

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Is the EU still serious about the Balkans?

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Executive summary

If the EU does not count the Balkan countries among these stakeholders who should participate, in some form, in the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), then one has to wonder whether the Union is still serious about the European perspective of the region. The EU should allow political leaders and citizens from the Balkan countries to join the activities and discussions held in the context of the CoFoE on a consultative basis, along the representative and citizens' dimensions of the process, respectively. In doing so, the EU would build on the precedent of the European Convention of the early 2000s.

The EU has nothing to lose and everything to win by deepening and refining its relationship with the Balkan countries, by allowing the region to feel included in its plans for the future of the EU. The Union would use the interdependence with the Balkans to good advantage, strengthening natural alliances with its neighbours and consolidating its political vicinity. Deliberating over joint responses to specific common challenges addressed by the Conference would help the Balkan countries continue to build experience and know-how in preparation for their eventual EU membership. Allowing the Balkans to witness and contribute to this initiative would also foster a sense of togetherness and partnership that has been lacking from the long, drawn-

out formal accession process. More, rather than less, EU-Balkans cooperation and coordination will build trust and loyalty.

In the end, 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 with similar initiatives. The Regional Cooperation Council could help organise and coordinate a network of Balkan politicians tasked by their governments to follow and participate in the Conference. In parallel, 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.

But the Union should know better than to just wait to be impressed by the Balkans. The EU is one CoFoE invitation away from leaping forward into the future, together with its strong partners and closest neighbours, as Commission President von der Leyen referred to the Balkans in her State of the Union address.

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As a rule of thumb, a relationship is considered serious when the partners involve each other in decisions about the future. At present, the EU is preparing a Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) to allow for inclusive discussions between stakeholders at different levels of governance, on the evolution and adaptation of the European project to 21st-century realities.¹ At the same time, the EU's engagement with the Balkans has ebbed and flowed into its second decade and has already resulted in an advanced level of integration between the two sides. In 2018, the European Commission even published a new strategy² for the region, based on a revised methodology, which seemed to suggest that the EU was serious about delivering on enlargement.

However, despite its longstanding commitment to the Balkans, the Union has failed so far to consider the possibility of including the region in the CoFoE process.³ If the EU does not count the Balkan countries among those stakeholders who should participate in this Conference, which is potentially decisive for its future, then one has to wonder whether the Union is still serious about the European perspective of the region.

The EU should allow political leaders and citizens from the Balkan countries to join the activities and discussions held in the context of the CoFoE on a consultative basis, along the representative and citizens' dimensions of the process, respectively. In the early 2000s, the European Convention involved delegates of the governments and national parliaments of the accession candidate countries in its activities.⁴ How would the EU justify breaking with this precedent set by the Convention, especially since the Balkan aspirants are now closer to EU accession than they were then?

Why should the Balkan countries get involved in the Conference?

There are at least three main reasons why the Balkan countries aspiring to join the EU should be invited to take part in the Conference process.

1. INTERDEPENDENCE BEGS VOICES

The interdependence between the EU and the Balkan countries goes beyond geographic proximity. All previous crises that shook the member states and European cooperation over the past decade have underscored the Balkans' vulnerability to changes in the EU. An economically troubled and politically divided Union could neither project prosperity, security and democracy beyond its borders, nor deliver on its enlargement policy towards the Balkans. Modern-day challenges like globalisation, ageing societies, migration or COVID-19 prove that the Union and the Balkan region

Perhaps the Union anticipates that a few member states, which have previously shown reluctance to proceed with enlargement, will also oppose the idea of including the Balkan countries in the Conference. Given that deciding on the launch and details of the CoFoE has been a struggle in itself, the EU might want to dodge the question of involving the Balkans in the process to avoid opening a new battlefield – that is, one which does not seem crucial to the overall success of the Conference. In reality, the EU has nothing to lose and everything to win by deepening and refining its relationship with its Balkan neighbours, by allowing the region to feel included in its plans for the future of the EU.

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Ultimately, even in the absence of 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 with similar initiatives. Doing so would prove the Balkan countries' strong will to become future 'good Europeans': constructive EU members committed to making the European project work. The fact that this would likely take the Union aback is a gratifying bonus.

share not only the same interests but, increasingly, also the very same problems. Like the crises-stricken EU, a reformed European Union following the CoFoE process would also affect the Balkans.

