to 80% of digitally trained adults, as well as 20 million specialists employed in the IT sector, all settlements having access to the 5G network; European semiconductor production should reach 20% share in

the world, 3 out of 4 companies in the EU should use artificial intelligence and services related to massive data banks (cloud computing services), digitalization of public services (access to health services, all public services will be online, etc.).⁴⁹

For the Western Balkans, the key question is to what extent it will be able to follow the digital development in the EU. Some countries, such as Serbia, have a well-developed IT private sector, as well as a development strategy in the IT sector.

The Regional Cooperation Council based in Sarajevo is leading a digital transformation project on Western Balkans: roaming, broadband, industry digitalization, cybersecurity and digital education.⁵⁰ According to the RCC plan, the key goal is the alignment of the WB Digital Agenda with EU Digital Single Market (DSM) principles and practices and relevant European strategies. In order to provide political support to this project, regular “digital summits” of the Western Balkans have been organized, with last,

⁴⁹ European Commission, 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade, Communication, Brussels, 9.3.2021 COM (2021) 118 final.

⁵⁰ RCC, “Digital Transformation: Connecting the Region”, 2021. <https://www.rcc.int/flagships/7/digital-transformation>

third, being organised in Tirana in October 2020.⁵¹

The European Commission has included digital transformation in its Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans from 2020 as one of the priorities, the implementation of which began with measures to support the digital agenda for the Western Balkans, adopted in 2018.⁵² In this framework, the main measures relate to: broadband and digital connectivity, developing the digital economy and society through: *eGovernment*, *eProcurement*, *eHealth*, digital skills and entrepreneurship, digitalization of industries and cybersecurity.

As a leading (flagship initiatives no. 8) initiative, the plan states the development of digital infrastructures: the development and roll-out of national broadband infrastructure, setting up secure, energy-efficient and trustworthy data centres,

edge and cloud infrastructures and building on ongoing initiatives such as the Balkan Digital Highway.⁵³

According to the European Commission's analysis of the development of electronic and digital services in the Western Balkans and Turkey from 2019, there were 29% market indicators where performance by a Western Balkans economy was above the EU average level and 43% of indicators where performance was 20% or more below the EU28.⁵⁴

Any discussion on what the future of digitalization might look in the EU will therefore have an impact on the Western Balkans. Their participation in the Conference, therefore, not only makes sense but could also help boost implementation of the future EU policies in the region.

⁵¹ The fourth summit will be organized in Podgorica, Montenegro in October 2021. See Telecommunication Development Sector (ITU-D), "Digital Summit for Western Balkans", 2020. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/Europe/Pages/Events/2020/DigSumWB/Tirana.aspx>

⁵² European Commission, "Measures in support of a Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, staff working document SWD (2018) 360 final", 22 June 2018.

⁵³ European Commission, "Annex to the Communication: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans COM (2020) 641 final", 6 October 2020.

⁵⁴ European Commission, "Monitoring the Digital Economy and Electronic Communications Services in the Western Balkans and Turkey", Market Report, 2019 Follow-up Study Report. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2e0e1320-5118-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1>

8. Migration

Unlike other topics such as economic development, the fight against climate change or digitization, the topic of migration has a somewhat negative charge in the European public opinion.

Especially irregular migration or movements of refugees are often perceived, or framed, as a phenomenon that threatens the stability and security of society or that can affect the identity of individual European nations. This interpretation is especially present in some political elites of Central and Eastern European countries and has been exploited by populist groups or parties throughout Europe.

The so-called migration or refugee crisis from 2015, fuelled by the war in Syria and wider instability in the Middle East, caused great debates and political disputes between individual EU States, and was contributed greatly to the emergence or strengthening of populist movements in some EU countries.⁵⁵

Today, there are around 2.6 million refugees in the EU, and the number of annual asylum applications exceeds half a million. Differences in views on migration and migrants, especially those from Muslim countries and Africa, have not been overcome even today, although the situation is somewhat calmer than during the crisis of the second half of the last decade.

