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**“Conference on the Future of Europe should become an enhanced cooperation of European citizens”**

**Euractiv.cz Conference: “Future of European integration: Together or in multiple speeds? Impacts of recent crises including Covid-19 pandemic”**

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I would like, indeed, to share with you some thoughts about the Conference on the Future of Europe.

It is an unprecedented process of public dialogue. But, undoubtedly, it is also one of the most important joint ventures by three European institutions: Parliament, Commission and Council.

It comes now, at the time when we're hopefully getting out of the terrible trauma of pandemic. We need to renew our hope and feel that we're together - Europe and the Europeans.

The Conference can help us to go and meet post-pandemic challenges as a Union that is certain of its principles and has instruments for their implementation.

The Conference is an opportunity to stand together, citizens, all levels of governance - national, regional and local, parliaments and European institutions.

Conference is a chance to identify pragmatic solutions for the post pandemic Europe.

But it is also a chance to protect European democracy, its values, its law.

It paves the way for moving toward Europe that is socially sensitive, climate friendly, technologically competitive, Europe providing security to its citizens, active and respected globally and last but not least caring about democracy, human rights, rule of law.

Most Europeans are fed up with the populists' politics of veto emanating from some countries, supported by the anachronistic unanimity principle, with the lack of respect of European values.

The anti-democratic, anti-European populists, although nominally they claim the mantle of *vox populi*, do not accept universal values, eager to punish groups in society that they deem "unsuitable", like women, LGBT people, young generation that fights for climate, refugees, independent journalists.

The values they want to inculcate in society live off the artificially induced divisions, not unity. They want to limit integration, voluntaristically, to some areas only. They divide societies for their own interests, often contradictory to the interest of their citizens.

This political irresponsibility *senso largo* found its culmination in Brexit, and is also a real threat in some countries in Central - Eastern Europe.

Observance of fundamental values and rule of law is not on the market to be traded for withdrawal of a veto.

Values are cast in stone. They are foundation on which Conference will develop.

In reaction to lack of political will and commitment to ever closer Union in some member states, differentiated integration paths are more and more often seen as a way to go forward.

As we know the Treaties already allow for different paths of integration through opt-out mechanism, enhanced cooperation, permanent structured cooperation and intergovernmental cooperation.

Except for the permanent structured cooperation envisaged for the common foreign and security policy all other forms have been used.

I personally believe that the differentiated integration makes sense if it allows those Member States, who want more integration do more, while the possibility for the non-participating states to join later is ensured. That is how enhanced cooperation should work.

The main issue where I have serious doubts is how to avoid consequences of differentiated citizens' rights depending on whether they are citizens of a state that decided not to participate in the deeper integration.

Differentiated integration should not be an instrument of exclusion, I see it only as a way to advance European integration. The EU has been practicing it for decades,

and common currency as well as Schengen system, both symbolic elements of European integration can be examples here.

Of course, differentiated integration should be organized in such a way that tailor made membership or Europe à la carte is not a choice.

And we must have clarity of what membership of the European Union means, also in moral terms and acceptance of fundamental values.

I must admit as well that in reality the unanimity principle does not allow for progress in integration. The most important is to allow those who want faster progress, to have the possibility of doing so.

I can imagine that this implies the freedom to recourse to the enhanced cooperation, based on the Treaties, the consolidation of multispeed principle and availability of the best possible mechanism making it possible.

We know that EU is not only a community of states. Lisbon Treaty has made it also the community of citizens.

Representative democracy can be strengthened through the direct involvement of citizens.

We can build here on the successful Irish experience. Irish politicians understood very well the importance of bringing the public at large directly into the political process.

The first experiment was the Constitutional Convention in 2012, when 33 politicians and 66 citizens were charged with recommending how to overhaul Ireland's constitution.

Then came the Citizens' Assembly: ninety-nine citizens were asked to deliberate on the conundrums of abortion, fixed-term parliaments, referendums, population aging and climate change.

Both experiments had big impact on Irish politics. The Convention recommended legalizing gay marriage, which was introduced by public referendum in 2015. In 2017, the Citizens' Assembly recommended ending a constitutional ban on abortion. This too is now law.

The Irish success has shown the power of citizens to enforce political change. The determination and the mobilization brought a big payoff in terms of citizens' engagement and changing the political climate in Ireland.

I hope that the Conference on the Future of Europe will have a similar effect and will bring a renaissance of civic involvement on a pan-European base.

I also hope that the deliberative model of the Conference will act as a swarm model, a gathering of collective social intelligence. It is a revolutionary model allowing to cancel a bipolar political thinking and facilitating thoughtful politics.

The Conference will be for all of those who want to participate in it, a great exercise in mutual communication and a learning process, which will help defining in a clear way what we want our Europe to look like in the future.

It will also become a sort of "enhanced cooperation" of European citizens, which is a necessary base for reinvigorating the Union and make it fit for the future.

Who said that only member states can enhance European integration. Citizens can do it as well! Conference can give them the feeling of ownership of Europe. And I can tell you this is a good feeling.

But listening is only the first step, the beginning. We should be truly bold in converting ideas into policies, in implementing what we will jointly arrive at.