

## **Report: European conference 2023**

### **Formulating the future vision of the EU in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine**

On Tuesday 23rd May 2023, a yearly European conference took place on the premises of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in Bratislava. This year, the conference focused on various crucial topics on the background of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The conference was opened by the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Miroslav Wlachovský, director of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Tomáš Strážay and executive director of the International Visegrad Fund, Petr Mareš. In his introductory remarks, Minister Wlachovský highlighted that Russian aggression against Ukraine has brought about a paradigm shift and that “the 24th of February 2022 changed everything”. He identified three pivotal aspects for the future: emphasis on the EU enlargement process, indispensability of cooperation within Europe and the potential of the EPC.

The first panel discussion focused on the Conference on the future of Europe and its follow up since it ended a year ago. The panellists in general agreed that it was a useful democratic exercise and presented various viewpoints on whether in what form should this kind of citizen participation continue. Finding balance between direct and electoral democratic processes was advised, as well as use of simulations, such as one of the EP functioning. Concerning citizens’ recommendations, for now, leaders should prioritize those that do not require Treaty revision. Also, for future COFOE follow up activities, the EU needs to consider disparities among enthusiasm and scepticism towards this kind of process among the EU member states, as well as scepticism among young people. It has been agreed that fostering increased interest of citizens in public affairs and their involvement in democratic processes is needed for the future of the EU.

The panellists of the second discussion spoke on the EU’s role as a global actor, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine and the boundaries of the EU’s ability to act, considering an indispensability of the US support. Speakers pointed out that the war in Ukraine reshaped the collective mind-set of the EU and prompted a deeper focus on security. Also, they underlined importance of finding balance between various preferences of European strategic autonomy (French, German, Polish or other) and achieving it, while also preventing excessive separation from the US. Furthermore, the panellists discussed the future enlargement process of the EU, where in terms of Balkans, one of the experts warned about the current significant frustration of local politicians who started to lose their enthusiasm due to longevity of the process. In case of Ukraine, one of the panellists recommended to be more realistic and rather focus on the more pressing matters of winning the war and reconstructing the country, while other underlined the importance to provide Ukraine with a clear European perspective, calling for the EU to be more flexible in this case.

Rule of law and disinformation threat were the main topic of the third panel discussion. The speakers explained that the issue of disinformation transcends borders and poses a challenge to protecting the European rule of law. Austria measured declining satisfaction with democracy, Slovakia experiences issues with rising popularity of populism and politicians who started to intentionally misuse disinformation narratives to mobilize support, deepening polarisation in

society as a side-effect of these actions. Concerning solutions presented by the speakers, there is a need for reasonable targeting (namely elderly, but also people who did not receive sufficient education on media literacy in school), promotion of media literacy, or generally putting greater emphasis on a positive agenda. This can help address those who feel disconnected from the existing system. People frustrated with the state of democracy in their country should be educated on how they can actively participate in the democratic process. Engaging experts on algorithms and AI needs to also be included when developing a complex solution. It has been suggested that criminalization of acts of disinformation should be kept as the last resort solution. Without strong institutions and political leadership, European democracies will not be able to tackle these issues. The EU has rather a role of coordinator, but can be useful for introducing regulations dealing with disinformation spread on social media platforms.

The fourth and final panel discussion of the conference focused on the EU climate goals in reflection to the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine. Russian aggression caused concerns about the stability of gas supplies and signalled a need to accelerate efforts towards diversification. Speakers recognized that times of energy crisis ask for a pragmatic approach and that achieving the EU climate targets cannot be accomplished without incorporating hydrogen technologies. In terms of strengthening energy security of Europe, construction of LNG terminals needs to continue, which is an acceptable solution for many countries. Furthermore, as approaches vary based on energy mix and economic factors across the EU member states, with the war in Ukraine even further colliding countries' interests, interconnectivity and coordination between them is essential to ensure successful implementation of common European climate goals.

The conference was organized by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) in cooperation and with the support of the International Visegrad Fund, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. Further partners of the conference were the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe, the FSES at Comenius University and the Office of the European Parliament in Slovakia. The organization of the conference was also supported by the APVV agency, under project no. APVV-21-0237: Slovakia in the European differentiated establishment (SKEUDIGFOVRE).