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Balkan youth speaks up about digital issues: Lessons for the Conference on the Future of Europe

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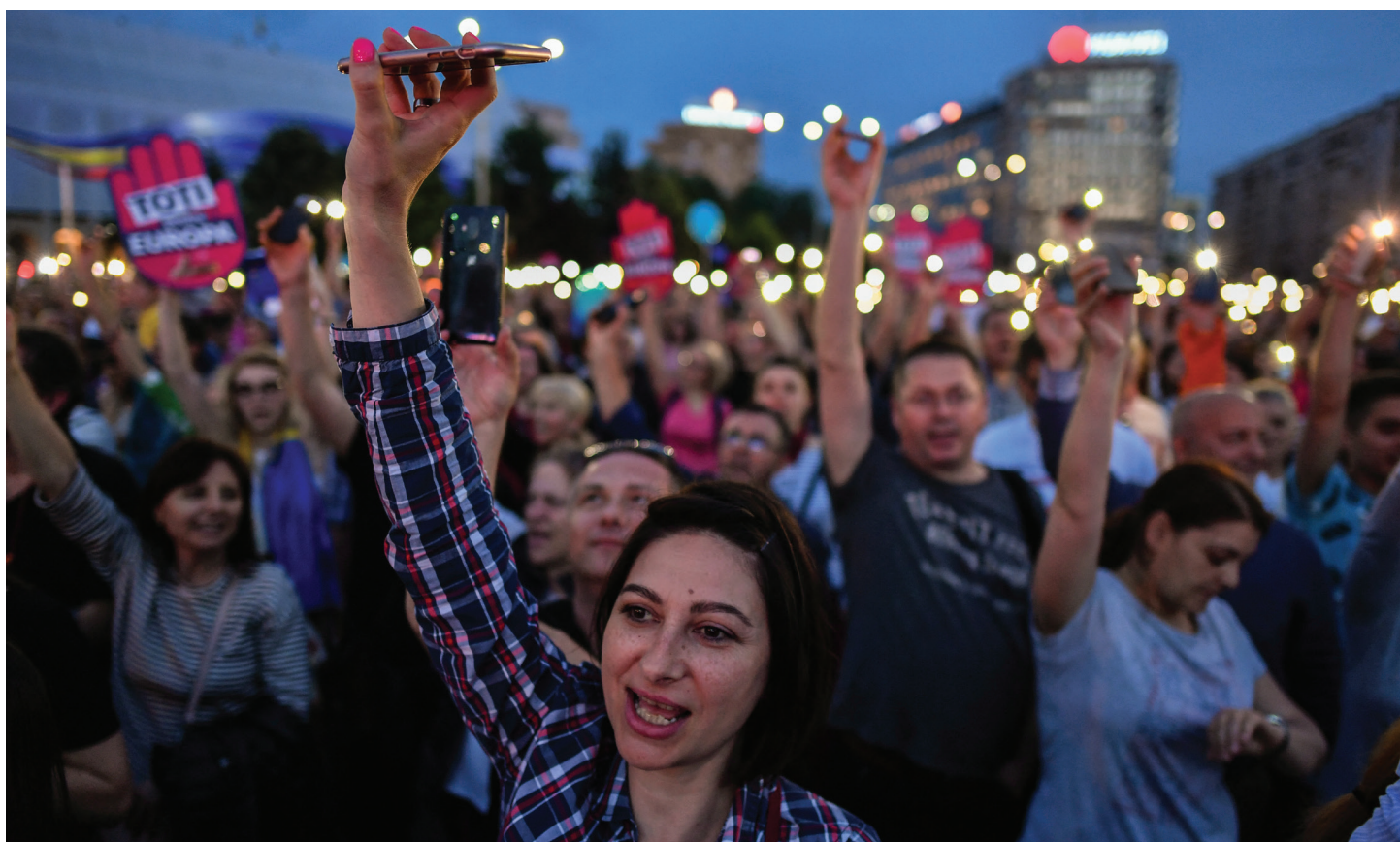


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Executive summary

The Balkan countries have the know-how to contribute substance and methods as part of the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). “Make Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective” is one recent experiment in participatory democracy that speaks of the potential of the Balkan countries to add value to the CoFoE. Its methods and results offer the EU best practices and lessons learned, as the project implemented a standardised method in a region-wide exercise. In this sense, it demonstrated that the Balkans can operate as a microcosm or testing ground for EU initiatives: a model applied successfully in all the countries of the region, which share little in the way of political structures, can be scaled up to a Union of 27 member states.

