

MINISTRY OF JUSTICE HUNGARY

Synopsis and summary report of the online conference

entitled “*Keynote discussion on launching the Conference on the Future of Europe: Perspectives for an interinstitutional agreement, expectations of the Member States and the European institutions*”

jointly organised by the Ministry of Justice of Hungary and the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law
on 25 June 2020

Synopsis

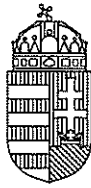
Following the unprecedented crises over the last decade, including the Brexit-referendum and more recently the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, the question for the need of a self-assessment of the European integration and the reflection on our common future has been a constant part of European public debates. In January, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the importance of organizing a Conference on the Future of Europe (and another one in June to confirm its position and to exert pressure on the Council), which was shortly followed by a statement of the European Commission. After some delay due to the pandemic, the Conference is supposed to be launched during the German Presidency of the Council and possibly end during the French Presidency, in the first half of 2022. The Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament will adopt a joint declaration laying down the foundations for the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The timeliness of the Conference is undeniable. While European integration can deliver many indisputable results, recent decades have shown that our continent is vulnerable. The financial crisis, the migration crisis, the spread of terrorist attacks throughout Western European countries, the perpetual political disputes on the principle of rule of law and tensions caused by the epidemic all prove the need for a self-reflection. Recent decades have also revealed a deep ideological divide concerning the future of European integration. The underlying question of this divide is whether European integration is for nation states or European nation states are for the process of integration *per se*. In the eyes of those who support the concept of a ‘Europe of nations’, the process of integration is an instrument, while federalists believe it to be the end goal.

The expectations related to the Conference are divergent. Some are calling for the Treaties to be amended, while others already call for caution concerning excessive expectations. The Conference will provide an opportunity to identify and discuss key issues, such as democracy in Europe, the institutional balance and the division of competences between the EU institutions and Member States, the application of the principles of sovereignty and subsidiarity, the current state and prospects of the internal market, as well as the role of the European Union as a global player in the world.

The aim of our keynote discussion is to explore and assess expectations regarding the launch, structure, organisation and process of the Conference on the Future of Europe including its eventual results. It is also essential to clarify issues such as how the organisation of the Conference will be conducted. What do Member States and EU institutions expect of the Conference, and of those who are supposed to lead it? How can Member States participate effectively and representatively in the debate? How can citizens and civil society be properly involved in the process to make their opinion heard? How can the Conference guarantee and mirror the political and cultural diversity of Europe? What organisational structure, what series of events would be most suitable for a genuinely effective dialogue?

The online conference was jointly organised by the Ministry of Justice of Hungary and the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law, a research institute participating in the dialogue regarding the Conference on the Future of Europe, and providing an appropriate forum for the evaluation of conference-related issues.



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Summary report

First Panel Discussion: Dialogue on the Future of Europe: Member State and institutional expectations

Speakers of the first panel had **two main questions** to address. During the *first round* the moderator, *László TRÓCSÁNYI*, Honorary President of the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law, Member of the European Parliament, inquired about the **expectations of the Member States and EU institutions represented by the speakers** regarding the planned Conference on the Future of Europe.

Judit VARGA (Minister of Justice of Hungary) emphasized that Europe's strength lies within the strength of its nation states, and the importance of **bringing European citizens closer to European politics**. She highlighted **the role of national parliaments**, the role of **the principle of subsidiarity**, and emphasized the **need to discuss specific issues affecting the lives of European citizens**. She argued that the most important achievements of the EU are the single market, the four fundamental freedoms, the Schengen system and the EU's traditional policies, all serving as pillars of EU integration and EU competitiveness. She stressed that stability of the Western Balkans was instrumental for the defense of Europe, and **called for Western Balkan candidate countries to be able to play a part in the Conference on the Future of Europe**. She also stressed the need for everyone to participate in the conference as an equal party, in line with the motto of "*united in diversity*", and the importance of ensuring **a fair balance between Member States and institutions**.

In his video message, *Antonio TAJANI*, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs, former President of the European Parliament, asserted that **without proper reforms, no solution can be found to Europe's problems**. However, he insisted that instead of debating on the need to amend the Treaties focus should be placed on **issues that are truly important to the citizens**. He underlined the need for **more solidarity and less bureaucracy**. He also pointed out the need to **reduce the distance between citizens and European institutions**, moreover to pay attention to the **involvement of citizens** in the forthcoming consultation on the future of Europe. In his view, real, **concrete solutions and decisions are essential for Europe to be a strong player on the global stage**.

Karoline EDTSTADLER, Federal Minister for the EU and Constitution at the Federal Chancellery of Austria, thanked the Hungarian side for their "*excellent cooperation*" during the COVID-19 epidemic. She emphasized the **need to represent the views of citizens from all regions and ages**, especially highlighting the **importance of involving younger generations**. She expressed her expectation that the conference would come to life through a **mechanism that, on the one hand, adequately reflects the views of citizens and, on the other, is fully transparent**. In her view, only such comprehensive cooperation can create a common European vision. The minister pointed out the importance of **subsidiarity and regional cooperation within the EU**. She also emphasized the **need to support the Western Balkans region**, including the candidate countries.

