

Some Aspects for the Debate on the Future of Europe

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1. Since the start – and since the end - of the Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2021 – and a year later, in May 2022 – the world has become an even more dangerous place. Although the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be over, the military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine – following the aggression by President Putin -, the occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the ethnic cleansing by the Azeri government, and the new war between Izrael and the Hamas after the terrorist attacks of the militant organisation show that we, Europeans live in a more hostile international environment than a couple of years ago. In fact, the Trump Presidency, Brexit, and the populist waves in some EU member states have already created a more and more unpleasant political climate for democrats – with different partisan affiliations – as well as for civil society actors both in the first, and then, in the second decades of the 21st century.

2. Our turbulent times with multiple crises, however, as many say in an optimistic manor, give us also opportunities and chances to move forward and to implement, for example, another significant phase of reforms in the history of a unifying-united Europe. There is a realistic hope: the European Union – together with the United States – has reacted confidently to Russian imperialism and gradually changed its attitudes when adjusting to recent geopolitical transformations. A leap forward, that is what the Conference on the Future of the European Union has elaborated in details, including the reform of the institutional settings as well as urgent inventions in many policy fields, would be another efficient response to current global risks and challenges.

3. Protection and renewal of liberal democracy at the European level are inevitable. Attacks of populist-illiberal-Eurosceptic forces against functioning EU structures from outside and within the European community have not evaporated. Whether we like or not, there is an ideological alternative claiming that only national sovereignty matters and European elites are hostile against the people who need to take back control under the leadership of anti-European forces. Today, the Polish elections are crucial from this perspective: a Hungarian-Slovak-Polish minority block could even obstruct necessary changes in Europe. Whatever is the outcome of the vote, liberal-minded political and civil players in the EU need to have strategy, vision, narrative as well as smart political communication methods to counter-balance populist views and practices.

4. On the other hand, reform ideas for the renewal of the European Union are not new. We have a long history of conflicts between inter-governmentalists and supranationalists. Today, fresh concepts about strengthening direct democracy should go hand in hand with the defence of representative democracy and established democratic institutions. Qualified majority voting in the Council, trans-European party-lists at European elections, an elected President of the European Union as well as to ensure more competences to the European Parliament and Europeanising common policy areas like health care, environment, climate actions, etc., as well as the concept of differentiated integration have been on the agenda since long time ago. A leap forward with a simple elan is still unlikely: protagonists of a united Europe have to be prepared to an ongoing, long march.

5. Once again: liberal democracy at European and national levels cannot be separated. In case there is a democratic backsliding in one member state, the whole European project has to cope with trouble-makers from within its own structures. The Hungarian government not only dismantled liberal democracy and the rule of law at home, but more and more aggressively intends to block common decisions especially in the case of common foreign and defence policy of the European Union. It tries to undermine shared European values in the fields of migration

whilst disrespects human and minority rights. Spreading alt-right ideology, Orbán has become a hero in the eyes of many conservative citizens beyond the borders of Hungary. The toxic impact of a single illiberal actor can be detected everywhere and not exclusively at the European decision-making tables. The relative isolation of Orbán has only occurred recently, at least, and the European institution finally use the toolbox at their disposal more desperately to force the Hungarian government respect norms and rules of the community. Nevertheless, pro-Europeans, liberal democrats should not be shy or suffer from inertia when fighting back – together with domestic liberal-minded groups and individuals – against the influence of populist forces.

6. Facing European elections next year, citizens should be targeted, convinced and seduced to support the European cause. This is the art of politics that should be renewed not only by political parties. Of course, listening to diverse groups of societies, involving them into public discourse at national and European levels is the minimal requirement today in order to create a grand coalition of those who agree that the fundamentals of liberal democracy should be taken seriously. In 2024, European elections will focus much more on identity politics, especially the political divide between liberal democrats and their adversaries. The events related to the Conference on the Future of the European Union are supposed to channel joint efforts whilst not losing our shared objectives on the horizon. Amongst ourselves, we do not have to agree in all the aspects of politics and policies, just the contrary: pluralism is a value in itself. Today, however, citizens of polarised political societies, who often join one or another antagonistic political tribe, cannot get into a dialogue with each other. Although no concessions are allowed to the enemies of our liberal global, European and national constitutional order, liberal democrats have to respect citizens, who have different life experiences and do not belong to “us” in the era of aggressive political entrepreneurs, who have even fanaticised them.

Those who work on the renewal of the historic European Union project, the future might look uncertain. There is no need to be pessimistic. In spite of our turbulent times, the existence of the European Union is still

an attractive mission and a good place for living for its citizens and also in the eyes of the external world. Moving ahead is the only way to keep our European ideals alive and make the European Union stronger, more effective and more democratic.