



Rethinking Europe: the Lithuanian Perspective

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Abstract

The initiative of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CFE) stems out of the necessity to re-evaluate the European Union project after the Brexit, the wave of populism and nationalism and the changing geopolitical environment in the world, as well as to reflect upon the European unity ten years after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. As mentioned in this Franco – German initiative, it was meant to address all issues at stake and guide the future of Europe with a view to turning the EU more united and sovereign. It should have focused on policies and it should have identified the main reforms to be implemented as a matter of priority in each block of policies, setting out the types of changes to be made. The current public health crisis has redefined the problems and priorities of the EU. Some issues have become less topical, some have remained relevant and some have emerged as high priorities only now.

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Rezumat

Inițiativa Conferinței privind Viitorul Europei (CFE) rezultă din necesitatea de a reevalua proiectul Uniunii Europene după Brexit, valul de populism și naționalism și mediul geopolitic mondial în schimbare, precum și de a reflecta asupra unității europene la zece ani de la intrarea în vigoare a Tratatului de la Lisabona. După cum s-a menționat în această inițiativă franco-germană, scopul era de a aborda toate chestiunile puse în joc și de a ghida viitorul Europei în vederea transformării UE într-o uniune mai unită și suverană. Ar fi trebuit să se concentreze asupra politicilor și să identifice principalele reforme care urmează să fie puse în aplicare cu prioritate în fiecare bloc de politici, stabilind tipurile de modificări care trebuie făcute. Actuala criză de sănătate publică a redefinit problemele și prioritățile UE. Unele aspecte au devenit mai puțin actuale, unele au rămas relevante, iar altele au apărut abia acum ca priorități ridicate.

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initiative, it was meant to address all issues at stake and guide the future of Europe with a view to turning the EU more united and sovereign. It should have focused on policies and it should have identified the main reforms to be implemented as a matter of priority in each block of policies, setting out the types of changes to be made. The current public health crisis has redefined the problems and priorities of the EU. Some issues have become less topical, some have remained relevant and some have emerged as high priorities only now.

The COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the EU. The economic recession is inevitable. The main challenge to the EU is linked to the ability of restoration of EU's reputation as an attractive, values-based and perspective project. In the fight against COVID-19 national states triumphed, and limited competence or lack of abilities of the international organizations came out.

Due to the pandemic, geopolitics does not disappear. The competition between the USA and China is going on, the negotiations on the future of relations between the EU and UK continue, the wars in the different places of the world did not disappear, neither did the threat of terrorism. New challenges such as the flows of illegal migration, the growing needs for Development Cooperation, the escalation of the new political conflicts might add additional pressure on the EU. EU will have to be able to adapt very quickly to the changing environment. It means that the time for decision making would have to be short and less time would remain for the search of compromises.

The pandemic added new challenges and revealed new shortcomings of the EU:

- Large numbers of lives were lost;
- A long-term economic damage has been made;
- Time for the implementation of the EU agenda has been wasted;
- New threats to the fundamental freedoms and the rule of law occurred;

- Shortcomings of management, such as long decision-making processes, were revealed, and were especially evident in the system of crisis management;
- The lack of solidarity revealed itself, which led to the growth of nationalism and protectionism;
- The growing disinformation exposed the lack of inspirational communicators;
- Euroscepticism has increased. Expectations of the EU citizens did not match the possibilities and competences of the EU. Big reputational damage was done.

On the other hand, during the pandemic new opportunities emerged:

- the polarization of the society decreased;
- individualism decreased and more solidarity appeared;
- citizens developed more trust for the experts' opinion;
- society became more resilient, flexible, and that means that more decisions with higher added value could be made;
- digitalization in all spheres of our lives increased;
- the society was mobilized to participate in the so-called "exercise of alert in real circumstances";
- the pandemic could speed up the process of the negotiations between EU and UK.

The global environment was influenced as well:

- having in mind the shortage of protective equipment, changes in the global supply chains must occur: EU will have to diversify production and seek for more strategic autonomy;
- the infrastructure of information will have to be made more effective and competition in the sphere of technologies should increase;
- since the role of international organizations was challenged, it will have to be re-evaluated, the escalation of discussions about the added value of global governance might increase;
- having in mind some changes in the external actions of the US, Europe will have to rely more on itself, at least for the short-term

period. EU will have to assume more responsibility in the global world.

What we have learned:

For the first time in the EU history, the future of this organization will depend on the EU citizens. EU has the tools to overcome the economic crisis, but they will be worthless if society will not be united in obeying the rules (such as self-distancing, hygienic norms etc). We are all depending on one other now.

It is evident that more attention will have to be paid to the rule of law. The rule of law will need a recovery. After the state of emergency is waived in many countries, it will be of utmost importance to encourage society to freely express its opinion, to get involved in the decision-making process. It might be necessary to introduce new instruments to protect the rule of law.

