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Should the Western Balkans participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe?

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In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four experts give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue our topic is *“Should the Western Balkans participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe?”*

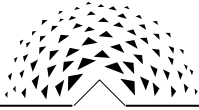
I. INSIGHTS FROM THE EU

JANA JUZOVÁ

Last year, the EU started one of the most ambitious discussions about the future of the Union in its history, the Conference on the Future of Europe. Through discussions with citizens, civil society, and European institutions, the Conference is expected to result in EU reforms both at the institutional level and at the level of European policies. The Conference arrives at a time when the EU is facing an unprecedented threat to its existence in the form of growing nationalism and Eurosceptic sentiments. As this crisis has resulted in one country leaving the Union for the first time in its history (Brexit), with the Conference the EU hopes to rediscover its unity and purpose.

However, this is not the first initiative of this kind that has been undertaken in the EU. Two decades ago, EU leaders discussed how to make the EU functional after having accepted ten new members with the “big bang” EU enlargement in 2004. This resulted in the Treaty of Nice, which reformed the institutional structure of the EU and the organization of the Convention on the Future of Europe, which had goals similar to the ones of the current Conference. The soon-to-be new member states, including the Visegrad countries, were invited to the Convention through the participation of a representative they selected, Alojz Peterle from Slovenia.

The obvious question today is why candidate countries have been excluded from the process this time. Like twenty years ago, the title of the Conference includes the term “Europe”, not “the EU”, and as such indicates a broad discussion, without being limited to the current members of the EU. This gives the impression that while the 2002 Convention explicitly focused on preparing the EU for a big enlargement and was thus more open to the applicant countries, this time the Conference only provides a closed discussion for those already in. The decision not to include candidate countries in the process questions the EU’s seriousness about its promise to the Western Balkans, as well as the argument that the EU needs to be able to absorb new members first, which is often used to justify the never-ending enlargement process. It is further evidence of the EU’s doubts concerning the EU enlargement policy and its continuation, but also of the fading post-Cold-War ideal of a united Europe.



Furthermore, the Conference aims to bring about a reform which will affect the future of Europe in the medium to long term. Including the Western Balkans, and even Turkey, in the discussions would thus be in the strategic interest of the EU. Already with the current levels of interdependence between the EU and the region, it is clear that the EU will not be able to find solutions to large issues, such as climate change, migration, or health crises, on its own, as these issues are not confined by national borders. As the Conference is expected to shape the future of Europe for the next few decades, the EU should make the discussions as broad and inclusive as possible. It would be understandable that EU leaders are hesitant to include candidate countries if the outcomes of the discussions were binding. However, to the detriment of any tangible results, that is not the case, thus there is no real obstacle to involving the region and its citizens in the Conference. In the end, knowing the opinions, preferences, and concerns of its future citizens would only benefit the EU, and it could enrich the discussion and the eventual decision making.

The reasons for the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe are thus both pragmatic and normative. The EU can only gain from gathering more information and new, perhaps different, ideas and perspectives to work with when following up on the discussions of the Conference, especially in areas that impact the EU and the region equally. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, for the Conference to be organized in a truly European manner, to re-establish a sense of unity and togetherness, the inclusion of the Western Balkan partners is not a choice but a must. The current approach only emphasizes the already existing divisions, enhancing the perception of the EU in the region as an elitist club that is closed off to those who have been waiting at its door for more than two decades.

FLORENT MARCIACQ

After a bumpy start, the Conference on the Future of Europe is on, but limited time remains for those who wish to contribute to the EU's advancement of a more robust strategic vision: the Conference is already planned to deliver its conclusions in 2022. Regrettably, the Western Balkans have not been invited to join the Conference. Their accession perspectives do not rank very high on the agenda of most Member States, and the countries of the region have missed one more opportunity to join forces in addressing this issue together.

However, the jig is not up, and support is growing in the EU capitals and in Brussels for the Western Balkans to ultimately join the Conference. Rather than waiting for Godot, the countries of the region should jump on this train and demonstrate their readiness to contribute to the reflections regarding the future of Europe.

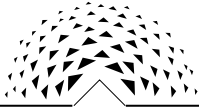
This reflection, after all, is about a Union that they are striving to join. At the same time, beyond the need to contemplate their future in the same light as that of the EU, their participation is essential to building a shared sense of belonging across the region, to increase the joint ownership of the European integration project and give Western Balkan citizens the opportunity to mobilise and engage in discussions that transcend ethnonational lines. The inclusion of the Western Balkans is thus, in one word, crucial to strengthening the community of purpose that connects the EU and the countries of the region in the making of a stronger Europe.

In addition, the challenges undermining the transformation of the Western Balkans today are in many respects comparable to those faced by the EU. The post-COVID uncertainties, growing socioeconomic disparities, demographic decline, erosion of democratic values, rise of populism, lack of solidarity, persistence of bilateral tensions, rising insecurity and geopolitical tensions are by no means peculiarities affecting the countries of the region alone. Rather than considering the Western Balkans as essentially different from the EU for their lack of membership status and locking them up in an agonising accession policy, the EU (and the countries of the region themselves) should start seeing south-eastern Europe as a full-fledged region that is already in Europe. The EU and the Western Balkans are already steering the same European boat.