From a methodological point of view, the project demonstrates the capacity of the Balkan countries to devise a respectable approach to citizens’ consultations and apply it systematically throughout the region. Being able to simultaneously hold a participatory exercise in all the Balkan countries, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a remarkable achievement that underscores the region’s ingenuity and courage to try out new processes. If this is possible in the Balkans within the constraints of the time, resources and expertise of a single project, one can only imagine what the EU member states could accomplish together, with some goodwill and political support, under the CoFoE.

The project’s standardised method for the consultations with young people also reinforces the merits of ensuring consistency across events and countries. By adopting similar means of participant selection, similar (and specific) questions for the agenda and similar reporting forms, the Make Future Together initiative proves how easy it becomes to compare national outcomes and retrieve relevant input from discussions.

The project also provides insights into a subject that is crucial for the EU: the impact of the internet and social media on young people’s lives and their socio-political engagement. The input of the young people who joined these consultations suggests not only that the Balkan countries share many of the same views and priorities as the EU. The region can also handle – and, indeed, wants to speak up on – contemporary issues of concern. From this perspective, this project helps to underscore that the EU should allow the Balkan aspiring member states to join the Conference process, even if only on a consultative basis.

By welcoming the Balkans aboard the CoFoE train, the EU would help build a future of solid and beneficial partnerships. And, like all great powers, it would demonstrate that it does not only preach, but can also learn from other countries.

A train ticket for the Balkans

The train of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) left the station last month when the Presidents of the European Commission, European Parliament and Council finally signed the Joint Declaration that mandates the initiative. The EU-hopeful countries in the Balkans were not formally asked to come aboard. By omitting the region from a process that is potentially decisive for the Union's future, the EU sabotages the credibility of its enlargement policy towards the Balkans. It also underestimates the ability of the Balkan countries to contribute to the CoFoE's planned, citizen-focused, bottom-up and broad-based deliberations about key European issues which are of mutual interest to existing and prospective member states.

Omitting the region from the process underestimates the ability of the Balkan countries to contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

If the EU is still serious about the European perspective of the region, it should allow the Balkan aspirants to join a Conference that discusses the future of the Union to which these countries still seek membership – even if only on a consultative basis.¹ Such a decision goes beyond considerations of fairness. It is in the EU's own interest to encourage the region to reflect, debate and formulate positions on concrete policy priorities relevant to both sides.

Participating in the Conference could stimulate civic and political forces in the Balkans to define their vantage point on thematic priorities from the CoFoE agenda, like the green transition, democracy and governance, and digital innovation and transformation. This process would improve the Balkan countries' diplomatic dexterity in their preparation for accession, helping to turn them into constructive future members.

Equally importantly, it would allow EU capitals to better understand the ideas and stakes of their Balkan neighbours and strategic allies on issues of common interest. Greater awareness could then translate into more informed and relevant policy work for Europe's common future. While the countries of the region are at different stages on their respective EU tracks, they do have knowledge, resources and practical experience to contribute substance and methods as part of the Conference. The EU would be ill-advised to downplay the Balkans' ability to add value to the CoFoE process.

The Make Future Together project

“Make Future Together: EU and the Western Balkans from the Youth Perspective” is a recent project that proves that the region can rise to the occasion of the Conference. Funded through the EU's Europe for Citizens programme, this project is implemented by the Think for Europe Network (TEN), which includes six prominent think tanks from across the region.² The project's declared objective is to foster communication and understanding between the EU and the region by promoting citizens' debates about issues of relevance to both sides.

