



Slovenian Pre-Presidency Conference (PPC) Report

Ljubljana, 17 and 18 June 2021

The PPC Ljubljana was organised by the Centre of International Relations – University of Ljubljana (CIR) and TEPSA. The two-day online event was attended by nearly 250 participants.

After the opening address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (MFA) Dr. Anže Logar, the Slovenian MFA State Secretary, Gasper Dovžan, presented the Slovenian priorities for the EU Council Presidency. Slovenia's main priorities include the Union's resilience to crises, the debate on the European strategic autonomy, the Conference on the Future of Europe and the recovery of the European economy based on the digital and green transition. Through constructive dialogue, Slovenia will promote the rule of law and work towards a better understanding of the different systems in the Member States. The Slovenian Presidency believes that a good understanding of constitutional, socioeconomic, political, historical and differences between Member States can help to strengthen the rule of law in the EU. The Slovenian Presidency will pay special attention to strengthening transatlantic relations, both in the European neighbourhood and globally in relevant issues. Equally important, the support of the Western Balkan countries on their path towards European integration will be a key priority.

In line with TEPSA's tradition, researchers from the TEPSA network prepared a set of recommendations for the Slovenian Presidency. The recommendations focuses on EU's Recovery, the Conference on the Future of Europe and EU's strategic autonomy. The implementation of the Next Generation EU is one of the most prominent issues on the agenda, especially activities related to financing and implementing the national Recovery and Resilience Plans. Secondly, the Conference on the Future of Europe will be in its most important phase during the Slovenian Presidency, thus requiring Slovenia to push for active engagement of EU citizens. Thirdly, the broader debate on strategic autonomy is another priority issue, from the definition to discussions in which fields the EU should strive to achieve, be it in digital, trade, finance and/or several others.

The PPC continued in two parallel sessions. The first one addressed the European Green Deal, where panelists stressed that by its importance, the Green Deal can be compared to the foundations of the EU as both are difficult, challenging, and complicated, presenting a huge transformation for the EU. Most Europeans acknowledge that climate change is a problem and with this consensus EU policies need to actively pursue transformation towards a green and more equitable society. The climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic are two sides of the same coin, both require changes in crisis governance. Experience with the COVID-19 crisis management should serve as a lesson. The pandemic showed poor coordination of the international actors, lack of coordination and frequent changes of recommendations for addressing the pandemic. European Solidarity has failed, because the less developed economies have been hit the most. The implementation of the European Green Deal needs to avoid these deficiencies and better address the drivers and pressures of environmental crisis by a systemic



approach. The EU has already an example of good practice: in deploying emissions trading schemes (ETSs), the EU has been leading by example. There are also other cases of ETSs, however, the EU ETS has been the first one, the largest one and the most advanced one with the highest price on carbon. The need to collaborate is essential for implementing the European Green Deal.

The second panel discussed European solidarity. The panelists shared their views on how the concept of solidarity is viewed within Portugal, Austria, Germany, Bulgaria and Slovenia, and how this has changed during the pandemic. The presentations were based on their contribution to the forthcoming book within TEPSA Series on the 'Future of Europe: Views from the Capitals', where contributions from experts from TEPSA Member Institutes and beyond explored the issue of EU solidarity. The panel also focused on the examples of solidarity among the Member States during the pandemic. Each country-panellist pointed to certain specifics, but also to the fact that there were positive examples of solidarity, often among neighbouring countries, but some negative experiences, especially early on with the pandemic with regard to bans on export of protection equipment, closing of borders, etc. The joint action by the Commission to secure vaccines was viewed very positively, since smaller countries would have a more difficult time in securing the same conditions, yet there was also the view that the EU could have done better in a more harmonious response. Even after more than a year each country has its own rules and restrictions as to the entry conditions, limiting the freedom of movement. It was also expressed that the positive practices of solidarity ought to be promoted more in the media, contributing to public awareness of the importance of solidarity as one of the key European values.

Two more parallel sessions followed in the afternoon. Digitalisation is clearly one of the EU's priorities as well as the priority of Slovenian Presidency. The parallel session focused on Digitalisation and Security. The round table opened with interesting and substantial questions related to digitalisation and cybersecurity. The experts firstly presented the framework for the discussion on cybersecurity and then elaborated it on everyday practice. The red line of the debate was on how digitalisation and (cyber)security are connected, how should/could states enhance cybersecurity within the digitalisation process and what are the challenges to the digitalisation process in the EU, not only connected to (cyber)security, but as an action in/for EU Member States. What came out as a conclusion is that the EU must do quicker steps in providing cybersecurity if it wants to compete with other relevant actors in the international community. On the other hand, also the "Catch-22" was presented regarding the issue of cybersecurity, digitalisation and own production of all products and processes related to cybersecurity. The debate also highlighted that the EU cybersecurity should be strongly linked to the digitalisation process among the Member States.