There is a point to be made, but pressing for it would require a regional push. As a region, the Western Balkans matter more than the sum of their parts. As a region, they can gain better leverage in EU politics. The Western Balkans do not need to ask for the EU's permission to discuss the future of Europe: they are entitled to create imaginaries, nurture visions, and voice strategic preferences. What they need is Europeans sharing their vision on the finality of European integration, the value of European democracy, the importance of solidarity, or the advancement of the EU's strategic autonomy. These are no rare commodity, given the resonance of citizens' aspirations across the EU and the Western Balkans.

ULRICH SCHLIE

The integration of the Western Balkan countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures is one of the most demanding and forward-looking tasks of Europe today. The future of the Western Balkans will be decisive for Europe as a whole. The admission of the Western Balkan countries as members of the European Union, however, is conditioned to various factors and intrinsically linked to political developments in the countries themselves. The road to full membership will only be successful in the long run if neighbourhood stability, internal developments, a pro-business environment, and a culture of freedom and democracy flourish.



Europe has been marked by its diversity and the footprints of the history of competing nation states. The project of the European Union after the devastating effects of World War II has been a political project from the very beginning. This political project could only have developed into what is today a Europe that is whole and free by promoting mutual understanding, reconciliation, an exchange of views, and growing understanding. It should therefore go without saying that the citizens of the Western Balkan states should bring their views, ideas, and visions of the future to the larger table of the project of Europe. It is advisable that we not only listen carefully to these ideas, views, and visions based on different past experiences, but that we engage these prospective members of the European Union, which are already an integral part of the Europe of our days. Thus, we all will profit in the long run.

The Western Balkan states should therefore participate in and contribute to the reflection on the Conference on the Future of Europe. This reflection not only has to define how Europe will defend itself, it also has to find answers to the pressing problems of our days, which range from climate change and migration to European defence. The Europeanization of the Western Balkans will only be possible as part of a discussion process that will lead to greater awareness and better understanding of the different national perspectives. Post-conflict stabilization, democratization, and the promotion of the rule of law form key elements and an integral part of a comprehensive EU foreign policy. We should take the fact that there is still unfinished business regarding these areas in the Western Balkan countries as an incentive to engage in an even more constructive dialogue and find common solutions to common problems.

WOUTER ZWEERS

EU leaders declare that [“The future of the Western Balkans is in the EU”](#) time and again. Yet the Western Balkans are not participating in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CofoE). This is a painful example of the EU not being sincere on EU enlargement, raising doubt concerning the extent to which it is committed to the EU perspective of the Western Balkans.

It remains to be seen whether the CofoE will gain some traction within the EU and lead to feasible outcomes that are politically acceptable for the institutions and Member States to work with. Already before the process got underway, we saw [a group of Member States](#), including the Netherlands, setting red lines when declaring that the CofoE should not lead to treaty changes. As the Dutch parliament subsequently reminded the government, this position does not reflect an open approach to the outcomes of the process. In the Netherlands the conference is not widely covered in mainstream media, and apart from the EU in-crowd, it does not seem to live amongst citizens. Some consider the Conference a vehicle to influence the French elections, which

are scheduled midway through the French EU Presidency. Browsing the Cofoe website yields very few events in the Netherlands, of which [only one attempts to engage ordinary citizens](#).

This does not mean that the initiative is not a praiseworthy attempt to connect citizens to EU policy making, which is why the exclusion of candidate and potential candidate countries in south-east Europe is problematic. They have been engaged in an EU accession trajectory for many years, with North Macedonia, for example, in the EU waiting room since 2003.

Citizens are almost nowhere to be found in the accession framework. Negotiations take place between incumbent governments, the European Commission, and the EU Member States. To put it mildly, the negotiations have not led to the expected results. Serbia, for example, has [taken an autocratic turn in the past years](#) but continues to be praised by EU leaders, the latest example being Commission President Von Der Leyen, who declared in Belgrade in September that she [commend\[s\] the steps taken thus far on reforms and rule of law](#).

In the meantime, 53% of Serbian citizens are still in favour of joining the EU, although 44% believe their country will never become an EU member.¹ Despite the deterioration of the rule of law and media freedom in their country, they find it difficult to grasp why their country is not yet a part of the EU. The core message they hear in that regard comes from their incumbent government, which, amongst others, uses the Kosovo issue to deflect the situation concerning the rule of law.

The only way to turn the tide would be to better inform citizens in the Western Balkans as to where their country stands in the accession process and the values the EU is supposed to stand for. The Conference on the Future of Europe could have been an opportunity for the EU to go beyond its government-oriented approach in enlargement and connect with citizens who, even after years of stalled negotiations, are still generally staunch supporters of the EU – even when, or possibly as a result of, not being part of it.

The name of the conference makes the missed opportunity for the Western Balkans extra painful. This conference is not only supposed to be about the future of the European Union as its title suggests, it should provide a course for the future of the continent – Europe – at large. Words matter. The Western Balkans have been hearing for years that they have a [‘European perspective’](#). Situated in the heart of that very same continent, this message remains devoid of any meaning. The Conference on the Future of Europe risks the very same fate. Regardless of its outcomes, the Cofoe could have been an opportunity to finally connect with citizens in the WB region and show them that the EU is serious about the future of Europe at large.

¹ August 2021 IPSOS poll for BiEPAG and EFB, unpublished at the time of writing.