Between November and December 2020, the think tanks involved carried out online consultations with young people (aged 18-24) in all Balkan countries. These events drew on a common methodology to collect the participants' opinions about the impact of the internet and social media on young people's lives and their socio-political engagement. In addition, the organisers set up an online consultation platform where youth from throughout the region could express their concerns and ideas about key issues for Europe's future.³

The Balkan region would not start from scratch if it were to participate in the Conference. On the contrary, it would be perfectly capable of following the proceedings in parallel.

The upcoming Conference, too, foresees the organisation of events and deliberations concerning strategic EU priorities, in innovative formats and involving various actors at different levels of governance. Moreover, the CoFoE's Executive Board has put in place a multilingual digital platform that allows citizens from across the Union to actively engage in debates about the EU's future.⁴ Thus, the Make Future Together project mirrors the Conference, suggesting that the Balkan region would not start from scratch if it were to participate in the process. On the contrary, it would be perfectly capable of following the CoFoE proceedings in parallel.

However, this project has not only familiarised the Balkan countries with the kind of activities that are also likely to unfold in the Conference context. Its methods and results suggest that it has also helped equip the involved partners with know-how and input that could

serve the EU. This experience refers to the best practices and lessons learned by implementing a standardised method in a region-wide participatory exercise, as well as to insights into the views of Balkan young people on a subject that is also crucial for the EU.

Methodology: A standardised format

The project partners organised online events with young people in their respective countries using the same methodology. More specifically, they all resorted to similar procedures to recruit the consultation participants, held the meetings on the basis of the same agenda and filled in a standard reporting form to convey the results of the approach and the input gathered. Each Balkan think tank organised one consultation.

To select their participants, the think tanks launched a common call that was widely distributed through each organisation's own social media channels (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) as well as to high schools, universities, and youth and non-governmental organisations in each country. Those who answered the invitation had to respond to a number of questions regarding their demographic background (e.g. age, sex, education level, hometown), allowing the organisers to monitor the profile of those who registered. The call remained open for two weeks. The number of registrations ranged from 29 people in Serbia and Albania to 30 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 34 in Montenegro, 48 in North Macedonia, and 77 in Kosovo.

At least in part, the rather low number of registrations and the poor turnout can be explained by the fact that the timing of the consultations clashed with the school schedule in most of the countries. The implementing partners in Skopje and Pristina were thus the only ones in a position to choose participants for the youth consultations from the applicants. To this end, the former first divided the applications by language – Albanian or Macedonian – and then contacted those who registered by phone to confirm their attendance and secure a balanced sample of participants for each language. The latter simply reached out to the first 45 people who signed up to verify their intention to participate.

Given limited resources, the think tank partners did not attempt to randomly select the young people or ensure that the groups were representative. The majority (90%) of those who eventually participated in the consultations were from urban or semi-urban areas, aged 18 to 24, and mostly women. In the Kosovo event, for example, there was only 1 man to 11 women. This imbalance was also due to the fact that many participants dropped out and did not participate in the event. In Serbia, for example, more than half of the attendees who signed up failed to log in on the day (out of 29 registrations, only 12 joined the call).

All the debates focused on the same topic, broken down into the same sub-questions. Based on the organisers' common agenda, the young people attending these

two hour-long consultations discussed the subject in both small groups (5 to 7 participants) and plenaries. The group discussions allowed participants to elaborate long lists of:

- ▶ pros and cons of the internet (first round); and
- ▶ what should be done – and by whom – to preserve the positive and tackle the negative effects of the internet (second round).

In the plenary sessions, the participants worked to narrow down these full lists of items by voting in Zoom polls on:

- ▶ their top two positive and top two negative evaluations of the internet (first plenary); and
- ▶ the top three solutions of what should be done in response, and by whom (second plenary).

The participants' choices, arguments, opinions and suggestions were reported by each organiser in a standard reporting form, allowing for a cross-country snapshot of similar issues. This form also gathered information about which methodological aspects worked well and which did not go smoothly during the consultation.

