

# The Conference on the Future of Europe in the Slovak Republic

Events, initiatives, ideas and recommendations (2021-2022)





On 3 March 2021, the Government of the Slovak Republic adopted a framework document<sup>1</sup> on the implementation of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) on the national level. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) of the Slovak Republic served as coordinating body<sup>2</sup> and discussions on the future of Europe have been accordingly structured in two pillars. The first focused on the public outreach activities through the continuation of the strategic communication and public diplomacy project *WeAreEU (MySmeEÚ)*, the second on expert discussions on EU sectoral policies and issues through the continuation of the National Convention on the EU.

On the national level, the Conference on the Future of Europe was formally launched on 9 May 2021 by President of the Slovak Republic, Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. On the occasion of the launch of the Conference, the President of the Slovak Republic co-signed a letter by Heads of State of 21 Member States of the EU calling for an active public participation in the Conference “Let’s talk about Europe”<sup>3</sup>. On 7 June, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs and State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs presented the Multilingual Digital Platform and appealed to the public to actively participate in the EU-wide debate on the future of Europe.

In the framework of WeAreEU public outreach activities, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic organised several events, among others the following:

- **an online conference** in cooperation with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association “**The EU in 2021: Slovakia and the future of integration**” on 19 March 2021,
- a **week-long online communication campaign** focused on the Conference on the Future of Europe in cooperation with the **EURACTIV Slovakia** on 15 – 22 March 2021,
- **an online panel discussion “What kind of Europe Slovakia wants to live in after the pandemic?”** on 19 May 2021,
- an **online CoFE kick-off conference** in cooperation with the European Commission Representation in Slovakia on 8 June,
- a series of discussions and public activities on the future of Europe, **the “Roadshow 2021”** on the EU in 25 cities across Slovakia on 22 – 27 August 2021,
- a series of discussions of representatives of the Ministry with students at secondary schools and universities, **the Back to School project**, between October 2021 and March 2022,
- a mid-term assessment conference focused on the Conference on the Future of Europe in cooperation with the **EURACTIV Slovakia on 27 January 2022**.

During the Roadshow 2021 events, attendees responded to the questionnaire on the future of Europe. When asked what the first association is, when the EU is mentioned, they listed euro, cooperation, freedom, travel, freedom of movement and open borders, but also with a negative emotion. When asked whether they support strengthening the EU’s powers, 37

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<sup>1</sup> Framework document on CoFE (in Slovak): <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/25772/1>

<sup>2</sup> On the MFEA’s website a dedicated CoFE banner and page were created: <https://www.mzv.sk/europske-zalezitosti/konferencia-o-buducnosti-europy/o-konferencii>

<sup>3</sup> Let’s talk about Europe, letter by Heads of States of 21 EU Member States (in English): <https://www.prezident.sk/upload-files/96304.doc>



percent were in favour, 22 percent against, while 41 percent would support maintaining the current competences of the EU. Among the main threats the EU is facing, migration, environmental challenges and climate change, public health and pandemic, and social challenges such as salaries, retirement and unemployment were mentioned most. Survey participants listed environment and ecology, social issues and employment, migration, health, and education and youth as priority areas the EU should deal with in the future. When asked what they would change about the EU, they pleaded for the strengthening of the role of nation states / smaller (Member) States, a more active role of the EU in social affairs (social security, retirement benefits, lower prices, jobs), increasing transparency, flexibility and efficiency of the EU governance, increasing the public awareness on the EU, and for a better distribution of EU funds.

On 22 November 2021, the **Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic Ivan Korčok** joined the conversation on the Future of Europe during his **visit at the European University Institute in Florence**. The hybrid lecture **“The Future of Europe: a Central European point of view”** was also followed remotely by students of four Slovak universities, namely Comenius University, the Matej Bel University, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, and the University of Economics in Bratislava. In the subsequent Q&A session, students asked about the EU enlargement with regard to the countries of the Western Balkans, the rule of law and spread of populism especially after the EU’s enlargement in 2004, and the fragile situation at the border between Poland and Belarus and the EU’s role in addressing this situation.

Two CoFE-related projects supported by the MFEA through its project-funding programme were structured as national citizens’ consultation panels.