Since the *acquis communautaire* is constantly expanding and the conditionality for accession progressively enhancing, it could be said that the EU has always been a moving target for the Balkan countries. However, if the CoFoE process lays a stepping-stone and/or leads to an actual fundamental change in the EU's set-up and functioning, it could radically alter the Union which the countries in the region set out to join. Would the Balkan countries still seek membership in a 'club' which has taken a significant leap towards European integration, or has become notably more differentiated? If the countries' 'destination' changes, will the criteria for accession to a more deeply integrated Union remain

the same? Conversely, how would the enlargement methodology change if a 'multispeed' EU became the default option?

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Thus, in many ways, the Conference on the Future of Europe could determine the future of the Balkans, too. And yet, the region might not get the chance to have a say in it. As non-members at different stages of their respective accession tracks, the Balkan countries are not in a position to demand a seat at the EU's decision-making table. The European Union, however, can and should do its utmost to accommodate the region – at least in the decision-making room. In doing so, the Union would use the interdependence with the Balkans to good advantage, strengthening natural alliances with its neighbours and consolidating its political vicinity.

2. PRACTICE MAKES BETTER FUTURE MEMBER STATES

The participation of the Balkan countries in the context of the CoFoE would also embolden the region to continue on the EU path, focusing on concrete issues and away from questions relating to accession dates, the technicalities of the European integration process, and other regional or country-specific hold-ups. This could stimulate civic and political forces in the Balkans to reflect more carefully on their respective country's vantage point on the policy priorities it shares with the EU. Deliberating over joint responses to specific common challenges could then help the Balkan countries continue to build experience and know-how in preparation for their eventual EU membership.

Although the CoFoE agenda has not yet been agreed, based on the position papers issued by the three EU institutions for the Conference,⁵ it is expected that the initiative will cover thematic priorities like the green transition, democracy and governance, and digital innovation and transformation. The EU and the Balkan countries must see eye to eye on all of these issues.

Take, for example, environmental policy. In this field, the EU focuses on phasing out fossil-based energy sources and replacing them with renewables. In contrast, the Balkan countries, especially Serbia, have been accepting Chinese loans to build new thermal plants that run on cheap, inefficient coal, without performing environmental impact assessments.⁶ As a result, Belgrade, Skopje and Sarajevo constantly compete for the position of the most polluted city in

the world during the cold winter months, when energy consumption goes up.⁷ One can safely assume that if the region were involved in the EU's effort, including during the CoFoE process, to shape a green transition, such projects would be unimaginable.

Another example is in the area of democracy and governance, where the Balkan countries and a number of EU member states share quite similar challenges. The efforts of the EU institutions to improve the quality of democracy in the Balkans through the accession process would be greatly reinforced if democratic reforms in the existing member states were discussed and addressed together with the EU-hopeful countries. The many years of strict democratic conditionality applied to the Balkan aspirants have produced a wealth of knowledge and practical experience in terms of what does and does not help induce domestic governance reforms. The Balkan countries could thus contribute to the EU's discussions about protecting its rule of law, media freedom and civil society.

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Ensuring that European governments and administrations are up to the task of providing guarantees of civil and human rights is then closely related to a further example, which comes from the area of digital innovation and transformation. While the Balkan countries are eager to develop digital businesses and public services, they must guarantee personal data protection and thus gain their citizens' trust in such initiatives. The EU is a true global leader in this regard, as demonstrated by its recent General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679. The Balkan countries have much to learn from EU-level discussions in the field, which are also likely to take place within the CoFoE framework. The more the region is aware of how the member states shape their common approach and the more it adapts and follows the EU's models and rules in this area, the more benefits are likely to accrue, not only for the Balkan countries but also European citizens and EU businesses.

3. INCLUSION BUILDS TRUST AND LOYALTY

The argument in favour of involving the Balkans in the CoFoE on a consultative basis remains valid, even if the Conference does not yield significant results. Regardless of whether the CoFoE ends up reforming the EU, allowing the Balkan countries to witness and contribute to this initiative could foster a sense of togetherness and partnership that has been lacking from the long, drawn-

out formal accession process. Cooperating beyond the scope of the enlargement dossier to co-shape a common European future would help restore the region's fizzling confidence that the promise of EU membership will be upheld.⁸ It would also boost both sides' awareness of the other's ideas and the different stakes on the items of the Conference's agenda, inspiring greater mutual confidence.

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In particular, the slowdown of EU enlargement over the past decade has made it easier for other actors – most notably Russia and China – to meddle in the Balkans and cosy up with countries like Serbia, Montenegro and

How should the Balkans be included in the Conference?