Limitations and small scale notwithstanding, this methodological approach is inspiring for at least three reasons. First, **it targeted and engaged young people (aged 18 to 24) in debates about an important political issue**. Although the youth represents the future, its voice often remains unheard at the political level. This project reveals that the Balkan countries have the infrastructure, through their established networks of civil society organisations, to mobilise ordinary citizens in political discussions. It also raises the question of how much more could be achieved with backing from the national and European tiers of politics.

Second, **the entire exercise, which took place in all Balkan countries, happened online**. Clearly, this was the result of the physical restrictions imposed by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This project helps to demonstrate that citizens' participation instruments can be used successfully in virtual formats. Social distancing rules should not be used as an excuse to prevent their implementation.

Third, **the project relied on a standardised method that made the process coherent and the results comparable throughout the region**. The limits and pitfalls of uncoordinated and unsystematic efforts across

countries have already been exposed in the EU, such as during the 2018-19 European Citizens' Consultations.⁵ However, in the Conference context, member states will once again be free to organise citizens' panels

or thematic events in line with their "own national [...] specificities".⁶ This Balkan project shows that EU countries can and should use the opportunity provided by the CoFoE to work together and do better in this regard.

The results: Connections with and divergences from the European policy debate

The Make Future Together project gathered input from young people in the Balkans regarding their ideas and preferences for how the EU digital policy field should develop. The participants were asked to consider some urgent macro-level questions relating to the policy debate, such as the general principles that should guide regulation (if regulation is indeed necessary); the level of government that should be responsible for deciding said regulation; and the role – if any – that citizens should play in securing a safer, healthier online space. By first addressing which aspects of the internet and social media they personally believed to be most beneficial and most harmful, the participants were encouraged to think about how a balance could be struck to preserve the former while minimising the latter.

The choice of topic was motivated by the fact that, although digital issues are among the highest policy priorities for the EU and the Balkans alike, the discussions informing regulation in this field take place mostly between experts and industry voices. The views of internet users themselves are often absent. As technology develops at an ever-faster rate and its impact on society and on politics becomes ever more apparent, it is important to ensure that the debate about the benefits and costs of social media and internet use remains grounded in citizens' actual experiences and preferences.

Young people play a particularly important role in the digital debate, as they have grown up under the influence of such technology and are among its most frequent users.

Young people play a particularly important role in this debate, as they have grown up under the influence of such technology and are among its most frequent users. In 2020, an estimated 79% of EU citizens used the internet every day – a percentage that has risen steadily over the last decade. The figures for the Balkans are similar, ranging from 67% in Bosnia and Herzegovina to as much as 93% in Kosovo. However, the daily internet use among those under the age of 25 approaches 100% in all the countries of the region.⁷

Much of the EU policy debate around the internet and social media dwells on the supposedly negative or harmful aspects of its impact on politics and society. Online sources can be used to spread disinformation, propaganda or hate speech.⁸ The use of individuals' personal data for potentially manipulative targeted advertising is controversial. Digital security and privacy remain confusing subjects for many, with data breaches, hacking and other cybersecurity threats having potentially catastrophic consequences.⁹

Nonetheless, the internet has also brought enormous benefits: it can draw people together around common interests, facilitate engagement in social or political causes, and provide new economic and business opportunities. It constitutes an essential part of modern communication infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated how central the internet has become to our societies, as virtually all of social life (and much of professional life, too) moved online.

National governments have sought to address some of the risks confronting their increasingly online populations through regulatory means that seek to make the internet a safer place while preserving those aspects that render it a powerful tool. Examples include the Network Enforcement Act in Germany and the UK's Online Harms White Paper. A number of initiatives also exist at the European level, such as the more recent European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act. For the Western Balkans, too, integrating into the EU's digital regulatory framework is an important part of the EU enlargement process, as indicated by the launch of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans at the Sofia summit in 2018.