The second parallel session in the afternoon opened with the issue of EU post-COVID-19 Recovery, with particular attention to the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The key-note address was delivered by the Director General of the Recovery and Resilience Task Force, who shared with participants the experience of preparing the National Frameworks for the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Member States have followed the Commission's guidelines in dedicating the projects and reforms to the four dimensions: green, digital, social and economic resilience. Now the key issue is the successful implementation, in the first place of the reforms



proposed. Here, some potential difficulties were pointed out by the panelists: the question of the absorption capacity of individual countries, coupled with the administrative capability of assuring timely reform process, the possibility of corruption due to the large influx of money and the ability of the European Commission to monitor the processes and enforce the regulations. It was also stressed that to successfully build long-term resilience and improve the productivity and economic growth, Member States need to combine FRR sources with other investments. For those receiving also the Cohesion funds, the complementarity of investments needs to be assured. To prevent misuse of the funds, the Commission is preparing clear rigorous guidelines and milestones, along with a number of innovative instruments.

The second day of the conference started with a keynote address by the Vice-President and Commissioner Dubravka Šuica. In her speech, she paid special attention to the Conference on the Future of Europe, where citizens are invited to participate and engage to strengthen deliberative democracy at the local, regional, national and European levels. Different possibilities for contributing are opened, from platforms, panels, plenaries, etc. The system is designed to also enable cross-border exchanges. Currently, nine key topics are proposed for discussion, from climate change to culture, but other topics are also welcome. The Conference should reach far beyond the capital cities, to every corner of Europe.

The plenary continued with a debate on Differentiated Integration and the Future of Europe. TEPSA members have been involved in several EU research projects on differentiated integration (DI) and their representatives were invited to present some of their findings. The common thread of the discussion was that there are both positive as well as negative impacts of DI. On the one hand, DI allows for legitimate diversity and domestic preferences, while at the same time it opens the possibility for further inequalities and divergence of the Member States. Negative effects of DI can be detected in the field of inter-EU solidarity, political equality and the EU's unity. In addition, fears were expressed that DI could allow less-democratic governments to disrespect the rule of law and use DI to justify their own reactionary policies. Therefore, DI could not be allowed in certain fundamental areas, important for the basic EU values and policies: rule of law, the freedom of movement, single market, protection of the citizens' rights across EU, etc.

One of the parallel sessions of the second day was devoted to the Slovenian priority about EU enlargement in the WB. The panel discussed existing EU tools to promote democracy and the rule of law in order to bring change to the EU neighbourhood. All panellists agreed that the EU needs to move faster in its accession negotiations with Western Balkans states and remain (more) committed towards its eastern neighbours if it wants to limit the negative effects of current enlargement fatigue, rising Euroscepticism and increased global power competition in the neighbourhood region. The panelists proposed that EU's discourse should move beyond "stabilitocracy" and remain a merit-based project. To keep its gravitational pull, the EU needs to not only set rules but also to improve its monitoring and assessment tools and deliver on its European perspective (if and when conditions are reached). Double standards (for visa liberalisation), lack of unity (regarding recognition of Kosovo), absence of commitment to enlargement by some Member States and increased Europeanisation of bilateral issues (Greek and Bulgarian demands for North Macedonia) were identified as the main limitations of EU's current approach towards the region. At the same time, the WB enlargement process should



not only be a national priority but a regional one, making it easier to lobby and fight enlargement-blockers together. In their conclusions, panelists agreed that the EU needs to change perceiving enlargement and neighbourhood policies as unilateral top-down processes and focus on involving citizens and civil society more directly. In this respect it is crucial that the neighbouring countries are involved in the deliberation processes at the Conference on the Future of Europe and that by the 2030 they receive at least some form of EU membership.

Finally, European strategic autonomy was the topic of the second parallel session. The panelists presented their definition on the concept, stressing that it does not mean an isolation or < European step back from multilateralism. Strategic autonomy is first making sure that the EU is able to protect the interests of its people in the manner which safeguards EU values. The EU needs to remain open, it needs to promote multilateralism in international relations, but it should not be naïve and dependent on others to defend its key interests. The EU should be able to maintain its leadership in the areas where it has its stronghold (for example, green transition, especially the regulatory control) and focus on other areas, which are important for the future economic and social development (digital, trade, industrial policy, human rights, etc.). A successfully addressed challenge of building stronger strategic autonomy was considered by the panelists as one of the major steppingstones for EU's future. The PPC ended with a closing statement by TEPSA's chair, Lucia Mokrá, who stressed that the challenging times the EU is facing asks for more cooperation and joint efforts amongst Member States. The Conference on the Future of Europe offers the platform to openly discuss what kind of Union we wish to build to fulfil the expectations of all the citizens of Europe.

You can revisit the sessions here:

- [Welcome and opening remarks](#)
- [Priorities of the Slovenian EU Council Presidency and TEPSA Recommendations](#)
- [European Green Deal](#)
- [European Solidarity in Action and the Future of Europe](#)
- [Digitalisation and Security](#)
- [EU post-COVID 19 Recovery](#)
- [Differentiated Integration and the Future of Europe](#)
- [The Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood](#)
- [European Strategic Autonomy](#)