



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
The Conference on the Future of Europe Officially Began
After a Year of Delay
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The Conference on the Future of Europe Officially Began After a Year of Delay

Summary

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been opened on May 9th, which marks the celebration of Europe's Day; thus, making this event even more significant, at least from the symbolic perspective. The Conference was supposed to be organized while Croatia was presiding over the Council of the European Union, however, several circumstances caused a one-year delay. Nevertheless, Croatia still has an important role in it; Dubravka Šuica, a Vice-President of the European Commission for democracy and demography is the person responsible for coordinating the communication between the Union's institutions. What will be Croatia's priorities during the Conference, we have yet to see.

Introduction

After a one-year delay due to a coronavirus pandemic and the fact that the European leaders could not agree on who be the chair of it, the Conference on the Future of Europe has been officially opened on Europe's Day, on May 9th. The Conference was supposed to begin last year during the Croatian presidency over the Council of the European Union and it was often communicated by the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) as one of the highlights of the country's presidency and a great achievement that Croatia was scheduled to organize and coordinate.

The Preparation of the Conference During the Croatian Presidency

What brought even more attention in the Croatian public and media was the notion that Dubravka Šuica, a former member of the European Parliament and the European Commission Vice-President in charge of democracy and demography portfolio was appointed by Ursula von der Leyen to lead the whole process and to serve as a mediator between the European Union's institutions during their participation in the Conference. Šuica was previously a vice-president of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs and a vice-president of the European Parliament delegation for relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. However, on a

domestic level, Šuica is sometimes a subject of criticism due to several different reasons, but this particular paper will focus on the other topics related to the Conference of the Future of Europe and, therefore, we shall skip the “domestic issues” part. Be that as it may, the Conference was, thus, postponed to 2021 with a hope that circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic will allow it to finally happen. On March 10th, the European Parliament President David Sassoli, the European Commission President von der Leyen, and Prime Minister of Portugal António Costa, as a head of the country that is currently running the rotating presidency, signed the joint declaration which “paved the way for a series of debates and discussions that will enable people from every corner of Europe to share their ideas and help shape Europe’s future”¹. Even though the Conference did not kick-off during the Croatian presidency, it appears that the European leaders were satisfied with the way Croatia was handling the inter-institutional talks and negotiations on the Council's official position and thanked the Croatian Government, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, for the efforts the country has invested during the period between January and June 2020.

The Purpose of the Conference

The whole purpose of the Conference is to give an opportunity to European citizens to address the rising issues and challenges that the European Union is facing nowadays, especially with regards to the coronavirus pandemic and the rise of populism for which, as it turns out, the Union's leaders cannot find a solution to. Cynics would say that the European Union officials can debate on these issues and challenges on an everyday basis without organizing a conference and that citizens in every member state (or at least in a large part of them) have become fed up with the non-stop talk that is leading nowhere near answers and solutions. The Conference is meant to bring citizens closer to the decision-makers and through the recently launched multilingual digital platform invite them all to participate in (re)shaping of their own future. This all sounds quite optimistic and praise-worthy, taking into account that the European Union is sometimes heavily criticized for the way in which decisions are made, meaning that the procedures are led behind closed doors and that regular people are not familiar with how the processes unfold. The European Union was also criticized in recent months when the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic was far worse than it is now. The problem of uneven vaccine distribution among the member states and the failed negotiations with vaccine manufacturers

¹ Conference on the Future of Europe. *Consilium.europa.eu*
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>.

led many people to believe that European countries would be much better if they had decided to deal with the health crisis on their own, without the mediation of the European Union. Croatia too was among those countries whose leaders decided to put their fate in the negotiating skills of EU officials. Prime Minister Plenković would often say that the country will not participate in any kind of deal that would undermine the influence of the European Union and the agreements that the EU leaders have decided to follow. Understandably and unsurprisingly, the way of thinking of many people soon shifted when it turned out that the vaccines will be available and that the situation in Europe is now getting better.

Topics to be Addressed

Two weeks after the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe was signed, the Executive Board held its constitutive meeting in Brussels. "The Executive Board is composed of representatives from the three institutions (European Parliament, Council, and Commission), on equal footing. The Executive Board will oversee the work, process and organization of the Conference"². During the initial talks, the heads of the EU institutions proposed a series of topics such as the fight against climate changes, social justice, digital transformation, rule of law, migration and security, and a couple of others which could be a subject of a debate over the next two years. It was agreed that citizens will participate through the above-mentioned multilingual digital platform available in 24 languages which will serve as a meeting point for people to exchange their ideas, positions, and views on how the European Union should work in the upcoming years. The aim of the Conference was perfectly exemplified by Guy Verhofstadt who said: "In transformative times, it is up to citizens to decide what they expect from the EU and how to make that happen. It's their Europe, and their future, so it's their Conference! Our job is to make sure the Conference gains public momentum, and then, to draw an agenda from it to shape Europe's future together"³. Well said by Verhofstadt; however, we only hope that his words will come true and that the ideas and opinions of EU citizens will be taken into account when making decisions that shape our lives.

² N.N. 2021. Work Begins on the Conference on the Future of Europe. *2021portugal.eu*
<https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/news/work-begins-on-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>.

³ N.N. 2021. Work Begins on the Conference on the Future of Europe. *2021portugal.eu*
<https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/news/work-begins-on-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>.

How Will Croatia Participate?

As for Croatia, we are still not sure in what way Croatian citizens will participate in the Conference and what will be the priorities of the Croatian Government. Two days after the Conference was opened, the President of the Croatian Parliament Gordan Jandroković hosted an event where several successful Croatian stories were presented, perhaps intended to serve as a filter of ideas that Croatian people could use to express their opinions during the Conference. The project of Sisak-Moslavina County Development Agency (SIMORA) was leading the way with presentation of how the city of Novska has become the center of the gaming industry in Croatia, with the Agency's director saying that the gaming industry is on the rise in Croatia as well and that is slowly surpassing other industries such as film and music industry⁴. Director Mario Čelan also said that “the project had already launched 49 start-ups and that a new, four-year study programme for gaming technicians had been developed as well and that the National Recovery and Resilience Plan envisaged a gaming industry campus”⁵.

Conclusion

The Conference on the Future of Europe is hopefully about to open some new perspectives on how citizens want to participate in the European Union. While bringing citizens closer to the decision-makers, the Conference will also open some crucial topics such as demography, attitude toward migrants, mobility and education, and job opportunities. Of course, one should not forget the debate on the quality of democracy, active citizenship, and civic engagement regarding the policy-making process. Yet, the Conference is just a first step in creating an inclusive and affirmative environment for the citizens of the European Union.

⁴ N.N. 2020. Future of Europe: Successful Croatian Stories. *Total Croatia News* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/52835-future-of-europe-successful-croatian-stories>.

⁵ N.N. 2020. Future of Europe: Successful Croatian Stories. *Total Croatia News* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/52835-future-of-europe-successful-croatian-stories>.