THE PROS AND CONS OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Discussing the topic without prompts (beyond the simple instruction to consider both the positive and negative aspects of the internet), the participants spontaneously landed on many of the subjects that are most prominent in the policy debate (see Figure 1). One notable exception was the question of the extent to which social media platforms constitute **monopolies or threats to fair competition**. This has been a large part of policy discussions, especially at the EU level: the European Commission's antitrust cases against industry giants like Google and Apple received significant attention.

THE MOST FREQUENTLY DISCUSSED SUBJECTS AND IDEAS IN THE CONSULTATIONS



Pros

- ✓ Ease of access to abundant information
- ✓ Ability to connect with others, including friends and family abroad
- ✓ Opportunities to engage in social or political activism
- ✓ Business opportunities



Cons

- ✗ Negative impact on mental health
- ✗ Disinformation and 'fake news'
- ✗ Hate speech and cyberbullying
- ✗ Cybercrime and security risks
- ✗ Lack of responsibility and regulation



Who?

- 👤 Self-regulation (by online platforms)
- 👤 The EU
- 👤 National governments
- 👤 An independent body
- 👤 Personal responsibility by users

Furthermore, there is some concern in Europe that the fact that the social media space is dominated by a handful of private companies, mostly based in the US or China, represents a danger to Europe's competitive advantage and strategic autonomy.

However, it would seem that these issues – which are mostly rooted in industry or economic concerns, rather than social ones – are not especially relevant for young internet users who took part in the project's discussions. A few participants did mention that tech companies have much power over debate on their platforms due to their moderation policies, but stopped short of covering any implications of monopolies in the information space generally.

Another prominent topic in the policy debate is that of **disinformation and 'fake news'**, which has been the subject of considerable media attention as well as regulatory and legislative efforts at EU and national levels (e.g. the EU's Action Plan Against Disinformation). All the consultation groups mentioned disinformation as a problem but generally did not devote much time to discussing it in detail. Some expressed the view that it is a significant challenge but not especially relevant to their own online experiences. Rather, they felt it was generally other groups, such as older generations, who were most at risk of being influenced by disinformation.

The young participants also raised some issues that are largely absent from most policy debates on digital issues. Most notably, when considering the negative aspects of the internet, without exception, every group named **the impact of frequent social media use on mental health** as one of the topics that concerned them the most. In many cases, this appears to have been the subject that attracted the greatest degree of engagement

from participants, well ahead of other issues (e.g. disinformation, cybersecurity). Social media's potential to be addictive and the promotion of unhealthy attitudes, such as unrealistic beauty standards, emerged as particularly important topics of debate. One participant in Kosovo also identified a negative impact on not only the people's health but also "social values".

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In preliminary polls and the first discussions of the day, the participants were asked how often they use social media platforms. Without exception, they replied that they do so every day, with many explaining that they spend significant amounts of time online (some indicated as much as 9 hours a day, or that they "have their phones in their hands for the majority of the day"). Many participants agreed that their social media use has increased – and become healthier – during the pandemic and/or that they did not feel good about the amount of time they spend online and were consciously trying to cut down their internet usage.

While this is a subject that has received some attention from civil society and academia in Europe and elsewhere,¹⁰ it remains rather absent from most political or policy discussion, which tends to focus on harmful content (e.g. disinformation, manipulative advertising). That said, most of the event participants felt that the main responsibility for addressing this challenge fell on their own shoulders as users rather than on regulators.

What is more, several participants talked about how online communities can also be very *positive* for their mental health and social lives, as they help to “build a feeling of belonging”. This has been especially important during the pandemic, as it has allowed people to enjoy some semblance of normalcy despite the lockdowns. Thus, the young people also acknowledged that they spend so much time on social media because it brings real benefit to their lives. For this reason, they would prefer not to cut it out completely for the sake of their mental health but rather develop healthier usage habits. Some also mentioned that this would be easier if the platform designs did not encourage compulsive use, such as through recommendation algorithms and notifications.

