

# A Wake-Up Call for the European Union



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**W**hen in 2019 the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe was announced, there was a lot of optimism – both official and spontaneous. The Conference was supposed to be the cure for Europe’s ills under current political circumstances. It placed citizens at the centre of reform in the European Union. The European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the European Commission have committed to listening to Europeans and to following up, within their sphere of competences, on the recommendations made.

Discussions have started. Politicians were excited. Liberals from the Renew Group proposed, among others, drafting the European Citizenship Statute, which would outline the existing rights for citizens – such as the right to vote and to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament, and also in municipal elections. It shall ensure as well consular rights, the right of petition, the European Citizens’ Initiative, and freedom of movement. Many interesting ideas were put on the table. Numerous uninteresting ones too.

But citizens were less excited about the process. Most of them have probably never heard about it, and only few – the most determined and dedicated ones – have participated in discussions. Also, experts, even the most pro-European ones, were skeptical about the success of the Conference. Scholars and activists have stressed that EU institutions had no idea about its purpose. Now, in April 2022, shortly before the end of the CoFoE (an acronym recognized only in the Brussels bubble), the organizers are still not sure what they will do with citizens’ recommendations. Original enthusiasm became replaced by increasing doubts. It looked like the answers to the key questions would not be delivered.

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## POPULISM AND REJECTION OF THE RULE OF LAW MAKES EUROPE MORE VULNERABLE TOWARDS EXTERNAL THREATS

Then, on February 24, 2022, everything changed. Russia, unprovoked, brutally attacked independent Ukraine. A war in Europe has ensued. A brutal, inhumane war that after a month has cost lives of thousands innocent civilians. The Russian invasion was a tragic wake-up call for Europe. No institution and no leader can now avoid serious discussion about the future of Europe. The time of *business as usual* and thinking only about better comfort are gone. European citizens – definitely those in Central and Eastern Europe – understand that we must act not only to protect our democracies and rights, but also to defend our freedom and independence. The discussion about the future of Europe has truly begun, and the voices coming from the CEE region are and will be heard.

This discussion will cover many topics, and some of them are not that obvious. It must start with a debate about the general structure of the European Union. Liberals have a clear view of the European integration being the only way to ensure peace and security on the continent. We can clearly see that a federal dream is not over yet. There

are many arguments in favor of a federal structure of the EU, but the label is not the most important. What matters is building a European Union that works, is efficient, and can protect its interests. An EU that can guarantee its own democracy and promote it in other countries. It is evident that more bureaucracy is something that nobody wants, but strong institutions that respect European values are necessary to protect our values.

In this context, it became more obvious than ever that all alternative visions of Europe, presented by corrupted autocrats and Putin-admirers, are not only foolish, but also extremely dangerous. Populism and rejection of the rule of law makes Europe more vulnerable towards external threats. Therefore, if a member of the European Council calls the president of the country invaded by Putin's Russia 'an enemy', he should be immediately pushed out of the European family. By tolerating such a person and his methods we allow the whole of Europe to drift away toward an illiberal future.

Foreign relations and security policy will see probably the most visible changes, as they will happen before our very eyes, as an immediate response to Putin's actions. A European army, discussed for so many years and mocked by numerous politicians, can become a reality. Germany has already announced that it will dramatically increase its defense, and other countries will follow. Neutral states are discussing what their status really means these days and how to protect their citizens. The EU can be born as a military player. Eurocorps could be expanded to the size of a true corps and entered into the EU's Common Defense and Security Policy. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) could be developed. European strategic autonomy may be developed in close cooperation with the United States, for the benefit of both sides of the Atlantic.

The current situation forces us to consider EU enlargement. A fast-track membership for Ukraine – so divisive even among liberal leaders – may sound merely symbolic when the country is at war, but it will have to be addressed directly after the invasion ends. Similarly, there is still the question of Georgia and Moldova, the two states which asked to become members when faced with Russian aggression. All this has been happening in the face of European ambitions of the Western Balkans and, eventually, some states may lose their patience with the EU's undelivered promises and immediately fall into Russian (or other) arms.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a wake-up call for all European decision makers. A frighteningly loud alarm that must wake Europe up immediately, if it wants to survive – literally. European leaders lost any excuses to remain passive. A real Conference on the Future of Europe is now needed like never before. Europe must get stronger.

What does it mean? The European Union needs better integration, more democracy and freedom, less susceptibility to external blackmail, and no tolerance for those who violate common values. Changes should embrace areas from security and foreign affairs to employment and culture. It is high time to reform the EU, a moment for courageous visionaries who can listen to the voice of a European demos. A demos which is currently being born.

**Хай живе вільна Україна у спільній Європі!**



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