In response to the above-mentioned debates and the fact that some Member States have not agreed to implement some parts of the European *acquis* or arrangements in the field of migration and asylum, the European Commission submitted in September 2020 a series of new legislative proposals entitled "*New Pact on Migration and Asylum*", in order to regulate this issue in a new and comprehensive way.⁵⁶

This proposal provides a comprehensive approach, bringing together policy in the areas of migration, asylum, integration of migrants and border management. It is based on the idea that no Member State should shoulder a disproportionate responsibility and that all Member States

⁵⁵ According to a Eurobarometer survey, this question is considered as the main area of disagreement between the EU and national governments by nearly half (47%) of respondents.

⁵⁶ European Commission, "Communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum - COM (2020) 609 final", 23 September 2020

should contribute to solidarity on a constant basis. This common response needs to include the EU's relationships with third countries, as the internal and external dimensions of migration are inextricably linked. In this context, measures involving enhanced mandates for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and upgrading the Schengen Information System (SIS) and the visa information system (VIS) are particularly important.

In 2015 through the so-called "*Western Balkans route*" the number of people registered on this route increased by 16 times in a year, reaching probably one million. Although in the following years this number decreased, EU cooperation with Western Balkans countries in this area is still considered as vital for both sides. It includes EU support, harmonization of policies and measures related to strengthening the control of external borders, the application of asylum rules and more. The level of cooperation in the area of border control between the EU and Western Balkans governments show how much is possible to reach in a short

amount of time if political will exists.

However, for the region of the Western Balkans, another particularly important issue is the constant emigration of people from the region to the EU countries. This is a long-term trend that deeply affects the societies of the Western Balkans.

Demographic stagnation in the EU, as well as the increased need for experienced workers in different fields (including medicine etc.) have fuelled this trend, especially when it comes to the younger and more educated population.⁵⁷ According to some estimates, in the period 2008-2018, about three million inhabitants left the Western Balkans region. Migration of citizens of Western Balkan countries to the EU is within a margin of 6% -12% of their entire population. Therefore, the process of depopulation has deep medium-term or long-term consequences.

The above-mentioned data and trends indicate a great security, economic and social interdependence of the EU and the Western Balkans. This interdependence means that wherever the discussion ►

⁵⁷ First wave of economic emigration from ex-Yugoslavia into Germany and other West European States happened in the 60s and 70s. At that time, most of the migrants were unskilled workers, while in recent times they are people with higher education or skilled workers.

▶ during the Conference on the Future of Europe will lead the EU, impact on the Western Balkans is inevitable. The voice from the region should aim to promote further measures that will enable policy harmonization in the field of migration and asylum, including external border control and faster development of the region.

9. Health

The Covid 19 virus pandemic has been the reason to consider the issue of health policy and practice as a priority topic of the European Union. According to the EU Treaties, EU countries hold primary responsibility for organizing and delivering health services and medical care. EU health policy therefore serves to complement national policies, and to ensure health protection in all EU policies.

However, at the beginning of the pandemic, the European Council assessed that coordination at the EU level, i.e. primarily through the activity

of the European Commission, would be necessary in order to avoid exclusively national responses to the pandemic, and thus provoking divisions within the EU.

The situation with the implementation of the agreement on free border crossings (*Schengen agreement*) as well as the initial differences in the reactions of the member states to the pandemic indicate the extent of the ongoing EU crisis.

The European Commission has been particularly committed to providing financial support to the economies of the pandemic-affected member States, as well as supporting health research and the procurement of vaccines against the Covid 19 virus. The European Commission, for example, has ordered a total of 2.6 billion doses of vaccines for both member states and countries outside the EU. The crisis has also spurred initiatives to build a health union in the EU based on coordination and strengthening of prevention measures in the EU, as well as strengthening agencies in charge of health issues, such as the European Center

for Disease Prevention and Control, and the European Medicines Agency. A new Health Emergency Responses Authority (*HERA*) is to be formed as a result of the experience of the Covid 19 pandemic crisis.

During the pandemic, the EU supported the Western Balkans region in the form of financial aid, delivery of vaccines and other medical equipment, The EU has mobilized a support package of 3.3 billion Euros for the Western Balkans to address the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 crisis.

