



The Western Balkans Discuss the Future of Europe!

North-Macedonia's Perspectives on Europe's Future

Focus Group Discussion

organised in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2020-2022)

Venue: 22 September 2020, Museum of Contemporary Art, Skopje, North Macedonia

Organised by and with the support of

Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe, Vienna
Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Dialog Südosteuropa, Sarajevo
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French Institute for International Relations (Ifri), Paris
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Context and objectives

In the past ten years, the European Union (EU) has faced a long list of serious challenges, from the economic and financial crisis in the late 2000s to the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic earlier this year. These challenges have put the unity of the EU to the test. The need to swiftly react has strained the advancement of **a more robust strategic vision**. While a new reflection on the future of Europe has been initiated with the publication of the EU's White Paper on the Future of Europe in March 2017, followed by President Macron's speeches in Athens, La Sorbonne, etc..., much remains to be done to rediscover the reasons underlying the European integration process in the first place, rejuvenate the European project and make it again a higher source of inspiration for the citizens of the continent.

There could not be better timing for this reflection to be intensified. A new Strategic Agenda has been outlined for 2019-2024 and a two-year "Conference on the Future of Europe" has been launched with the aim to overhaul the general functioning of the EU. Key Member States have already put forward a number of proposals.

The Western Balkans should participate in, and contribute to, this reflection on the future of Europe, as their participation is crucial to strengthen a community of purpose connecting the EU and the Western Balkans. Pushing for such inclusion will be the aim of a new regional initiative taking place in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe. A series of events will be organised from 2020 to 2022 in the capitals of the WB6 and the capitals of key member states of the EU in order to stimulate an interactive and transnational exchange of views across the region and Europe on topics that are of essential significance for the future of the EU and the Western Balkans alike.

Focus Group Discussion in Skopje

The Focus Group discussion in Skopje will invite 20 opinion-shapers (journalists, intellectuals, activists, politicians, trade unionists, employers, religious representatives, artists) from North Macedonia to exchange on a range of topics that relate more to European governance in general than Western Balkan politics in particular. Their contribution will be used in preparation of publication to be presented in Brussels, Paris, Berlin, etc.

The focus group will look at the Western Balkans as “a region (already) in Europe”, i.e. as a region that can and should contribute to the *grands débats on the future of Europe*. It will explore the possible contribution(s) that Western Balkan societies could make to the making of Europe and reform of the Union, along two guiding questions:

- What should the European Union that the WB6 countries would like to join be about, what should it seek to achieve?
- What distinct contributions could the WB6 countries make to advancing the European project, how would their membership strengthen the Union?

A list of more specific questions that might be reflected upon is included in the **discussion framework** below. The discussion will be moderated by a tandem of experts.

Programme

14h00: Networking Drink and Registration @ Museum of Contemporary Art

14h30: Welcome and introduction

Florent Marciacq, Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe, Vienna
Harun Cero, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Dialog Südosteuropa, Sarajevo

14h45: Focus Group Discussion

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
<i>Kick-off:</i> Anida Šabanović Foreign Policy Initiative BH, Sarajevo	<i>Kick-off:</i> Visar Xhambazi Democracy for Development Institute, Pristina
<i>Facilitation:</i> Viktor Mitevski Start Up Academy, Skopje	<i>Facilitation:</i> Lura Pollozhani United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Skopje

Discussion round #1: *What should the European Union that the WB6 countries would like to join be about and seek to achieve?*

15h50: Coffee Break (15 minutes)

Discussion round #2 *What distinct contributions could the WB6 countries make to advancing the European project or how might their membership strengthen the Union?*

17h00: End of the workshop

Discussion Framework

Discussions on the future of Europe have been initiated in 2017 with the publication of the eponymous White Paper on the Future of Europe and President Macron's European speeches. They spread ahead of the 2019 European elections and against the backdrop of Brexit through Citizens' Dialogues, paved the ground of the Sibiu Declaration about Europe's commitments and provided guidance in the elaboration of the EU's new strategic agenda (2019-2024). With the launch of the two-year "**Conference on the Future of Europe**" (2020-2022), this strategic process will expectedly gain momentum and prove crucial to overcome the polycrisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of this outline is to set the ground for discussions in the Western Balkans on the future of Europe. It therefore identifies major, sometimes overlapping or highly contentious elements in the EU's contemporary *grands débats*, which might be used as building blocks of **a nascent Western Balkan vision for the future of Europe**. Its structure reflects the Council's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe of 24th June 2020 and Strategic Agenda (2019-2024) by bring up issues such as:

1. Sustainability, including green and just transition and climate neutrality by 2050

The ambition of the new President of the European Commission is to turn the EU into the world's first climate neutral and pollution-free continent by 2050. To achieve that end, she proposed in 2019 to launch a European Green Deal with the following ideas: increase of the EU's 2030 emission reduction targets, extension of the Emission Trading System, renewed emphasis on circular economy, support for clean mobility, greening of TEN-E regulations and fair support for transition through cohesion funds.