The **Institute for Central Europe** presented a **report “Our Europe”<sup>4</sup>**, an analysis of the public views of the EU based on the qualitative survey of public opinion conducted through in-depth interviews in six online focus groups (each consisting of 8-12 participants) in November 2021. Consultations were topically focused on public views of the EU, priority issues and challenges for the EU to deal with (and not to deal with), impact of EU membership on people and regions in Slovakia, mechanisms of civic participation in EU affairs, EU funds, EU’s foreign and defence policies, EU’s further integration and enlargement, and the citizens’ vision for the future of the EU. Positive perceptions of the EU were associated with the freedom of movement, education, euro, Schengen (open borders), unity, and EU funds. Negative views resonated mainly in connection with migration, loss of sovereignty, misuse of funds, bureaucracy, dictate and overregulation, as well as with the perception of double standards across the EU. With respect to the priorities for the EU to deal with, consultation participants voiced the idea that the EU should go back to its roots and address mainly the implementation of the freedoms of movement. A strong opinion with regard to promotion and enforcement of single currency was also recorded. The recurring theme that resonated during the consultation was the issue of living standards and quality of life and the perception of slow progress in the convergence of living standards, bordering with citizens’ frustration and fatigue with the EU. Citizens expressed their preference for a more coordinated or unified EU approach to addressing crisis

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<sup>4</sup> Report Naša Európa. Analýza postojov v slovenskej verejnosti vo vzťahu k EÚ (in Slovak): <https://www.mzv.sk/europske-zalezitosti/konferencia-o-buducnosti-eu/konferencia-na-slovensku>





situations. Reducing red tape (overregulation) for businesses and climate change action were also mentioned as priority areas for the EU. On the other hand, issues related to culture and identity were deemed as matters of competence of Member States. More generally, participants raised interference in national competences as a matter of concern, often without further explanation or a more concrete illustration. They also expressed sceptical views as to citizens' ability to influence decision-making in the EU. A quite strong appeal was made by participants with regard to the accessibility of EU-related information and coverage in the media, including national public-service broadcasters. Consultation proved that the EU funds are often perceived as a source of corruption, bad governance, misuse, inefficiency. It also pointed to the lack of awareness of the EU funds. Prospects of a joint European defence were surprisingly discussed without much prejudice; however, some expressed concern about its impacts on the original mission of the EU, i.e. protection and promotion of peace. A more unified stance of the EU in its foreign policy was supported, as well as a more flexible decision making mechanism, although participants recognized that there are differences of interests and positions among the EU Member States. As to the EU's integration/enlargement, participants presented sceptical (and to some extent uninformed) opinion on the deepening of integration (e.g. for fears of the loss of national identity, unfeasibility etc.). At the same time, they did not present strong opinions or preferences on the EU's enlargement. Finally, with regard to the vision of the future Europe, participants agreed in their wish for the future of Slovakia tied closely with the EU. The main message for the EU was to aim for the convergence in the living standards and equal treatment of people from across the EU (no more double categories of Europeans, no more double standards of products etc.).

Based on these findings, the Institute for Central Europe formulated a set of recommendations focusing on the support of education and raising public awareness of the EU, broadening of media coverage and tailored strategic communication towards citizens on EU affairs, broadening the scope of "Erasmus" exchange programmes for EU Member States citizens, continuation of CoFE or a similar EU-wide public consultation process, and addressing social-economic concerns of the citizens (standard of living/quality of life, consumer protection etc.).

The **Slovak Academy of Science** public consultation project "**Citizens' Vision for the Future of Europe**"<sup>5</sup> conducted in line with the OECD guidelines on best practices of citizen deliberation and participation in public policy formulation was realised on 22 January 2022. 38 citizens, selected as a representative sample of Slovakia's society, and divided into six working groups, were led in the consultation to formulate thematic areas that they consider important for the EU to deal with and subsequently a vision of the EU in 2050. The following topical priorities and challenges for the EU to address were identified by the participants:

#### 1) Environment, energy and transport

- a) We need to look for sources of energy, food and production not only ecological and sustainable, but also in a way the available sources energy are used efficiently.
- b) World trade sustainability as the point of departure in negotiating – e.g. reducing rainforest deforestation, eliminating nature degradation through trade agreements or cooperation.
- c) Sustainability of human resources and their potential