Although the Joint Declaration is yet to specify the details of the process that will unfold over the two years of the CoFoE, it is already clear that the Conference will have both a representative and a citizens' dimension. The former will likely include the Conference leadership, Members of the European Parliament, government officials (at the ministerial level), European Commissioners, national parliamentarians, and representatives of the Economic and Social Committee and of the Committee of the Regions. The latter will probably involve young people and citizens from all the member states, especially those that are often not reached by such initiatives. The Balkan countries should participate as 'active observers' in both dimensions of the Conference.

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On the representative dimension, Balkan political leaders, such as ministers and/or parliamentarians of each country of the region, should be allowed to join, on a consultative basis, the meetings organised by their

Bosnia-Herzegovina. Pragmatism rather than a search for alternatives might motivate Balkan political elites to flirt around but, in the process, foreign powers who do not share the Union's democratic ambitions for the region score points in their overall tug-of-war with the West.⁹

The EU's initial reaction towards the Balkans at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – when these countries were put in the same basket as the rest of the world under the Union's ban on exporting medical supplies – is the most recent example of how the EU trips itself up in the region. This decision prompted the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to quickly pronounce European solidarity "a fairy tale" and claim that the only country Serbia could rely on was China.¹⁰ Although European and Serbian officials made subsequent and repeated attempts to prove that EU solidarity is real,¹¹ it remains to be seen whether the already low support for EU membership in Serbia and the neighbouring countries will bounce back.¹² To prevent the passion in the EU-Balkans relationship from running out, the Union should not miss the opportunity provided by the Conference to strengthen and diversify how it reaches out to the countries in the region. More, rather than less, EU-Balkans cooperation and coordination will build trust and loyalty.

counterparts in the context of the CoFoE. The Balkan countries could send different officials, depending on the specific thematic priority under discussion, to match the political level of the EU colleagues under the Conference. The region should also consider organising a network of Balkan politicians tasked by their governments to follow and participate in the Conference. The network would exchange and coordinate positions regarding the various issues addressed in the CoFoE process. This would strengthen regional cooperation between the Balkans and the EU, making the former's position on the items of the Conference agenda more effective. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) could help organise and coordinate this network and its interaction with the CoFoE.

On the citizens' dimension, the European Parliament has proposed organising youth agorae and citizens' agorae under the CoFoE.¹⁵ Irrespective of the exact nature of the EU-level events that will be set up at the end of the process with the youths and/or other categories of European citizens from across the member states, organisers should also invite corresponding representatives from the Balkan countries. The Balkan region has a vibrant civil society which the European Parliament and the Commission are well acquainted with thanks to its involvement in the accession process. The EU institutions can draw on these local resources and enlist the help of the EU delegations in the region

to mobilise citizens in the Balkan countries, giving them the chance to join the platforms on which European citizens will have conversations during the Conference.

Allowing young people and/or ordinary citizens from the Balkans to attend these EU-wide citizens' events of the CoFoE would be a significant investment in the region's social capital, creating greater awareness on the ground in the Balkans about European affairs and their relevance to the different countries. It would also build people-to-people contacts between the EU and the region and

The Balkans' plan B

Ultimately, should the EU choose to ignore all these aforementioned arguments and not specify any kind of involvement for the Balkan countries in the CoFoE process, the region should organise itself at the political and civil societal level to follow the Conference in parallel. A regionally organised and led process of political discussions and citizen consultations on the very topics discussed within the Union would demonstrate the Balkans' strong will to approach the EU and a certain dose of political maturity.

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The institution best placed to gather the political representatives for such deliberations would be the RCC, the most prominent intergovernmental organisation with a strong representation of and funding from the EU. The RCC has already demonstrated a strong capacity to convene Balkan leaders based on common interests, such as in the Berlin Process. A consultative process between the region's governments could result in a joint declaration which lays out their vision for the EU and their place and contribution to the European project. An integrated position of the Balkan countries, which witnessed wars and destruction not that long ago, could set an example and remind its European neighbours of the immense power of compromise and cooperation. It would also allow the region, often rebuked as Europe's troublemaker,¹⁴ to prove that it can contribute to making the European project work and, thus, deserves a place in the club.

In addition, civil society networks in the region should build on their already existing cooperation and look for

improve the ability of these better-informed citizens to keep their political elites in check on issues linked to the European integration process. We assume that the EU is serious about fostering a culture of citizens' participation and finding more permanent mechanisms of involving citizens in European decision-making. As such, exposing people in the EU-hopeful countries of the Balkans to its experiments in this field means preparing them to assume the same role that their counterparts in the EU are now learning to play.

funds to organise 'Balkan Citizens' Consultations', which can accompany the CoFoE process as it unfolds. Such a process could be organised as the joint effort of several relevant civil society networks, including think tank networks, youth organisation networks, and so on. One relevant and well-experienced think tank network is the Think for Europe Network, which gathers six prominent think tanks from every Balkan country. It is already preparing for early consultations and trainings on how to conduct citizens' consultations. A youth consultation process in the Balkans that runs parallel to the Conference could be supported by the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, which was established and made operational under the Berlin Process. Such a process could provide support and networking for youth organisations across the region.

