



## CONCEPT PAPER

*for a conversation with citizens in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, Zagreb, 18 February 2022:*

### **“Setting the Stage for Tomorrow: Global and Regional Role of the European Union”**

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a Europe-wide democratic exercise, bringing the citizens to the heart of the debate on the issues that matter to them, in order to help the European Union respond better to their needs and interests in the years to come. It is a unique opportunity for us to listen, to reflect and to engage with our citizens on topics they see as impacting their lives today and determining their future. The Conference provides a platform to make the citizens heard, especially the young generation, as they should help us set the stage for tomorrow.

The Conference is taking place at the time of significant geopolitical shifts, underscored by the experience of the COVID pandemic, still far from being tamed. The pandemic has exposed our fragilities and interdependences, emphasizing the need for solidarity and for more resilience to face future shocks. Moreover, the trans-national nature of the challenges we are witnessing today – be it the post-pandemic recovery, climate change and environmental degradation; security challenges, including cyber threats and hybrid attacks; instability and conflicts in our neighborhood and beyond; competition for key resources and challenges related to the new digital technologies; migration; demographic decline; or disruptions of global supply chains – makes it evident that such critical issues can only be addressed through cooperation, both at the regional and at the global level.

This is also a time of unprecedented opportunities for the EU on the global stage to promote and protect the interests of EU Member States and its citizens. Amongst others, to be the first climate-neutral continent by 2050; a leader in circular economy; a continent fit for the digital age; a responsible global leader promoting strong multilateral governance and rules-based cooperation; peace, stability and solidarity, while upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law, making the EU one of the leading standard-setters. That said, the EU’s credibility, as a global actor, depends on how effectively we can respond to challenges in our immediate proximity, including in the Western Balkans and in our Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods. It also depends on how we position ourselves vis-à-vis the major geopolitical shifts and trends, be it in Ukraine, in Afghanistan or in Indo-Pacific.

The Western Balkans in particular is a geopolitically sensitive region, exposed to various influences and crises which could have a destabilizing effect on the European Union itself. Given the cross-border character of such crises and the existing links between the Union and the Western Balkans, notably those of economic and political nature, intensified efforts to build up the Union’s resilience to various crises should be accompanied by efforts to strengthen the resilience of the Western Balkan countries, in turn making the Union stronger.

“The EU in the World” is one of nine broad themes addressed within the Conference, with the aim to examine and reinforce the EU’s role as a responsible global leader. A **panel**

**with the citizens in Zagreb on 18 February 2022, entitled “*Setting the Stage for Tomorrow: Global and Regional Role of the European Union*”,** is part of a series of thematic events organised in Croatia in the framework of the Conference. It provides an opportunity to inform, engage and exchange ideas on EU’s policies and actions in its neighborhood and on the global stage. The participants are invited to share their thoughts, ideas, comments, questions or concerns on two topics in particular:

- 1) **What are the benefits of a stronger geopolitical Europe?** The participants are invited to exchange views on issues such as: What does a “geopolitical Europe” mean to you? How do global events and crises affect your life? Do you see the EU as a strong global leader, including in the green and digital transition? Are there areas where Europe should do more globally? How can the EU assist its Western Balkan partners in building up resilience to various crises? What can EU do to support strengthening resilience of democratic processes and of political institutions in those countries, as well as in terms of critical infrastructure, cyber security or fighting disinformation, to help them respond effectively to security or other threats?
- 2) **Is the enlargement policy of strategic importance for the EU?** The participants will be invited to exchange views on issues such as: Do you see the future of the Western Balkans in the EU? Does the EU enlargement policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans has an alternative? Is the EU visible enough in the region? Should the EU do more to help the Western Balkan partners’ progress on their European path, to consolidate democratic reforms, institution-building, fundamental rights and the rule of law, as well as the stability and security in the region? Which are the areas that would benefit most from deepened cooperation? How can the EU support the region’s green and digital transition, while fostering its overall economic recovery and competitiveness?

The event’s outcome will be registered on the joint Digital Platform of the Conference, as a contribution of the Croatian and Slovenian citizens to the broader debate on the global role of Europe. The event will be co-hosted by the State-Secretaries of Croatia and Slovenia, Ms. Andreja Metelko-Zgombić, State Secretary for Europe in the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, and Mr. Gašper Dovžan, State Secretary in the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the participation of the Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, Ms. Dubravka Šuica. This will be a hybrid event, allowing for online participation, with a specific focus on youth organisations.

To prepare for the discussion, the participants are invited to consult the information available at the Conference on the Future of Europe digital platform: <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes/EUInTheWorld>. Furthermore, for the latest overview of the key global trends impacting the EU's capacity and freedom to act, they are also invited to consult the 2021 Strategic Foresight Report: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight/2021-strategic-foresight-report\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight/2021-strategic-foresight-report_en).

**To register for the virtual meeting in Zagreb on 18 February 2022, please send your information to [sektor.jd.ks@mvep.hr](mailto:sektor.jd.ks@mvep.hr). The meeting link on the Zoom platform will be available following the registration.**