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<sup>5</sup> Event Report: <https://www.mzv.sk/europske-zalezitosti/konferencia-o-buducnosti-eu/konferencia-na-slovensku>



- d) Sustainable handling of the common spaces
  - e) Sustainable management of common resources
  - f) Urban planning ecology
- 2) Security and migration
- a) The economic and political integration of the Western Balkans and the resulting security aspects
  - b) Reducing economic inequalities
  - c) Country's food and economic self-sufficiency
  - d) Fight against disinformation
  - e) Protecting children and young people (and possibly also the less-skilled people in online environment) from online threats
  - f) Security risks related to migration policy
- 3) Social affairs, work and health
- a) Being old in the EU
  - b) Being young in the EU
  - c) Work and working conditions
  - d) Social policy and migration
  - e) Healthcare
- 4) Civil rights, European institutions and European identity
- a) Elected self-government – improving citizen participation
  - b) Transparency and availability of information
  - c) Coordination Centre – with the mission to raise citizens' awareness of the EU, ideally in schools or on the regional level
  - d) Informatisation – simplification for the general public, improving the understanding of the EU institutions by the public.
  - e) Civic and scientific engagement
  - f) Centralised management and security
- 5) Freedom, equality and regional policy
- a) Socio-economic equality – eliminating inequalities between citizens in social and economic status
  - b) Agriculture – thinking locally – promoting sustainable farming
  - c) Legislation – it is easier to create rules in a unitary state
  - d) Entrepreneurship - not to pose disadvantages for foreign companies compared to domestic ones
  - e) Climate change
- 6) Science and education
- a) Establishing comparable training for teachers in Member States
  - b) Leading position in science and research
  - c) Education and training accessible to all without distinction
  - d) Preparing children for real life already in lower grades of education
  - e) Cooperation in schools between children, teachers, and parents



- f) Partnerships between schools and different institutions, e.g. renewal of dual education

Through the project-funding programme, the MFEA also supported a project run by a non-profit non-governmental organisation EuroPolicy in cooperation with EURACTIV Slovensko focusing on mid-term assessment of CoFE. Three hybrid events were organised in December 2021 and January 2022, and they were complemented by broader online communication campaign. The first online discussion focused on the **rule of law and EU legal order** featuring Minister of Justice of the Slovak Republic Mária Kolíková and Member of the European Parliament Michal Šimečka. Participants of the discussion were interested in the relationship between the EU law and legal order in the EU Member States, position of civil society, impact of social media in attacks on democratic principles, and EU's rule of law control mechanisms. The second online discussion featuring representatives of two above-mentioned organisations, which realised citizen public consultations on the future of Europe, as well as a Slovak participant of one of the European Citizens' Panel, focused on the **proceedings of CoFE and prospects of citizens' participation in EU decision making**. Role of regional and local administration, lack of relevant information on the functioning of the EU as perceived by the public, engagement of „ordinary citizens“ and marginalized groups in CoFE were raised by participants of the online discussion. The third event was structured as the **mid-term assessment of CoFE on both national and European level**. The conference entitled **“Citizens' Europe”** featured the European Commission's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography Dubravka Šuica, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, National Council of the Slovak Republic, European Parliament, local self-government, civil society and youth among speakers. Participants raised various questions related to the proceedings of the CoFE plenary meetings, European Citizens' Panels, national events, and to the expected outcome of the Conference. They also inquired about the possible changes to EU's competences and/or EU treaties, public engagement, role of Members of the European Parliament, the issue of two seats of the European Parliament, and weighed on the low public awareness of and media disinterest in CoFE. Panel discussion dedicated to green transition raised interest of the followers in the costs of green transition and fossil fuel phase out, support mechanisms for renewable sources of energy in residential buildings, lack of support for geothermal sources of energy, and the power of the industrial/fossil fuel lobby.

In the framework of National Convention on the EU activities, four working groups of the National Convention on the EU met between September and November 2021. The project was steered by the Slovak Foreign Policy Association with the support of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. Representatives of public sector, regional and local self-government, private and non-governmental sectors attended the meetings of the working groups, whereas each of the working groups held two meetings. The aim of the project was to provide an expert platform facilitating in-depth analysis, exchange of views and opinions, and drafting policy recommendations for decision-makers. The meetings were held in different cities across Slovakia in order to bring debates on European affairs closer to citizens.

