



## **Proposal for the participation of citizens and civil society representatives from the Western Balkans at the Conference on the Future of Europe**

Ahead of the commencement of the announced Conference on the Future of Europe, the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) would like to provide its opinion and offer a proposal on the role and participation of the Western Balkan citizens and civil society in the forthcoming discussions.

BCSDN greets the initiative of the European Commission to establish the Conference on the Future of Europe. In relation to it and considering the critical and uncertain momentum for the EU, enabling a space for citizens to deliberate and make a contribution in shaping EU's policies is vital.

With this proposal, we would like to emphasize the need for the citizens of the Western Balkan countries to also be given an opportunity to take part in this process. Considering that both geographically and culturally the Western Balkans are part of Europe, and taking into account EU's values of solidarity, unity and democracy, we see it as a necessity for the citizens of these countries to be able to actively share their views, interests and challenges into shaping the future of Europe. The countries of the Western Balkan have been continuously making efforts and taking important steps and reforms with the aspiration of joining the EU. Furthermore, some of the challenges that the countries of the Western Balkan face, are still present in the EU as well, and their solution requires a joint approach. As some of the Western Balkan countries have already commenced the accession negotiations with the EU, while others have the status of candidate states, the EU has financially and operatively supported the positive developments in the region. Therefore, we consider that it would be of value for the Conference on the Future of Europe to include the citizens and civil society from the Western Balkan countries since they are Europeans and future citizens of the EU. The upcoming Croatian Presidency offers an additional incentive on this since it was announced that the enlargement process would be one of the priority issues to be discussed in the first half of 2020.

Taking into account that the aim of the Conference is outcome-oriented and tangible and concrete results are expected, the Western Balkan countries would be affected by such results both in the short-term and long-term.

In the short-term, in the following few years and due to their somewhat urgent nature, issues like migration and climate change are on the agenda of the EU and the Conference on the Future of Europe. We strongly believe that these issues should not be handled without the perspective of the Western Balkan countries.



Being positioned on the migration routes, in the past few years, the Western Balkan countries have played a significant role in helping the EU to manage the migrant inflow. Local authorities, border police and citizens have been directly affected by the pressure brought from the migration crisis. Since one of the priorities of the Romania-Finland-Croatia Presidency Trio is the reform of the Common European Asylum System as well as the strengthening of the European Border and Coast Guard, cooperation with the Western Balkan countries is more than needed to enable successful implementation.

Furthermore, due to EU's global leadership on combating climate change and other environmental issues, topics as climate change mitigation and adaptation and climate financing are to remain a priority. Considering the dedication to the Paris Agreement and the need for urgent measures and action to be taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, because of its geographical positioning the Western Balkans should not be left out from this commitment and should give their input on this issue. Their involvement in discussions around the long-term EU Strategy on greenhouse gas emissions and the efforts to address other environmental issues is of high relevance both for the region and Europe as a whole.

On the long-term, issues regarding education and social inclusion that are to be part of the Conference on the Future of Europe, directly affect especially the opportunities and prosperity of the youth of the Western Balkan countries. In line with the EU values, we think that the youth of Western Balkans should be given equal opportunities as their peers to get quality education, will affect the development, peace and prosperity of the Western Balkan countries.

We want to conclude on this note, and accent the need for appropriate representation of the citizens of the Western Balkans, in order to have their voices heard through methods of citizen participation which will be decided upon by the European Parliament in January 2020.

Some of the possible ways to include the participation of the Western Balkans citizens and civil society in the debate could be via:

- Taking opportunity of the platforms for civil society engagement and events organized during the Croatian presidency;
- Making use of the already established mechanisms by EU funded programmes for selections of participants when it comes to sectoral discussions (such as the People to People (P2P) programme);
- Organizing wide online consultations with the Western Balkans citizens and encourage online participation of youth from the region;
- Engaging the already existing regional networks with proven experience and expertise in Enlargement and the topics that are of priority to the Conference on the Future of Europe as a way to provide for appropriate and meaningful representation of the Western Balkans;



As a regional network of civil society organizations, we further want to offer BCSDN's expertise and assistance should it be needed in achieving the aims of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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