Another positive aspect of the internet that received some attention, predominantly from the groups in Albania and Kosovo, was its potential to provide young people with **opportunities to make money or find employment**. This feature is perhaps especially important for the Balkans, where levels of youth unemployment are among the highest in Europe,¹¹ but where many young people have a good command of foreign languages and can work across borders via the internet.

At times, Balkan youth’s entrepreneurial use of the internet has caused some controversy, such as the proliferation of disinformation-spreading outlets and ‘troll farms’ in the region (predominantly targeting English- or German-speaking audiences). However, the importance of this topic for those consulted demonstrates that policy debate that dwells on stopping people from making money from such means is incomplete. It must also consider how to provide better opportunities for young people to earn a living through ‘legitimate’ methods.

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT?

Overall, the participants in the events appear to have reached agreement on the pros and cons of the internet easily. However, in response, there was less agreement on the follow-up question of ‘**Who should do what?**’ Here, the relative merits of the different options – EU-level regulation, national government regulation, self-regulation by online platforms and even, in some cases, personal responsibility by internet users – provoked some debate. In the case of the Kosovo consultation, for example, all three subgroups came up with a different conclusion on where the ultimate responsibility should lie.

In general, however, participants appear to have been sensitive to **the risks of government intervention**, such as to freedom of expression, and nominated self-regulation by online platforms as a suitable compromise for most issues. In doing so, they appear to have come to similar conclusions to the EU institutions, which initially sought to encourage voluntary self-regulation (e.g. through the Code of Practice on Disinformation, signed by social media companies and advertising agencies). Only now is the EU moving towards a more rigorous system marked by ‘co-regulation’ – that is, a regulatory framework constructed through cooperation between tech companies and policymakers.

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Several participants referred to the online media spheres in their own countries and acknowledged that, although accessing ‘alternative’ sources of information is a benefit of the internet, it also has downsides. They recognised that some media outlets and journalists are not only ‘victims’ of disinformation practices but also contribute to spreading misleading or manipulative content themselves. They suggested that there should be **new media laws and more regulations** (e.g. a centralised registry that online media outlets must sign up to) to encourage or even force journalists to take greater responsibility. On the other hand, a few participants noted that media freedom is already under threat in their countries and that granting national governments further control over the media space could be risky.

One other point of similarity between the Balkan young people’s discussions and the EU policy debate is the importance placed on **media literacy** and increasing **awareness** about both the positive and (especially) the negative aspects of the internet. The discussion about digital media literacy as a means to build a healthier online space has begun to gather pace in Brussels and the national capitals. While the 2018 European Action Plan Against Disinformation recognised this as an important part of the fight against disinformation, it did very little to actively promote media literacy projects or make suggestions for how they might look.¹² However, the European Democracy Action Plan, unveiled in December 2020, foresees dedicated funding streams to increase awareness of and education about manipulative information online, in part building on September 2020’s Digital Education Action Plan.

For many of the young people who discussed this topic in the Balkan countries, however, educational reform for media literacy is not just one tool among many to counteract disinformation and other online harms. Rather, it constitutes the single most important area where policymakers should focus their efforts. Besides disinformation, they cited low levels of awareness about privacy breaches, online security, and how recommendation and advertising algorithms work as matters that more proactive education efforts could address. Their discussions of media literacy were not limited to schools and education but also covered the importance of educating older people, notably parents, to give them a better understanding of what their children may be exposed to online.

Media literacy is not just one tool among many to counteract disinformation and other online harms. Rather, it constitutes the single most important area where policymakers should focus their efforts.

Overall, this project's discussions with young people in the Balkans provide valuable insights into both their ideas and preferences on the digital sphere, and the suitability of the current EU policy agenda to address them.

At present, there is no directly comparable data regarding the views of young people in the EU on this topic. This makes it difficult to say to what extent the Balkan youth's

attitudes converge with or diverge from them. Concerning the EU policy debate, the project demonstrates that it corresponds with young people's priorities in many areas (e.g. disinformation, cybersecurity) but does not sufficiently cover the field they consider most important (i.e. impact on mental health).