#### **National Convention on the EU Working Group (WG) Meetings:**

- **WG1: Digital and Green Transition**



- Focus: Job loss due to automation and deepening digital divide
  - Žilina, 28 October 2021
  - Trenčín, 3 November 2021
- **WG2: Disinformation and Populism**

Focus: Disinformation as part of hybrid domain, its societal impacts, resilience of the state and the public against misuse of cyber tools in disinformation. Elimination of the spread of populism, raising awareness and other solutions

  - Trnava, 24 September 2021
  - Nitra, 6 October 2021
- **WG3: Single Market**

Focus: Brain drain. Reduction of regional disparities

  - Košice, 13 October 2021
  - Prešov, 14 October 2021
- **WG4: Slovakia and the EU in the global context**

Focus: Qualified Majority Voting in Common Foreign and Security Policy. Opportunities, challenges and red lines for the Slovak Republic. Role of the EU's CFSP in fulfilling goals of the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic

  - Banská Bystrica, 26 October 2021
  - Bratislava, 2 November 2021

Final reports<sup>6</sup> of the working group presented thematically clustered recommendations for both national and European/EU level.

- The recommendations of the Working Group on Digital and Green Transition focused on the complex reform of education system, adaptation of the labour market, development of digital skills, supporting economic operators in the process of digital transformation, as well as on the thorough implementation of National strategic road maps for digital decade in the EU Member States, sharing of best practices and closer cooperation.
- The recommendations Working Group on Disinformation and Populism addressed, *inter alia*, the needs to increase resilience of the Slovak Republic against information operations and disinformation, strengthen capacities of the public sector, and introduce a truly whole-of-society approach. A more active engagement in the international (including the EU and NATO) structures and networks, clear decoupling of political and strategic communication was also raised, along with the issue public support and the of loss of trust by the public in democratic principles, and political and other elites. Experts also recommended a more active and coordinated approach to global digital platforms (regulation, fact-checking, transparency) on the EU level, and the inclusion of disinformation agenda in the relevant legislative initiatives, such as the Digital Service Act.
- The Working Group on Single Market recommended to increase the role of local and regional self-government in the policy-making and decision-making processes, e.g. on issues such as post-COVID-19 recovery, industrial policy. A need of a more substantial reform the current structure of the public administration and self-government, and

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<sup>6</sup> Final Reports of the National Convention on the EU Working Groups (in Slovak): <https://www.mzv.sk/europske-zalezitosti/konferencia-o-buducnosti-eu/narodny-konvent-o-eu>



the decentralisation of financing and investment mechanisms were also highlighted, as well as the need to improve the EU funds management, address the issue of brain drain, and support public-private partnerships.

- The recommendations Working Group on Slovakia and the EU in the global context focused on the strengthening of the political leadership of the EU on the global scene. According to the experts, this can be attained through the enhancement of capabilities of the EU to address crises in its most immediate and further neighbourhood, strengthening of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, and increasing the effectiveness of CFSP decision-making mechanisms, including through the introduction of the qualified majority voting. Supporting the development of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy in a way that synergy and complementarity between the EU and NATO would be strengthened, active support of transatlantic partnership, and strategic partnership between the EU and the United States were also underlined.

Besides the four working groups, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic reached out to 126 different entities, including line ministries, regional and local self-government, Members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, political parties, business and civil society organisations seeking their active participation in and contribution to the public debate on the future of Europe.

The following examples of activities illustrate different forms of engagement of public administration in the Conference on the Future of Europe. In October 2021, the Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic organised an **expert seminar on the reform of fiscal governance and future of and completion of the Economic and Monetary Union**. In November 2021, the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic participated in the **public panel discussion on energy mix for Slovakia 2030 and on the transition to climate neutrality**. The Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic organised a series of **public awareness activities focused on the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy** and a **public expert discussion on cyber security and cyber defence in the EU and NATO**. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic initiated a **public consultation focused on agriculture, food production and forestry focusing on environmental aspects of agriculture**. The Ministries of Education and Environment actively participated in the CoFE-related events in the framework of the Roadshow 2021 or National Convention on the EU projects.