During the Conference on the Future of Europe these and other issues will be discussed, and ideas for strengthening the existing and maybe even establishing new instruments will be proposed. This is bound to have an impact on the Western Balkans, in one way or another, so their participation and ability to contribute is vital.

10. EU in the world

The European Union has large ambitions for further development of its geopolitical role in the world. It includes its economic role (EU internal market and its norms and standards have a great impact on other countries), the trade policy, the multilateral action in the field of environment, the *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (including peacekeeping missions), development and humanitarian aid, and so on.

The EU participates with about 15 percent in world exports and imports (second position in the World). The euro is the second largest reserve currency and the second most traded currency in the world. The EU and its Member States, taken together, are the world's leading aid donor, providing 74.4 billion Euros in official development assistance (ODA) in 2018. Development cooperation is a shared competence of the EU. The EU is providing a major proportion of global funding for emergency relief to victims ▶

► of man-made and natural disasters. For example, 7.1 billion euros was allocated to the humanitarian aid instrument for the 2014-2020 period.

That said, the European Union struggles to compete with rising – and sometimes ruthless – global competitors. The idea of being a normative global power exerting influence mainly through fiscal or economic instruments has proven to be not sufficient, not least because of the EU's dependence on external markets. In crisis situations, the EU often finds itself sitting on the fence, unable to react quickly and fiercely.

Ursula von der Leyen presented her “geopolitical” Commission when taking office – but the ambitions are often sneered at as a grand vision rather than a tangible political portfolio.

There are many attributes the EU tends to pride itself with - from being “a global green power” to being a “global liberal power advancing gender equality - but the current truth is that Foreign Policy remains a largely intergovernmental policy

field that is yet to be communitized. As such, decisions rely on unanimous voting and are hard to reach without a reform to introduce qualified majority voting.

It's prime time as global actor experienced the EU in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War when the conditioned process of accession offered leverage for the liberal power EU vis-à-vis candidate states. Today, enlargement remains a crucial instrument for the EU to push its own agenda, in particular in the Western Balkans.

The EU enlargement process is particularly important both for the EU and the Western Balkans region. While enlargement extends the mere field of foreign policy and goes deep into the heart of European domestic policy and EU integration, it must be seen as a litmus test for the EU's capacity as a global actor.

In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), a framework for relations between the EU and countries in the region. The 2003 European Council in Thessaloniki

reaffirmed that all Western Balkans countries were potential candidates for EU membership. Its 'European perspective' was reaffirmed in the Commission's February 2018 Western Balkans Strategy and in the declarations following successive EU-Western Balkans Summits in Sofia in 2018 and in Zagreb in 2020.⁵⁸

In 2020 the European Commission published a *new methodology* for enlargement negotiations. It is aimed at stronger political control over the negotiation process and foresees the possibility of sectoral integration of candidate countries in certain EU policy areas where sufficient integration progress has been made.⁵⁹

However, without a political decision in the EU to push enlargement, the Western Balkans are likely to remain in the limbo that is not in the interest of the EU or the region. The Conference could provide a platform for the honest discussion in the EU, offer realistic ideas on how to

move forward and create a much-needed political support.

Finally, the vulnerability felt during the Covid-19 pandemic has inspired increasing number of political figures and experts to debate EU strategic autonomy. The debate had already gained impetus when transatlantic relations suffered during the US-presidency of Donald Trump, and more and more arguments and ways forward are brought to the table. Whether it's called strategic autonomy, capacity to act or simply a stronger Europe in the world – there is much to discuss during the Conference and it would be therefore important to discuss as well the role that the Western Balkans play in the EU's global strategic interest.

Discussions on the EU in the world during the Conference on the Future of Europe will most probably discuss its future enlargement but also offers for potential integration of the region ahead of the full membership. The voice of the region in that sense is key.

⁵⁸ Council of the EU, "Zagreb Declaration", 6 May 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/05/06/zagreb-declaration-6-may-2020/>

⁵⁹ European Commission, "Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, Communication COM (2020) 57 final", 5 February 2020; European Commission, "2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy COM (2020) 660 final", 6 October 2020.