The Balkans should recognise the potential historic significance of the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe and do their utmost to follow the process, regardless of whether the EU carves space out for them in the initiative. The Union does not expect the region to do so without a formal invitation – which is precisely why the Balkan countries should take the initiative themselves. Accompanying the CoFoE process with parallel endeavours that mirror the official formats and policy themes is, in itself, valuable for the aspirants' transformation into EU member states, and can prove all the more rewarding if it also surprises the EU.

The Union should know better than to just wait to be impressed by the Balkans. For much of the recent past, the member states have come across as reluctant, even hostile, towards the enlargement dossier. Frequently motivated by domestic political reasons, EU capitals have repeatedly blocked or derailed the accession process, casting a long shadow over the credibility of the policy.¹⁵ This month, in her State of the Union address, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen argued that "[i]f Europe is to move forward and move fast, we must let go of our hesitations."¹⁶ The EU is one CoFoE invitation away from abandoning its hesitation and leaping forward into the future, *together* with its strong partners and closest neighbours, as the Commission President referred to the Balkans in her speech. A small gesture like this would surely go an awfully long way.

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- ¹ At the time of writing, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council are negotiating a Joint Declaration that will define the concept, structure, scope and timing of the Conference on the Future of Europe.
- ² European Commission (2018), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans](#), COM(2018) 65 final, Strasbourg.
- ³ A partial exception is the European Parliament's position paper on the Conference, which calls for the representatives of the candidate countries to be included in the Conference (albeit without specifying how). N.B. not all Balkan countries have candidate status. European Parliament (2020), [European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), P9_TA(2020)0010, Strasbourg.
- ⁴ See *European Convention*, "Composition" (accessed 28 September 2020).
- ⁵ European Parliament (2020), *op. cit.*; European Commission (2020), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), COM(2020) 27 final, Brussels; Council of the European Union (2020), [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 9102/20, Brussels.
- ⁶ Matkovic Puljic, Vlatka; Dave Jones; Charles Moore; Lauri Myllyvirta; Rosa Gierens; Igor Kalaba; Ioana Ciuta; Pippa Gallop; and Sonja Risteska (2019), ["Chronic coal pollution EU action on the Western Balkans will improve health and economies across Europe"](#), Brussels: Health and Environment Alliance, p.18.
- ⁷ See e.g. *European Western Balkans*, ["Sarajevo and Belgrade among the most polluted world capitals"](#), 13 January 2020; Bateman, Jessica, ["The young people fighting the worst smog in Europe"](#), BBC, 02 July 2020.
- ⁸ See e.g. Outbox Consulting (2020), ["Balkans Barometer 2020: Public opinion. Analytical report"](#), Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council; European Commission (2019), [Europeans' opinions about the European Union's priorities](#), Standard Barometer 92.
- ⁹ European Political Strategy Centre (2018), [Engaging with the Western Balkans: An investment in Europe's security](#), Brussels, p.3.
- ¹⁰ Walker, Shaun, ["Coronavirus diplomacy: how Russia, China and EU vie to win over Serbia"](#), *The Guardian*, 13 April 2020.
- ¹¹ The pro-EU Serbian public praised EU Ambassador to Serbia Sem Fabrizi for his extraordinary efforts to prove that European solidarity was, indeed, real. Famously, just days after President Vučić's statement, he said, "Whenever Serbia calls us, we are here." The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, [EU Urgently Grants €7.5 million to Fight COVID-19](#), 20 March 2020.
- ¹² Serbia is the only country in the region where EU accession is supported by fewer than a third of respondents (26% in favour, 24% against). Outbox Consulting (2020), *op. cit.*
- ¹³ European Parliament (2020), *op. cit.*
- ¹⁴ At the EU-Western Balkans Summit in May 2018, the then European Council President, Donald Tusk, commented that the Balkans produce more "troubles per capita" than France and Germany combined, despite its small size in terms of population and GDP. *Beta*, ["Tusk: Balkans has more problems than Germany and France combined, no expressway for membership"](#), 17 May 2018.
- ¹⁵ Balfour, Rosa and Corina Stratulat (2015, eds.), [EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁶ von der Leyen, Ursula, [State of the Union Address. Building the world we want to live in: A Union of vitality in a world of fragility](#), European Commission, 16 September 2020.

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