### Youth Engagement in the Conference on the Future of Europe

Youth Council of Slovakia, the umbrella organisation of children and youth organisations in Slovakia, held consultation with the young generation focusing on the future of Europe and presented its main findings in January 2022<sup>7</sup>. Online consultations through focus groups discussions with almost 200 representatives of the young generation from across Slovakia were conducted between November 2020 and December 2021. The young expressed a **strong**

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<sup>7</sup> Project „Rada mládeže Slovenska: Konferencia o budúcnosti Európy. Správa z konzultácií“ was supported by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and presented its main findings during an event „How do young Slovaks view the future of Europe?“ co-organized with the European Commission Representation in Slovakia:  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/1356832134747175>





**positive view of the EU** and associated the EU with the notions of **strong leadership, independence, power, protection, cooperation, stability and diversity**. Negative associations were present too, but were less numerous and were mainly linked to the **lack of awareness of the functioning of the EU**. Travelling, study and work opportunities in other EU Member States were listed as main benefits of the EU membership, while insufficient attention to solving challenges faced by the youth, e.g. in education, were mentioned with criticism. The young feel they lack basic knowledge on the EU, as well as up-to-date information on the EU affairs. They perceive great gaps in civic education in Slovakia and alarmingly weak presence of the EU issues in school curricula. Communication of the EU vis-à-vis the young should be more accessible and comprehensible, including through social media.

### Engagement of citizens on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe

According to the Report Platform<sup>8</sup> of February 2022, **562 contributions** (159 ideas, 253 comments, 150 events) from Slovakia were recorded on the Multilingual Digital Platform. In terms of total contributions, Slovakia thus ranked 14<sup>th</sup> among the EU Member States (*Note: Slovakia ranked 10<sup>th</sup> if the number of contributions was assessed against the size of population, with 104 contributions per one million inhabitants.*)

Based on the data of the February 2022 Report on Contributions per Member State<sup>9</sup> 70 percent contributors identified themselves as male, and 10 percent as female (*Note: 19 percent did not provide information on gender.*). The most active age group were 25-39-year-olds (35 percent of contributions), followed by 55-69-year-olds (24 percent). The most active group by occupation of participants were professional workers (39 percent), and the most active group by education were participants with tertiary education (60 percent).

**Climate change and the environment** was the topic that ranked first in terms of total contributions from Slovak participants (134). It has also generated the highest number of comments (73) and the second highest number of organised events (37). The category Other ideas with 90 contributions ranked second, followed by the topics of **Stronger economy, social justice and jobs** with 72 contributions and **Values and rights, rule of law, security** with 60 contributions. The topic of Stronger economy, social justice and jobs has generated the most ideas (36).

### Parliamentary dimension of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The European Affairs Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic initiated a **plenary discussion focused specifically on the future of Europe**. The debate was held on 18 June 2021 and Members of the European Parliament elected in the Slovak Republic took part in the proceedings of the plenary debate.

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<sup>8</sup> See CoFE Multilingual Digital Platform Reporting – Report Platform – February 2022: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting?locale=en>

<sup>9</sup> See CoFE Multilingual Digital Platform Reporting – Report on contributions per Member State – February 2022: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting?locale=en>



The European Affairs Department of the Chancellery of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, together with the Department of the Political Science of the Slovak Academy of Science, Faculty of International Relations of the University of Economics in Bratislava and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's Representation in the Slovak Republic organised a **conference** entitled „**What kind of Europe do we want?**“ („*Akú Európu chceme?*“) on 16 March 2022<sup>10</sup>. The conference was held under the auspices of the Chairwoman of the European Affairs Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and featured plenary discussions with the representatives of the European Commission, European Parliament, Slovak government and members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

Over 100 university students attended the conference. In the discussions with the panel participants, they raised questions on the war in Ukraine and EU's reaction, prospects of Ukraine acceding to the EU, fight against disinformation, efficiency of EU's foreign policy and the position of the High Representative, rule of law, European identity, and energy diversification. They were also interested in the positioning and agenda priorities of the Slovakia in the EU, reform of EU institutions and governance, and communication and public awareness on the functioning of the EU.

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<sup>10</sup> Event on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/1630411547326004/>