Since EU member states were affected by the COVID-19 differently, it will become important to prevent the attempts of the formation of the two-speed Europe. The common market, the Schengen area, the monetary union, the EU existing supply chains are threatened. It will be a huge challenge to achieve compromise over the recovery package. We have already witnessed the first disputes such as corona bonds, loans versus grants, etc.

During the fight with the pandemic it has become evident that the decision making process in the EU has to be improved. It has to be faster and more efficient.

More investments in research and science will be needed. A viable solution to find a balance between the necessity to restore economies and to fight the negative consequences of the climate change will have to be found.

And last but not least - the strategic communication will have to be reconsidered and improved.

Let us come back to the Lithuanian perspective.

EU and NATO are the main guarantors of Lithuania's statehood, security and welfare. Though the pandemic has shaken the reputation of the EU as an efficient player in the crisis, functioning of the Union was not challenged. Lithuania has no real alternatives to the EU membership.

The Lithuanian EU policy will not change in its essence. The multiannual financial framework (MFF) as well as other economic and financial response instruments (European Recovery fund, Corona Response Investment Initiatives, the European Stability Mechanism, the EU Solidarity Instrument, the European CB measures, the EIB guarantee fund etc.) will be a solid ground for the implementation of Lithuania's EU policy.

According to forecasts, Lithuanian economy is expected to shrink by 8 percent of the GDP this year.

From Lithuania's point of view, the recovery of the economy has to be rapid, well-coordinated and inclusive. The restoration of the common market has to be a priority. The reduction of the dependence on the third countries, the vetting of the foreign investments and the competitiveness of the industry have to be guaranteed. The green transition, the circular economy and digital transformation are the key elements for the recovery. The creation of the Recovery fund has to be simultaneous with the decisions on the MFF, the size of the impact of the pandemic to each country's economy being the main criterion for receiving the aid.

Despite the shock caused by the pandemic, the European policy has to be result-oriented, with a long-term perspective. European leaders in 2019 adopted the EU Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024. It contains all the elements that are of interest to Lithuania: the protection of the main freedoms; the development of the solid economic basis; the neutralization of the consequences of the climate change; the promotion of the European values worldwide. The implementation of the adopted strategy will prevent EU from spending money on everyday consumption and will create conditions for sustainable investments, the long-term return and high added value production.

Coming back to the Conference of the Future of Europe, the position of the Republic of Lithuania has not changed.

The lessons of the pandemic could encourage reforms which will strengthen the EU and make it more efficient. The new initiative for a deeper EU integration could encourage the development of the new "core circle" due to the different impact of the pandemic on different countries. All the MS will have to evaluate benefits and costs of deeper integration initiatives.

Lithuania is already a member of some core circles of the EU: the Schengen area, the monetary union, different like-minded groups, regional formats such as NB6 etc. It is in Lithuania's interest to keep all these core circles open to any EU MS which expresses its willingness and readiness for a deeper integration. The objective of such an attitude is to prevent differentiation among the core and periphery states. Our objective is to find the balance between the enlargement of the EU and a deeper EU integration, at the same time preserving Lithuania's political autonomy in the strategic areas.

Lithuania is interested in a deeper cooperation in the common foreign and security policy (CFSP), especially in the crisis management, the prevention of hybrid threats and disinformation, the transatlantic partnership, the neighborhood policy development; the common market, especially in the services area; the protection of external borders, the strengthening and development of the Schengen area; the energy security; the transport policy; and eventually the health policy, having in mind lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lithuania still has some doubts regarding the initiatives to deepen integration in the taxation policy, migration, the climate change, the military dimension of the common security and defense policy (CSDP), the amendment of the EU treaties.

In the context of COVID-19, many countries sustain the rapid reforms of the EU as well as the CFE process.

Initially CFE was meant to discuss opportunity-oriented reforms. However, after the Brexit and the pandemic the MS will have to look for means to consolidate the Union's relations with its citizens, rather than put the controversial issues on the table.

From Lithuania's point of view, discussions in the CFE have to start not from the technical questions or institutional reforms, but rather from the objectives and priorities. We have ourselves to answer the questions: what is the objective of Lithuania's EU membership and what expectations do Lithuanian citizens have regarding the EU? Lithuania supports CFE, but at the same time we underline that the participation of all MS and institutions in the discussions has to be equal. Discussions have to concentrate on the EU policies and the implementation of the strategic Agenda for 2019-2024.

We believe in European values.

We expect that EU will remain a guarantor of security, freedom and welfare.

We support the principle of solidarity and equality among the MS.

We support a fair Europe, with fewer economic inequalities and stronger ties.

We support an active and efficient EU.

We support EU with an adequate understanding of the common threats and are capable to respond to them.

We support an open EU, with the guarantees of the 4 freedoms and the membership perspective for our friends in the neighborhood.