László Trócsányi mentioned the **tendency of an increase in Euro-scepticism** in Europe. He also emphasized that **Western Balkan countries had a crucial role to play in the future of Europe** and that, although several reforms had already been implemented, they were still receiving a considerable amount of criticism from Western Europe.

Andreja METELKO-ZGOMBIĆ, State Secretary for European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, representing the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, emphasized the **importance of seeking compromises during the conference series** and the **need to reach full consensus on important objectives**. She also pointed out



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that the **consequences of the epidemic must be taken into account**, as current changes will have a major impact on our future. She emphasized that **views of citizens should be taken into account as much as possible** regarding the future of the EU. She highlighted the importance of including EU institutions, Member States, and national parliaments in the discussion on the future of Europe.

During the *second round*, participants exchanged views on **how to effectively involve European citizens in the Conference on the Future of Europe**, and what steps should be taken, to get to know their views. Minister **Judit Varga** briefly referred to the European Union's previous initiatives related to the future of Europe, then **emphasized that the Hungarian Government maintains close relations with its citizens**. As a best practice example, she presented Hungary's practice of conducting regular **national consultations**, underlining their key role within the democratic context.

Minister *Karoline Edtstadler* underlined the importance of the **current state and development of Western Balkans for Austria** and expressed her desire for this to be a **common objective at the Conference on the Future of Europe** as well. In her view, European **security is indispensable** for the future. She also considers the **opinion of citizens** to be extremely important, which is why **surveys have been initiated amongst Austrian citizens**.

State Secretary *Andrea Metelko-Zgombić* asserted that **we should launch as many consultations and inclusive programmes as possible, to bring citizens closer to the European Union's decision-making process**. She also considers it particularly important to discuss the **demographic situation in Europe** and the **effects and dangers of ageing societies in particular**.

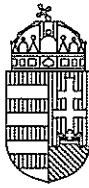
In his closing remarks, MEP *László Trócsányi* emphasized that **the Union level conference can only be successful if it sets realistic goals**. There are lessons to be learned from the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, and the most important task is to **ask citizens in advance, seek compromise, and work together to shape the future of Europe**.

Second Panel Discussion: Conference with a citizen-focus: how to ensure a balanced and diverse participation of citizens?

Having outlined the interests and perspectives of the institutional actors participating in the conference series, the **second panel** focused on the **possibilities for a balanced and diverse participation of citizens** with speakers representing civil society.

The moderator, *Márton SÜLYÖK*, lecturer at the University of Szeged, Hungarian alternate member of the Board of the Fundamental Rights Agency, asserted that **we must address the challenge of defining all suitable stakeholders**. In preparation for the debate on the future of Europe, **decision-makers should also determine whether they want to channel opinions or interests**, and decide on specific types of negotiating frameworks/frameworks of authorization based on common sense.

Frank SPENGLER, Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Hungarian Office, pointed out that the **challenges the European Union has faced since 2008 would require long-term thinking on behalf of the institutions**. He claimed that **citizen views and institutional functioning were at times still inconsistent**. Reflecting on the challenges of raising citizens' awareness, he believes that involving citizens in the debate directly or indirectly could have a significant impact, since **civil society actors attached to different interest groups often feature conflicting views**. It would also be important to see **whether the organizers will have sufficient resources to address citizens**



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directly or whether this should be provided at an EU level. Mr. Spengler raised the **possibility of involving the European Ombudsman in the process, as a new means of channeling citizens' interests**, and the importance of **being aware of the impact of fake news** on the dialogue. He also supported **the direct involvement of the candidate countries** in the debate. According to Frank Spengler, the experience of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, through its information and promotion campaigns prior to the 2004 enlargement of the Union has shown, that **without a positive future-oriented vision, people are less open to change and to the acceptance of reforms**. It is important to understand each other's perspectives, and the EU level discussion must reflect the **diverse range of perspectives and arguments**. In his view, **beyond the topics of enlargement and subsidiarity issues, the debate must address matters such as Europe's role in the US-China trade war and the future of EU-US relations**. Reflection must therefore focus on European issues, not national ones. Issues of common European interest should be discussed, including the future of artificial intelligence and communication technologies, European defense capabilities, protection against fake news and cyber-attacks, and environmental challenges. **A real exchange of views can only take place if citizens and stakeholders are properly involved**. In his view, involvement in this regard can be achieved either through a treaty amendment confirmed by a referendum, or even through consultation.

Ágoston Sámuel MRÁZ, Director of Nézőpont Institute, also considered it important to discuss common future challenges faced on an EU level, and has expressed a desire to **expand the range of topics, to include the economic impact of the pandemic, and accordingly, the protection of European living standards**. The functioning of the European Union became more complex after the Lisbon Treaty, and regulatory areas of Member States and the EU became less and less transparent to citizens. Therefore the **issue of sharing responsibility between the Union and Member States must also be included in the debate**. He added that the method of **national consultation**, widely used in Hungary to explore political issues, **can also be an effective tool at an EU level**, to involve citizens in the debate on the future of Europe. This can create a broad consensus, and ensure social support before governments take a position that may not be supported by their citizens at a later stage. Overall, he stressed the **importance of transparency, using a clear language, listening to critical voices, and the institutionalized inclusion of citizens' opinions**.