III. HOW VISEGRAD COULD BE THE VOICE FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

As previous chapters have noted, the Western Balkans as a whole are excluded from the Conference on the Future of Europe. This paper provided a detailed overview of how discussions and outcomes of the Conference will impact the future of this region which is fully surrounded by and already partly integrated into the EU.

Several officials and civil society organisations in the Western Balkans have called for full inclusion of the Western Balkans in the process. These calls, however, did not result in the formal inclusion of the region. But some in the EU, in particular the European External Action Service (EEAS), have showed readiness to listen to and become a voice of some of the concrete concerns, ideas and proposals coming from the Western Balkans.⁶⁰

As part of the Prespa Forum Dialogue at the shores of North Macedonia's Lake of

Ohrid on 2 July 2021 Western Balkans civil society organised an exchange of views on the future of the EU with EU civil society organisations.⁶¹

This was the first event that took place in the Western Balkans. It was an officially registered event that is part of the Conference on the Future of Europe. An EEAS official took part in the event and a final report has since been uploaded to official channels to mark a contribution to the process. This shows a model and example to follow.

There are several ways in which the Western Balkans could be heard and be at least indirectly involved in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Visegrad group, as a friend and partner of the region, could play a decisive role in making that happen. This chapter provides an overview and concrete proposals for the way forward.

⁶⁰ EEAS, "The Western Balkans contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe", 1 July 2021. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/101115/The%20Western%20Balkans%20contribute%20to%20the%20Conference%20on%20the%20Future%20of%20Europe

⁶¹ Ibid.

1. Citizens and civil society dimension

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As part of the Conference on the Future of Europe, citizens and civil society organisations in the EU, by the end of June 2021, have already organised over 1,300 so-called decentralised events with almost 19,000 participants that shared over 5,000 concrete ideas.⁶²

The early July 2021 event in North Macedonia showed that with cooperation between the EU and Western Balkans based civil society organisations, events can be organised on the territory of the Western Balkans and still be considered as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

This event, however, brought together experienced think tankers from the region and the EU, as well as EU officials. So additionally, it would be necessary to organise similar, yet low-threshold events

with citizens, civil society organisations at the local level and businesses from the region

For this purpose, existing or ad hoc networks of civil society organisations from Visegrad and Western Balkans, such as Think Balkans network, could come together to organise the so-called decentralised events across the Western Balkans.

These events could – like the one in Ohrid in July 2021 – be registered as official events that are part of the Conference on the Future of Europe. These events could include citizens and activists from the region (human rights but also environmental activists, for example).

They could be facilitated by experienced researchers with necessary EU expertise who would then sum up discussions and upload a report with concrete proposals to the official Conference on the Future of Europe web site. These events might also involve representatives of the business ▶

⁶² Conference on the Future of Europe, "What are the components of the Conference?", 2021. <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about>

▶ sector or even of the diaspora. There are many existing ties between EU-countries and future member states in the Western Balkans that should be taken as advantage in the process of the Conference.

When it comes to the number of such events, the minimum should be for one such event to take place in each of the six capitals of the Western Balkans. This could be done in cooperation with the EU info centres which exist in each of the Western Balkans states.

In addition, at least one regional event would be a great place to discuss regional issues and aspects related to the future of the EU.

Furthermore, Western Balkans and Visegrad civil society organisations could request for two civil society representatives from each Western Balkan state (a gender diverse pair with one being younger than 25) to be invited to take part in the conference plenaries as observers.

2. Parliamentary dimension

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In the Conference on the Future of Europe, the members of the European Parliament and the 27 national parliaments play an important role. Together with representatives of other EU institutions and national governments, they take part in the so-called conference plenaries on an equal footing. Their participation, of course, is an important factor for the democratic legitimacy of the process.

Across the Western Balkans, the role of parliaments in EU affairs in general should be strengthened and made more prominent. The Conference on the Future of Europe could, therefore, prove to be an instrument to encourage parliaments to take a more active and prominent role.

An ad hoc cooperation regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe at the level of speakers of the parliaments in Visegrad and Western Balkans countries, as well as at the level of the so-called European Committees (chairs and vice-

chairs) in Visegrad group and the Western Balkans could be established.