While the young Balkan participants did not have conclusive answers to the question of where overall responsibility for regulation should lie, they acknowledged the complexity of this issue and appeared to favour a mixed approach that prioritises self-regulation, with some government oversight.

While the young Balkan participants did not have conclusive answers to the question of where overall responsibility for regulation should lie, they acknowledged the complexity of this issue and appeared to favour a **mixed approach that prioritises self-regulation, with some government oversight**. This is similar to that taken by the European Commission in its relations with tech companies and social media platforms. The concerns the participants raised about some aspects of government regulation – centring on media freedom and freedom of expression – may reflect the situation in their own countries primarily, but also confirm that this is an aspect that policymakers all over Europe must take seriously when formulating regulation.

The implications: A promising participatory experiment with lessons for the EU

Far from being a mere repetition of a well-worn topic, the initiative clearly demonstrates that the subject is of mutual relevance for both the EU and the Balkans, that it resonates with young people, and that they can make a useful contribution to the policy debate in both their own countries and Brussels. Furthermore, the technical means of holding the consultations online and the framing of the consultation questions turned out to be more than suitable for achieving meaningful results.

That said, not everything about the events went entirely smoothly. **The lack of resources** prevented the organisers from using a selection method that could ensure an appropriately balanced and diverse set of participants. Moreover, each group faced a **significant drop-out**, and in some countries, fewer than half of the expected participants logged in to the event. This not only reduced

the sample size but also **severely upset the balance of the consulted group**, which in most cases ended up heavily skewed towards women, those from urban areas and university students (over school students).

This demonstrates that it is not enough to ensure a suitable *selection* of citizens; it is just as important that the participants are motivated to *attend*. For example, paying an honorarium to participants could help resolve this issue – although it would naturally have consequences for the project budget. This was not financially possible for the Make Future Together project.

Furthermore, organisers in several countries encountered issues relating to fitting the consultations around school schedules. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the event was scheduled rather close to an important school

exam period, which may have influenced many selected students not to attend. This serves as a reminder that **choosing a suitable timeframe** to hold consultation events can be challenging and requires the organisers to consider all kinds of external factors that could potentially interfere with the exercise.

The project also proves that extensive expertise is not necessary to pull off a successful consultation exercise, provided that there is a **clear agenda script** for the moderators and/or facilitators to follow. Where technical challenges arose, such as using the polling feature on Zoom, the organisers needed quick responses, so the presence of **backup staff overseeing the technical side** of things was helpful.

As regards the content of the discussion, it is to their credit that the young people involved in this project engaged very deeply with the subject, which clearly

resonated with their interests and life experiences. Their reflections, on the whole, were fair, balanced and sophisticated. They demonstrated maturity and the capability to discuss sometimes complicated topics – including willingness to change their views and consider other perspectives raised by their peers. They seemed to have little difficulty in finding points of common ground and coming to consensus-oriented conclusions.

The young people involved in this project engaged very deeply with the subject, which clearly resonated with their interests and life experiences.

All aboard!

Clearly, this project is only one experiment with citizens' participation instruments in the Balkans. Nevertheless, it provides a recent, concrete and region-wide example of what is possible when the Balkan countries sync up their efforts, reach out to young people and take on important conversations. The results are overwhelmingly positive and speak for the potential of the region to play an active and constructive role if it were called upon to implement similar initiatives in the CoFoE context.

From a methodological point of view, the Make Future Together project brings clear evidence of the capacity of the Balkan countries to devise a respectable approach to citizens' consultations and apply it systematically throughout the region. Being able to repeat a participatory exercise in all the Balkan countries, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a remarkable achievement that underscores the region's ingenuity and courage to try out new processes successfully. If this is possible in the Balkans within the constraints of the time, resources and expertise of a single project, one can only imagine what the EU member states could accomplish together, with some goodwill and political support, under the CoFoE.