- How compatible with its climate ambitions is the EU's economic model?
- Is innovation a panacea for achieving sustainable growth?
- How to advance a greener agenda in times of hyper-consumption, cultural consumerism and e-commerce?
- How to lessen tensions inevitably caused by Green Transition amongst the various sectors of the industry (from coal to car manufacturers and offshore wind)?
- How to connect the EU's ambitions with the global agenda?

2. Societal challenges

The on-going pandemic has challenged the EU's cohesion in many ways, created frictions among the Member States, undermined social convergence and tested inter-generational solidarity.

- Should the EU invest more in building solidarity in the health sector, or should it leave it to the member states?
- What would be the benefits and what could be the potential downsides of increased solidarity in social policy such as health, education, social security?
- How to mitigate the possible trade-offs between public investments in health (benefiting aging societies) and public investments in education (serving primarily younger generations)?

The EU's commitment to make progress in the area of migration in the next 4 years, emphasises the need for solidarity and shared responsibility.

- Should the EU work towards opening its borders and improving the quality of its migration and asylum systems, or should it rather constrict the asylum system and securitise its external borders?
- How can the EU better promote circular migration?

3. Innovation, competitiveness and digital transformation

The pandemic has pushed the EU towards more financial solidarity. But further reforms remain key to ensure the stability of an economic and monetary system that delivers prosperity.

- Is EU's economic and financial recovery dependent on further fiscal and market integration or is the current system capable to overcome the economic differences within the Union?
- Is further fiscal integration going to threaten the sovereignty of EU member states or is it a chance to start creating stronger European identity which will work for all not only for the very few?

With the potential automation of many jobs, particularly low to medium skilled jobs, it is feared that unemployment will rise.

- Is universal basic income a potential solution, or are there other policies which would enable the creation of new jobs or to ensure decent work or income for persons who are at risk of losing due to automation?
- What should be EU's focus and priority with regard to digital transformations - promoting ethical standards and privacy protection or fostering competitive innovation and further digital integration? Where should the EU set its priority?

4. Fundamental values, rights and freedoms

The rise of populism and consolidation of autocratic processes in Europe are a challenge to the very spirit of the European project. Rooted in complex dynamics (socio-economic demotion, etc...), they affect "old" and "new" Member States alike.

- Are the existing mechanisms providing enough guaranties in enforcing the respect of the Rule of Law within the European Union? Have the infringement procedures under arts. 259 and 260 TFEU and art. 7 TEU proven effective?
- How can the European Commission become more active in protecting the founding principles? How can it use its toolbox to its full potential, including in combatting populist narratives?
- What kind of institutional reforms are needed to strengthen constitutional democracy in the EU? How can the election procedure for European Parliament provide more democracy and reflect the will of European citizens?
- Should EU governance allow for more direct democracy as a way to counter populism?
- What are the challenges caused by digitalisation to democracy and how to address them?

5. International role of the EU

In the past few years, the international order has been shattered in historical ways. The return of geopolitics has challenged the EU's self-conception as normative power; the market

economy crisis has fuelled inequalities and populism; technological revolutions have exacerbated volatility; and climate change and environmental threats loom over the world as we know it.

- How to strengthen the strategic sovereignty of the European Union?
- Should it relax its unanimity requirement in CFSP matters? How should it accommodate the national sensibilities of its Member States?
- Should it launch a European Security Council to reinforce intergovernmental cooperation or boost Community actors?
- How does the EU's more geopolitical agenda and "principled pragmatism" intersect with the EU's value-laden legitimation processes?
- How can it step up its support for effective multilateralism against the backdrop of US disruption?
- What approach should it adopt towards key neighbours (Russia, Turkey) and China?
- Should the EU offer European perspectives to its Eastern neighbours?

Important steps have been made in recent years to consolidate the European defence policy through differentiated formats of integration.

- Is differentiated integration the most effective way for the EU to strengthen its strategic autonomy?
- Can it lead to the emergence of a 2-speed Europe in defence?
- Should the EU strive for establishing a European Army and for what purpose?
- Should it seek to become an independent "Puissance Europe", raise its level of ambition within NATO (while remaining committed to the non-3D) or merely support NATO through the membership of most of its Member States (burden-sharing and resource pooling)?
- How to deal with the politics of the European defence policy (e.g. divergences in arms export policy, threat perceptions and democratic control of armed forces) as well as the specific implications of neutrality?