



Conference on the Future of Europe

Civic-Democratic Youth organized a live discussion, which was part of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The event took place in the conference room of the Permanent Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia and the European Parliament Liaison Office in Slovakia. The three speakers of the event were - Vladimír Bilčík (MEP), Peter Osuský (MP), Radovan Geist (Euractiv). In total, 25 young people, aged 15 to 45, attended the event. The discussion touched on three key topics: decision-making efficiency, democratic deficit, and ultimate goal (federation or union of strong national states). The aim of the Civic-Democratic Youth event was to develop a dialogue between the engaged young people and professionals on the future of Europe. The discussion was led by Martin Hochel from ODM, who asked the first two questions and then gave the floor to questions from the audience.

Policy proposals

- In case of violating the Copenhagen criteria setting European standards (like in Hungary and Poland) there should be sanctions given by EU in form of suspension of money or suspension of voting right in the Council of EU
- Social networks should have responsibility for their content and change algorithms to avoid promoting and spreading disinformation.
- In some fields of foreign policy, decision making should be by a qualified majority without veto right. For example when deciding on sanctions or standpoints about human rights violations, such as in Belarus or China.
- We propose building up closer regional defense cooperations, enlarging EU military, intelligence and counter-espionage capacities and prolonging key partnership with NATO countries.

Discussion summary

1. Expectations from the Conference (moderator)

According to *Bilčík*, it is important to take the conference seriously. It should be taken seriously especially by the EU member states. *Geist* added that the European Union has changed much since the Lisbon Treaty. The EU institutions have powers they did not have before. Therefore, there should also be a change in the treaties, without which we will not move. We should also talk about the goals of the conference. Today, the discussion is not about the "United States of Europe". The most important thing is to deepen the cooperation in those areas, where it could be more effective in result. This applies to the foreign policy, for example. *Osuský* does not consider the idea of the "United States of Europe" as a good idea as well.

2. Changes in electoral rules - transnational candidates for the European elections, election criterion at least 16 years for voters, direct election of the President of the Commission (moderator)

Bilčík is against the idea of having transnational candidates for the European elections. According to him the transnational candidates are not the answer, as it would mean social engineering from above. It is important to have your own constituency that the candidates represent. He cannot imagine what an election campaign would look like, whose voters they would target, and in what language the campaign would be conducted. In addition, it is important to send a signal to smaller countries that there is a place for them in the EU. He does not oppose the idea of the voting age 16 criterion for the European elections. There is already such a criterion in Austria, but he does not think that it will solve the low turnout of young people in Slovakia. MEP *Bilčík* welcomes the fact that the election of the president of the European Commission is partly in our hands and partly in the hands of the member states.

3. What is the future of the EU with regards to the infringement process on Hungary and Poland, which was launched by the EU Commission? (participant)

Osuský said that The EU should respect the will of the electorate, which it expressed in the democratic elections. "Let us admit that different representatives can be elected in the world," said *Osuský*. He stressed that the most important thing is to have the opportunity to have another regular election, in which voters have the opportunity to vote for change. *Bilčík* opposed that and is worried about the fair opportunity to vote for change in Hungary, due to the lack of freedom of press, fair media, and functioning institutions. Hungary is moving away from the EU project, as well as Poland. If the governments of the member states do not respect the decisions of their institutions and their constitutional courts, then we have a big problem. There is a thin line between punishing the whole society and punishing only the specific people who are responsible for non-democratic policies. We must stick to our European rules in these countries as well. *Geist* added that the V4 is a good platform for building cross-border and trade relations. It is very important to have the same right in every European country, but unfortunately in Hungary and Poland human rights are not respected. There is a need to punish Hungarian and Polish regimes for that. It could be done by tools such as suspension of money or suspension of voting rights in the Council of EU. Orbán draws a significant amount of EU money, which he abuses.

4. How should we deal with the problem of disinformation? (participant)

According to *Bilčík*, disinformation is a significant topic even in the European Parliament. Disinformation is a grey area, but it is not explicitly illegal. A disinformation campaign can be dangerous, as we have seen in the case of Brexit, for example. We need to have rules according to which the social networks will have much more responsibility for the content. Should it take place, the speed of the propaganda will not be as fast as it is today. Freedom of speech will be preserved, as will our right to have access to high quality and relevant information. The solution is to change the algorithms. Likewise, it is necessary to promote greater priority for the dissemination of content that has long-term credible informative value on the part of certified media. *Osuský* said that it will be just about moving the responsibility for dealing with disinformation to the social networks. He does not believe in an institutional method that will rid us of disinformation. He considers it as an utopia.

5. Are you not afraid of abusing these tools to control disinformation? What will be the difference between the censoring in China and regulating disinformation in the EU? (participant)

Bilčík agreed that freedom of speech is key to democracy. We must not have a ministry of truth. Hoaxes and propaganda were always here. What has changed is the space for their spreading. We now have regulation for traditional media, the banking sector, and transport, but we do not have regulations for social networks. The speed of disinformation needs to be regulated. We should improve our quality of life whilst not depriving our rights to freedom of speech. *Geist* added that hoaxes are promoted because of algorithms. We need to force social network owners to bear responsibility for them. Freedom of speech is absolutely essential for liberal democracy, and regulation of social networks is not censorship. When someone takes benefits in the form of profit from owning a social network, they should also be responsible for it.

6. Should the powers of the European High Representative for Foreign Affairs be strengthened or abolished? Because currently we have a relatively weak foreign policy. (participant)

We created this position, thus, it should have all the seriousness and weight that it does not currently have according to *Bilčík*. We generally lack attention to security threats in the EU institutions. There are areas where we should vote on by qualified majority. The Hungarian position often delays us, for example in relation to what is happening in China and in Hong Kong. Our advantage should be in that we can rely on that common European position.

7. Don't you think it's time to dust off the idea of a defense union or a common security service? (participant)

Bilčík said that it is time to think about a common EU defence. We must rely on NATO, but we also see more space for closer European cooperation. According to *Geist* this is no longer a question of the EU or NATO. Today, EU countries are investing more in defence than 10 years ago, because we realized that we live in a world where there are more threats. The interests of the United States are no longer just in the EU, and they are asking EU countries for more money for defence. *Osuský* added that when it comes to defence cooperation, much could be done about it. There could be closer cooperation in countering the threats of terrorist acts. We should look at the examples of countries that are exposed to these threats and are managing them well, like Israel.