The standardised method used by the project for the consultations with young people also served to reinforce the merits of ensuring consistency across events and countries. By adopting similar means of participant selection, similar (and specific) questions for the agenda and similar reporting forms, the Make Future Together initiative proved how easy it becomes to compare across events and retrieve relevant input from discussions. In this sense, the Balkans can operate as a microcosm or testing ground for EU initiatives: a model applied successfully in all the countries of the region, which share little in the way of political structures, can likely be scaled up to a Union of 27 member states.

As regards the content, the young people participating in these consultations took an active interest in the topic and contributed valuable substance to the discussions. Their input suggests not only that the Balkan countries should be integrated more closely into the EU digital policy agenda, but also that the region can handle – and, indeed, *wants* to speak up on – contemporary issues of concern. From this perspective, this project helps to underscore that the EU and the Balkans are in the same boat. Only by rowing together will the two neighbours manage to advance in the same direction.¹⁵

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If the EU loses allies, such as in the Balkans, its power will ebb – no matter how much it reforms at home. The gates of accession might still be locked to the region, but the Balkan countries deserve a ticket on the CoFoE train. By welcoming the Balkans aboard, the EU would help build a future of solid and beneficial partnerships. And, like all great powers, it would demonstrate that it does not only preach, but can also learn from other countries.

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- ¹ See Stratulat, Corina and Milena Lazarevic (2020), [“The Conference on the Future of Europe: Is the EU still serious about the Balkans?”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ² The project is also implemented in partnership with the European Policy Centre (Belgium), Istituto Affari Internazionali (Italy) and Bronisław Geremek Foundation Centre (Poland). The six think tanks included in the Think for Europe Network are the European Policy Centre Belgrade (Serbia), Institute for Democracy and Mediation (Albania), Foreign Policy Initiative BH (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Group for Legal and Political Studies (Kosovo), Institute Alternative (Montenegro) and European Policy Institute (North Macedonia).
- ³ See MLADIRINI, [“MLADIRINI”](#) (accessed 23 April 2021).
- ⁴ See *Conference on the Future of Europe*, [“The future is in your hands”](#) (accessed 23 April 2021).
- ⁵ Butcher, Paul and Corina Stratulat (2019), [“Citizens expect: Lessons from the European Citizens’ Consultations”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre; Butcher, Paul and Corina Stratulat (2018), [“The European Citizens’ Consultations – Evaluation report”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁶ European Commission (2021), [Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), p.2.
- ⁷ Eurostat, [“Individuals – frequency of internet use \[isoc_ci_ifp_fu\]”](#) (accessed 23 April 2021).
- ⁸ See e.g. Butcher, Paul and Alberto-Horst Neidhardt (2020), [“Fear and lying in the EU: Fighting disinformation on migration with alternative narratives”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre; Butcher, Paul (2019), [“Disinformation and democracy: The home front in the information war”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁹ See e.g. Ivan, Paul (2019), [“Responding to cyberattacks: Prospects for the EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁰ See e.g. Crenna-Jennings, Whitney (2021), [“Young people’s mental and emotional health: Trajectories and drivers in childhood and adolescence”](#), London: Education Policy Institute; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018), [“Children & young people’s mental health in the digital age: Shaping the future”](#).
- ¹¹ The unemployment rate among people between 15 and 29 years of age in the Western Balkans lies between 20% and 30%, compared to the EU average of 12.5%. Eurostat, [“Youth unemployment rate by sex, age and country of birth \[yth_empl_100\]”](#) (accessed 25 April 2021). Some sources put the figure even higher, with the World Bank recording a rate of 34% for Bosnia and Herzegovina and 35.5% for North Macedonia for ages 15 to 24. *The World Bank*, [“Unemployment, youth total \(% of total labour force ages 15-24\) \(modeled ILO estimate\)”](#) (accessed 23 April 2021).
- ¹² See *European Court of Auditors*, [“Audit preview: EU action plan against disinformation”](#), 17 March 2020.
- ¹³ Stratulat, Corina; Marko Kmezić and Srdjan Majstorović (2019), [“The European Union and the Balkans: In the same boat”](#) in [“Yes, we should! EU priorities for 2019-2024”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre, Ch.13.

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