A topographic map of the Balkan Peninsula and surrounding regions, including parts of Italy, the Adriatic Sea, and the Aegean Sea. The map uses a color gradient from green (low elevation) to brown and orange (high elevation) to represent terrain. The text 'KKI' is overlaid on a black rectangle in the top left corner, and '4:1' is overlaid on a white rectangle below it. The title and subtitle are in the top right, and the page number is in the bottom right. The Institute name is in the bottom left.

KKI

4:1

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

II. Insights from the Western Balkans

KKI 4:1

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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?*”.

DONIKA EMINI

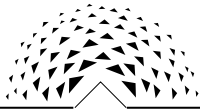
Who gets to decide what Europe is going to look like in the future? Evidently, not the Western Balkan countries. Keeping the region formally out of the broad consultation process sends a worrying message about the future of the Western Balkans in the EU. Ad-hoc track two initiatives are important, but they will not make up for the lack of political will to formally include the region in shaping the future of Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is not a conference, rather a complex process of discussing what the future of Europe is going to look like. Yes, the future of Europe, not only that of the European Union and its member states. Nevertheless, the right to shape the future of Europe has been formally granted to the EU member states, without the contribution of third parties of strategic importance.

The decision not to formally include the Western Balkan countries in the Conference of the Future of Europe has negative implications. It not only sends a negative message to the region it has promised a European perspective, it also trumpets weakness, as the EU does not include all the relevant stakeholders to design its future form.

On the other hand, the lack of political will to include the Western Balkan countries in the process – with some sporadic exceptions – showcases a lack of vision for the common future of Europe. To date the political elites in the region have shown no interest to mention in participating or contributing to the debate. The lukewarm approach of the Western Balkan countries highlights a phenomenon familiar to all of us – if it does not come in the form of EU pressure, the Western Balkan countries will not do it – even if it is in their interest.

In the entire Conference on the Future of Europe saga, the online platform has saved the face of the EU. Numerous track two initiatives have been launched with the proactive approach of the EU External Action Service, from the *Prespa Forum for Dialogue* to events in all the capitals of the region. However, most of the debate has been broad and focused on why we deserve to be part of the debate and what we can offer. The debate has merely been a large-scale advertisement of the countries in the region trying to prove that they can contribute and that they should have been invited to contribute to the debate. Thus, it has not provided an opportunity to gather specific strategic proposals for each field of importance listed by the EU.



These events have not been an easy exercise for the scholars, think tankers, and experts of the region. Thinking outside the box, switching perspective from *'what the EU can do for us'* to *'what we can do for the EU'* has been a challenging task. This marks the first step of the region perceiving itself as a contributor rather than just the recipient of policies already shaped by the EU. Furthermore, it has shown the enthusiasm of the public, led by civil society organizations, to be part of the process, even if track two has a low probability of getting feedback or making an impact that will determine the future of Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is taking place amid a multifront crisis faced by the EU, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has severely limited the possibility for the debate to take place in person. The Western Balkan countries have joined the debate unilaterally, showing enthusiasm and the will to have ownership in shaping the future of Europe. It is now up to the EU to process and respond to the provided input at the end of the process, in spring 2022.

Daring to think about the future of Europe is a serious exercise, the fact that the region has taken part even though it was not invited speaks volumes about the last drops of enthusiasm among the pro-EU mass in the region. Now it is up to the EU to do its part.

DUŠKO LOPANDIĆ

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a year-long decentral process to collect ideas for a shared European way forward. The process of the Conference is designed to be integrative, democratic, and egalitarian; however, it is seriously flawed in terms of inclusion. Candidate states in the Western Balkans, who have been promised European accession, have not been included in the work of the Conference in a proper way. Even if their membership aspirations have not yet been fulfilled, the Western Balkan countries are already a part of Europe, and as such they are closely linked to European politics, markets, and societies. Therefore, the region needs to be included in the Conference on the Future of Europe for the remaining months. Governments, citizens, civil society organizations, and think tanks should have the opportunity to participate in the events, with the emerging ideas contributing to the final resolution.

The EU-Western Balkans relations need to be understood as a two-way street, where both sides benefit from strong ties, even if in different ways. Whatever happens in the EU – positive and negative events or trends alike – impacts development in the Western Balkans. Similarly, developments in the Western Balkans contribute to the wider European future and present.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity for today's generations to seek solutions and provide answers to the questions of the future. The EU today is confronted with numerous internal and external challenges.

