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„The EU must strategically approach its future”

Keynote speech at high level debate of online Jean Monnet Conference "Next GenEU & the Conference on the Future of Europe"

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Thank you for inviting me to this important event!

Finally, the Conference on the Future of Europe is becoming reality, almost two years after its announcement by President Von der Leyen and more than a year after the first European Parliament's resolution with its vision about the Conference!

The Executive Board of the Conference on the Future of Europe already held two meetings, and the first steps were made to make sure that citizens could soon start to contribute to the Conference, in particular on the multilingual digital platform, which is foreseen to be endorsed on 19 of April. We have also learned that the Board discussed the possibility of a formal event on 9 May in Strasbourg as well as a possible first Conference Plenary on 10 May. Of course, everything depends strongly on the situation generated by the virus.

All these developments are positive and show the unity of the three institutions in achieving a positive outcome. However, given the tight timetable and the need to carry out the consultations by the end of the year, in time for the preparation of the joint report to the Joint Presidency by spring 2022 during the French Presidency, we need to remember what we have underlined from the beginning. It is not a listening exercise for our citizens. We have agreed to create a room for deliberation and we want to have a dynamic European debate!

The Conference should be approached with an open and positive attitude and focus on bringing the Union closer to the citizens, it must be an ambitious, transparent and open process for all!

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, there have been crises that deeply affected the solidarity and unity of the MS, and brought about significant political challenges. We have witnessed as well a profound change in global geopolitics, which also forces the Union to look hard at its global role.

With all of these changes in mind, the EU must strategically approach its future, invest in its own capabilities to cope with the future. And even more so - to shape the future. The citizens' engagement in this reflection and reform can help us to avoid business as usual approach. The dialogue needs to include citizens from the entire EU territory, from the smallest village to the most cosmopolitan city. This means that we need to organise events, face-to-face assemblies of citizens representing European diversity, in different places from schools to libraries, and town halls.

The Conference on the Future of Europe should provide a forum for debate and our deliberation with citizens should give us a chance to strengthen representative democracy. There is no reason at this stage not to accept the idea that should the result of the Conference lead in this direction, we should be open to possibility of Treaty changes. Despite the pandemic, the engagement of citizens must remain a priority of COFE. We want the Conference on the Future of Europe to be meaningful in developing the future polity and policy of the EU. Hence, we want to put profound questions about Europe's democratic future. It is important that the Conference will not be misconstrued as an alibi event for pursuing only cosmetic changes to the EU's political system. Otherwise, we risk our legitimacy and gamble on the future of Europeans. Every generation has the duty to offer a better future to the young generation.

We support the priorities as spelled out in the Declaration of the three Presidents: healthy continent, the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality and intergenerational solidarity, Europe's digital transformation, European rights and values including the Rule of Law, migration challenges, security, the EU's role in the world, the Union's democratic foundations, and strengthening of democratic processes governing the European Union.

General priorities for our work on the future of Europe are known and shared. We need Europe that would protect its citizens against global threats. We need Europe of prosperity and equality.

But also Europe based on knowledge and innovation that would make it competitive globally. Our young generation has made it already clear to all of us that we must save our planet. And we need Europe that would play effectively its global role. As never before across generations there is a call for democracy, respect of European values and rule of law.

I truly hope that the Conference will open a real democratic space for citizens Engagement and will be a bottom up process. Ireland, with its citizens' assemblies can serve as a model.

We expect the involvement of national parliaments, political parties, foundations, local and regional authorities, civil society in its full variety, academic structures, think tanks, business community - these are all European integration stakeholders and shareholders, with long history of engagement in debates and with long history of benefiting from the integrated Europe.

Indeed, we start in a very difficult time. It we also feel that the most innovative, brave ideas and changes are often born in crises. This is the moment when societies and individuals look for solutions. It is in my view good time because people need more European solutions, that comes clearly in the public opinion surveys. People demonstrate higher than normally propensity to get engaged, to reflect, to look toward future, to await a change.

There are also risks of not using the pandemic time for this type of action. Under the stress of pandemic, if there is no other credible offer on the European table, people may turn toward the pseudo solutions proposed by the false prophets of the new Renaissance, like the populist politicians of the ilk of Victor Orban and Matteo Salvini.

The proposals that the Conference can give birth to should be constructive, based on reality, aim at advancing our European project in a pluralistic way that would be welcoming the ideas of various participants, and of the youth in particular. I see the inference as a beginning of a multifaceted, inter-generational dialogue on how to

move Europe forward. Any priorities that will emerge should reflect this attitude of open exchange.

At this moment, the Executive Board of CoFE is concentrating on the technical aspects of the dialogue, and especially on the start of the digital platform.

This is important but of course the mechanism cannot be put before the content. The platform is a tool. And it can be used in different contexts and ways. And I hope it will stay with us if people use it, find it useful and like it.

My real worry is that the eurosceptics, anti-European populists are better mobilized to take advantage of any means available to hijack the agenda and put their messages forward in a forceful way. This looming danger is probably under appreciated.

There are countries like Hungary or Poland that are important for CoFE in political sense. On the ground there the high stake game is being played in a moment that can make or break the Union in the near future.

Building a common front of pragmatic nationalists just at the beginning of the Conference is a clear sign that national populist forces want to overtake the political discourse on Europe. They found a catchy phrase "Renaissance of Europe". And come to the fore with a clear goal of mobilising part of the European citizenship with a simplistic but quite effective nationalistic message.

That is why it is important that the Conference is not only a place to seek pragmatic solutions to the post pandemic Europe, it also a place where we clearly understand the issues at stake which is the defence of democracy and fundamental values.

And engaging citizens is the only way to not allowing those who want to destroy Europe to do it.

It is therefore crucial to ensure that the Conference fortifies a strong current of pro-European, pro-democratic public opinion.