Each of the six parliaments in the Western Balkans could organise an exchange of views on the Conference on the Future of Europe in their European committees. In this regard, experts, members of the Visegrad national parliaments and members of the European Parliament coming from the Visegrad group, who will be taking part in the conference plenaries, could be invited to share ideas.

Each of the six Western Balkans committees would have the opportunity to adopt conclusions. These could then be presented to their Visegrad group counterparts to be included in their contribution at the conference plenaries.

Additionally, a Western Balkans regional meeting between speakers of the parliaments, as well as chairs and vice chairs of the EU committees, could be organised with an aim to draw some joint conclusions and messages. Counterparts from Visegrad group and members of the European Parliament from Visegrad group

could be invited for a thorough exchange and discussions on the future of the shared future.

Furthermore, Western Balkans and Visegrad parliaments could request for speakers and/or chairs of the EU committees of the Western Balkans parliaments to be invited to the conference plenaries as observers.

3. Governmental dimension

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At the conference plenaries two representatives from each of the twenty-seven governments in the EU would be taking part in the discussion. The conference plenaries are the place where inputs from other events are being discussed. The final outcome will be presented as a report to the Conference's Joint Presidency (EU institutions) which will then decide about which of the proposals and ideas might be implemented, and how.

When it comes to the foreign policy issues, at the conference plenaries the Vice ▶

- ▶ President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will be taking part.

The Western Balkan governments could contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe as well. In particular when it comes to their expectations regarding future integration with the EU, as well as support they expect and contribution they might have for the EU.

Taking into account the format of the Conference on the Future of Europe, each of the six governments in the Western Balkans could consider discussing and adopting a set of conclusions regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe.

These conclusions could then be presented at a meeting of the Western Balkans and Visegrad foreign ministers with the Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This meeting could be convened for a sole purpose to present and discuss these individual government conclusions.

Furthermore, Western Balkans and Visegrad governments, together with the Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, could request for ministers of foreign affairs of the Western Balkans to be invited to the conference plenaries as observers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU today is confronted with numerous internal and external challenges and finds itself under severe criticism. In response to all this, political elites in the EU have agreed to initiate and implement far-reaching consultations with citizens, civil society organisations and academia, to listen and include their voices when developing ideas for the future.

This report had three objectives. First, to provide a background on the Conference on the Future of Europe and to look at circumstances that led to the Conferences, its objectives and methodology, as well as issues to be discussed and the timeframe under which it will take place.

Second, to take a closer look into whether and to what extent the Western Balkans are involved in the Conference on the Future of Europe. This report looked in detail at the current state of debate in nine large topics to be discussed at the Conference. From the state of

democracy and institutional framework to education, culture, youth and sport. From climate change and economy to digital transformation. This report also looked at potential directions in which proposals and ideas might go, and how these changes could impact the Western Balkans.

Finally, the third objective of this report was to provide suggestions on how different voices and ideas coming from the Western Balkans – citizens and civil society organizations, parliamentarians and governments – could be included in the Conference with help of the Visegrad Group

As this report shows, the Conference on the Future of Europe is taking place under unprecedented circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. At this point it is still unclear to what extent discussions and ideas coming out of the Conference will in fact respond to diverse expectations and interests in the EU. ▶

► What is certain, however, is that whatever comes out of the Conference in form of concrete changes in the EU will have impact on the Western Balkans. Major topics of concern for the Western Balkans, among many, include the fundamental rights and rule of law, a stronger economy and cohesion policies, connectivity, enlargement, migrations and health.

The level of integration of the Western Balkans with the EU so far, as well as the prospect of full EU membership in the future are two main reasons why this impact on the Western Balkans will be felt at all times. Equally, time does not stand still in the Western Balkans either and developments in the region will be felt – immediately or in the future – in the European Union.

One of the advantages of the Conference on the Future of Europe is that, despite its strict rules on the formal exclusion of the Western Balkans, it allows for the voices from the Western Balkans to be heard in practical terms. The official Conference on the Future of Europe event in early July

2021 took place in North Macedonia and showed that things can be done⁶³.