The European Union must change. In view of the rapid change of societies, with the technological revolution, climate change, and environmental threats, with new challenges to humanity such as pandemics, the EU must adapt to the years to come. Despite the many shortcomings of the EU and its inadequate responses to different challenges, all of us need appropriate European answers to the new problems and crises.

The Conference on the Future of Europe, aiming to develop ideas that would strengthen the internal democracy of the EU, could open a path for increased readiness in the EU to enlarge. The challenges to democracy in the region are vast and manifold. Rule of law and the state of democracy should remain a cornerstone of the EU engagement in the Western Balkans. The broader debate on European democracy might benefit from a perspective that looks at shared challenges and solutions together with the Western Balkans.

It would be necessary that all programs of modernization and financial support for the WB be as harmonized and integrated as possible with European projects such as the European Green Deal, digital strategy, innovation, research, and education, with the aim of aligning current WB convergence trends with the EU average. This will only be possible if the EU funds are evenly opened to beneficiaries from the Western Balkans. The EU Green Debate needs to include the Western Balkans, since it is part of the European space. From the point of view of the Western Balkans, another particularly important issue is migration, especially the continuing emigration of people from the region to the EU countries. This is a long-term trend that deeply affects the societies of the Western Balkans.

The EU enlargement process is important both for the EU and the Western Balkan region. While enlargement extends the field of foreign policy and goes deep into the heart of European domestic policy and EU integration, it must be seen as a litmus test for the EU's capacity as a global actor. Without a political decision in the EU to push enlargement, the Western Balkans are likely to remain in limbo, which is not in the interest of the EU or the region.

The Conference could provide a platform for an honest discussion in the EU on the enlargement process, and it could offer realistic ideas on how to move forward and create much-needed political support for integrating the Western Balkans fully and rapidly into the EU.

LEDION KRISAFI

At the moment, it seems it is a big question if the Western Balkans should be part of the European Union in the near future. Clearly the region is far from the democratic standards of the EU, but so are some EU member countries at the moment. Also, the countries that joined the EU in the 2007 were not significantly more improved than the WB countries are today, and they still became part of the EU. In this sense, it is more about political will than about



standards. On the other hand, the region today is in a much better position than ten or twenty years ago, and the EU's leverage has been a big push. Now it is time for the EU to show itself in the region again and not let a ghetto be created in the heart of Europe. The region is part of Europe geographically and culturally, we only need look at history to understand that.

Albania and the Balkans have always stood as a bridge between the Western and Eastern civilizations. Albanian history has been shaped by both civilizations, which is mirrored in the religious structure of the country. Even though Christianity originated in the Middle East, it has come to be synonymous with Western civilization. At the beginning of the 1600s, Skopje Archbishop Pjetër Bogdani, one of the most illustrious Albanian writers and intellectuals, discussing Christianity in Kosovo and Western Macedonia at the time, wrote that in these parts '*Catholicism is called the religion of Albanians*'. Albania's Catholic writers of the 1600s created a bridge between Albanians and the Italian peninsula, thus firmly setting the Albanian cultural milieu inside the centre of Western civilization.

At the same time, Albania has been affected by the Eastern, Islamic civilization. The majority of the population adheres to the Islamic faith, and the cultural, spiritual, and everyday impact of five centuries of Ottoman rule is enormous. Albania and the Albanians have been shaped by this influence like no other.

However, despite the dichotomy between the West and the East, Albanians during their national renaissance in the mid-nineteenth century firmly positioned themselves with the West. In 1908, in Bitola (in today's North Macedonia) Albanian intellectuals and writers chose the Latin alphabet to write the Albanian language, despite the alternatives of Arabic and Greek alphabets.

In this regard, there should be no question if the Western Balkans, and Albania as a part of it, should participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe. Five centuries ago, during the ongoing Ottoman campaigns, Europe and Western civilization was defended in the high mountains of North Albania during Skanderbeg's resistance, which earned him the epithet *Athleta Christi* from Pope Calixtus III.

There is no future of Europe without the Western Balkans. The unification of the continent will be completed with the accession of the Western Balkans in the EU.

DRAGAN TILEV

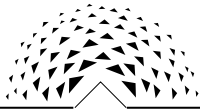
If the geopolitical interest of the European Union (EU) to integrate the Western Balkan countries (WB6) into its structures is sincere, the question should not be whether the Western Balkan countries should take part in the debates of the Conference on the Future of the European Union (CoFEU), but rather *why they are not invited and allowed to be part of this crucially important process*, which should set the trajectory of our common future. Considering the geographical position of the Western Balkans, located in the heart of the Union as a crossroads between

southeast and northwest EU, it can become either a bridge or a (new) wall that will divide instead of connect. In the contemporary European Union, there is no topic that can be considered without the Western Balkan countries in an isolated manner, starting from climate change and the environment, to health and the consequences of the pandemic on our economies and trade, values and the rule of law, education, migration, digital transformation, and the role of the EU in the world. The Conference on the Future of Europe is expected to show the way forward in terms of policy and priority reforms, as well as institutional cross-cutting issues that promote democracy and European values.