In going forward, this report recommends to the Western Balkans and the Visegrad Group to consider working in two directions.

First, foreign ministries of the Visegrad Group could consult among themselves if they would be willing to invest time and resources to become the voice of the Western Balkans at the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the case of a positive response the Visegrad Group would once again need to confirm its strong partnership with the Western Balkans.

To set things in the motion they would then need to consult with their national parliaments (speakers and European committees) if and to what extent they would be interested in providing support. Furthermore, they would need to bring civil society organisations from Visegrad countries on board that have experience and network in the Western Balkans.

⁶³ Coverage of the first event on Western Balkan contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe, held during the Prespa Forum in North Macedonia (July 2021). <https://idscs.org.mk/en/2021/07/02/the-first-event-on-western-balkans-contribution-to-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-was-held-within-the-prespa-forum-dialogue/>

Following these initial inquiries, concrete steps, events and meetings could then be planned and implemented.

Second part is related to all six Western Balkans where foreign ministries and parliaments, as well as civil society organisations, would then need to come on board with the idea and execute the plan in the most efficient way.

Last but not least, while we address the V4-governments specifically with these recommendations due to the project-related circumstances, we wish to emphasize that it should be in all EU government's interest to consider the Western Balkans in their (strategic) planning on the future of the EU.

We are living in a time when there are many doubts about the future of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. The growing frustration among politicians, civil society organisations and citizens on both sides points to need of concrete and visible steps that would provide mutual reassurance. Inclusion of the Western

Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe, as outlined in the third chapter of this report, could be a concrete first step in the right direction.

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Information about the International Visegrad Fund

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The Visegrad Fund is an international donor organization, established in 2000 by the governments of the Visegrad Group countries—Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to promote regional cooperation in the Visegrad region (V4) as well as between the V4 region and other countries, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The Fund does so by awarding €8 million through grants, scholarships and artist residencies provided annually by equal contributions of all the V4 countries. Other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.

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Information about THINK BALKANS

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The 'Cooperation Instrument for the Western Balkans Think Tanks – THINK BALKANS' project is financially supported by the International Visegrad Fund and builds upon the previously established cooperation between the members of the Southeast European Think Net Network (SEE Think Net) and Think Visegrad as part of the 'Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans: The Berlin Process and Visegrad Group in comparison project'.

Following the successful past cooperation, the **Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS)** is the project coordinator, which, in collaboration with the **European Movement in Serbia (EMinS)**, **Platforma CiviKos** from Kosovo, **Politikon Network** from Montenegro, **Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS)** from Albania, **Humanity in Action Bosnia and Herzegovina** from Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Centre for European Perspective (CEP)** from Slovenia, **Centre for Eastern Studies from Poland (OSW)**, **Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade from Hungary (IFAT)**, the **Research Centre of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA)** from Slovakia, and **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy (EUROPEUM)** from the Czech Republic, will work in achieving the project's goals.

The project duration is 15 months, that is, from October 2020 to January 2022.

Modelling on the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform and closely cooperating with it, this project aims to pilot an instrument for the permanent cooperation of Western ►

- ▶ Balkan (WB) think tanks by 1) strengthening the cooperation of think tanks in V4 countries with WB think tanks/analytical institutions; 2) promoting V4 cooperation among experts / policy makers in the WB as a successful regional model open to experience sharing with countries wishing to join the EU; 3) offering V4 expertise on regional cooperation that can help strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, which represents a crucial aspect of the region's European integration; 4) providing a new platform for strengthening people-to-people links between analytical institutions, think tanks, government institutions from the V4 and the Western Balkans; 5) cultivating inter-regional cooperation between V4 and WB6 on issues of common strategic interest; and 6) encouraging the use of V4 know-how gained through Think Visegrad to help improve dialogue between the relevant state institutions in the WB countries (e.g. between the foreign ministries as well as between the WB think tanks and NGOs and the WB MFAs).

Information about the authors

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Link

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<https://idscs.org.mk/en/portfolio/the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-how-visegrad-could-be-the-voice-for-the-western-balkans/>

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