If 'we share the same continent, the same history, the same culture, and the same challenges', and if the intention is that 'we will build the same future together' ([PEC Von der Leyen, SOTEU 2020](#)), if these words are genuine, and we believe they are, there is no justifiable argument why the Western Balkans has been left out of the Conference on the Future of the EU, as the Western Balkans is undoubtedly an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic area of interest. The sooner we become fully integrated into the Union, the sooner the Western Balkans will become a better place to live, and the European Union will become safer as a result. In the contemporary global world and modern democratic societies, one cannot afford geopolitical 'free space', simply because global powers have the tendency to fill that free space with their political gravity.

EU integration (or unification) is not an easy process, and certainly not a cheap one. We all must not forget that the accession process is a two-way street, and it is a process of *building brick-by-brick a strategic, long-lasting partnership in all areas of common interest*, based on trust and solidarity. Therefore, it would have been highly beneficial for both sides if we had been allowed to sit at the same table at all levels of the CoFEU and given the right to say what we think, what we want, and how we see the future of the Union, considering it as our own future. If given the chance, we can learn a lot and say a lot about our mistakes, about our compromises and lessons learned, but also about our achievements. The EU should stay together with the Western Balkans, thereby sending a strong signal of EU commitment to the accession process, simply because the EU owes it to all the young people from the Western Balkans who believe in a European future and because an investment in the future of the Western Balkans is an investment in the future of the EU. *The Conference on the Future of the EU still has a chance to put these topics at the centre of a wide and multilevel inclusive debate* by including the Western Balkans citizens.

For several decades, the enlargement policy has been a signature of unprecedented success for Europe, as well as its safety, security, and economic prosperity. The expanded structure, with its diversity of cultures, has become a generator for economic prosperity despite its complexity. All WB6 countries are making efforts to integrate into the Union as soon as possible. Unfortunately, one member state (Bulgaria), with its unreasonable opposition against the rest of the 26 member states, has taken down the whole expensive Union architecture.



The credibility of the European Union is at stake. The citizens of the Western Balkans are very disappointed by the lack of forcefulness in the EU to move forward. What has blocked North Macedonia can block any other WB6 country as well, at any stage of the negotiations. This time it is clearly not about bilateral issues, it is about the Union respecting its own values. In order to preserve its credibility, the EU needs to hold an Intergovernmental Conference with North Macedonia and Albania until the end of 2021, during the Slovenian Presidency. This could be a sincere sign that last year's adoption of the new methodology was not used to slow down and postpone the accession dynamics of these two countries, but to place the process on firm ground and unleash the fundamental transformative power of the accession process. The European Union should show all the citizens of the Western Balkans that it is capable of playing its role to keep its credibility alive and deliver something when promised. *The potential cost of the EU leaving us out is much higher than the cost of having us in.*

If we do not start the accession negotiations, the possible negative consequences are many. It is predictable that the loss of hope for EU membership may prompt young, educated people to start leaving the Western Balkan countries in waves, which would reduce the workforce and the potential for development and growth. A loss of hope can also produce strong EU "fatigue" and scepticism. A lack of perspective may also deepen the division in the population along ethnic, religious, and social lines, thus resulting in the vulnerability of the democratic institutions and their capacity to govern. Weak governance may decrease the level of resistance and create fertile ground for interference and increased influence by third parties, and it may also leave space for the emergence of potentially violent groups, thus raising the risk of terrorism, extremism, and nationalism. Waiting for the solutions for too long is not productive. Over the past couple of decades, we have lost a generation and created a lot frustration nation-wide.

It is more than evident that an omission has been made by not including Western Balkan representatives in the Conference; however, it is not too late to correct this mistake, first of all by including the Government and Parliament representatives in the Conference Plenary meeting, as well as the civil society and youth representatives in the European Citizens' Panel. It would be highly beneficial for the Western Balkan countries and the European Union if all EU participants agreed to open a special European Citizens' Panel on EU Enlargement. *We are not naive, we understand our limits, our voice is not going to become a decisive voice, but we want to be at the table and have the chance to speak and participate in projecting and building our common future.*