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Parliamentary Dimension
of the Estonian Presidency
of the Council of the
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Conference of the Speakers of the European Union Parliaments
23–24 April 2018, Tallinn

Background Information

Session I: The Future of the European Union

In the Conclusions of the EU Speakers Conference in April 2017, the Speakers recognised that "The EU has proved to be the best existing common instrument we have to address the various challenges we are facing today." Fundamentally, this is the spirit in which the year has passed. Instead of asking whether the EU has any value in addressing common European problems, the discussion is focused on what the EU *could* and *should* do to better respond to the challenges that Europe is facing.

Framework for the discussion
In March 2017, the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome provided a point of reflection for the Union. With the Rome Declaration, the leaders of 27 Member States and EU Institutions initiated the discussion on the future of the EU and confirmed their commitment to make the Union stronger and more resilient. The European Council further contributed to the debate with the Leaders' Agenda, a work programme that brings together the heads of state and government to find solutions to complex challenges such as migration, the Eurozone reform, and the post-2020 MFF. As the EP elections in May 2019 are a critical signpost for the Union, the Leader's Agenda work programme will conclude around that time.

In order to provide a more robust framework for the debate, the Commission issued the White Paper on the Future of Europe, which outlines five possible scenarios for the EU by 2025 as follows: (1) carrying on; (2) nothing but the single market; (3) doing more with those who want more do more; (4) doing less more efficiently; and (5) doing much more together. The White Paper is supplemented by a series of reflection papers on topics ranging from the social dimension to the future of European defence. In addition to that, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the Commission, presented the 'sixth scenario' and outlined various other noteworthy ideas for the future of Europe in his annual State of the EU speech in September 2017.

National Parliaments and the EP have also made significant contributions to furthering the debate on the future of the EU, particularly through establishing new formats to better involve citizens in the discussions. Besides reaching out to the public directly, the EP is organising a series of debates between EU leaders and MEPs on Europe's future. In February 2017, the EP set out its vision for the future of the EU, with increasing EU's capacity, restoring trust, and strengthening the euro zone economy outlined as key priorities.

Central issues in the discussion
While a proper framework is necessary for a constructive and inclusive debate on a topic as multi-layered as the future of the EU, it is the substantive matters and policy issues that lie at the heart of the discussion. Below is a brief and inconclusive list of some of the topics that have been recurring in previous debates.

Several studies (for instance, by Eurobarometer) indicate that Europeans feel the **need for greater safety and security** and want the EU to do more in this field. This expectation goes beyond keeping its own citizens safe; increasingly, Europeans want an EU that promotes peace, prosperity, and stability on the global stage. The Union has shown its ability to adapt itself and to address the concerns of its citizens. The decision by the Commission to launch the European Defence Fund in July 2017, and the one by the

Council to establish the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in December in the same year, bear testament to this.

Ever since its establishment, **economic and monetary issues** have had an important place in the EU's agenda. The Roadmap for Deepening the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was set out by the Commission in December 2017, with the goal of enhancing the unity, efficiency and democratic accountability of Europe's EMU. Looking further ahead, the EU's MFF post-2020 will depend heavily on the results of the discussion on the future of the EU. Debates and public consultations for preparing the new MMF are underway.

The Tallinn Digital Summit, held in September 2017, demonstrated that Member States acknowledge the importance of **digital and technological** development in the EU. The Summit was held with the future in mind: one of the goals outlined in the Conclusions of the Summit was making Europe a truly digital continent by 2025. Just as important as digital development is tackling unemployment, poverty, and discrimination, and fighting for **equal opportunities, particularly for the young and vulnerable**. Leaders of the EU affirmed their commitment to creating a fairer Europe by signing the European Pillar of Social Rights in November 2017.

In March 2017, the government of the **United Kingdom** invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union to **formally start the process of leaving the EU**. A few weeks after that, the Speakers expressed hope for a "fair, balanced and transparent negotiation process" in the Conclusions of the EU Speakers Conference. In December 2017, after the EP welcomed the joint EU-UK progress on Brexit talks, the European Council in an EU-27 format took the decision to move the negotiations to the second phase. In March 2018, the EP recommended regulating future EU-UK relations through an association agreement.

Last but not least, the issue of **lack of trust of the public towards the EU** continues to require serious attention. While the year 2017 brought electoral success for pro-European parties in several EU countries, there is a significant number of Europeans who do not trust or support the EU. In February 2018, Maria Demertzis from Bruegel, a European think tank, argued that the lack of trust is the key obstacle to EU reforms. Referring to the common misconception that the EU spends most of its budget on administrative and personnel costs, Ms Demertzis stated, "In the long run, there cannot be such a severe disconnect between what the EU does and what people believe it does, without threatening its very existence."

National Parliaments have a special role and ability to connect with the citizens and to explain to them what the EU is, what it does, and how it benefits the Member States. In the future, the EU will have to not only communicate with its citizens more, but also better, and parliaments should be at the forefront of this effort.

Some points for discussion:

1) How to make sure that the discussions on the future of the EU will yield results that are truly helpful and valuable in determining the direction of the Union?
2) What are some of the most important policy areas that should form the core of the debate?
3) What actions can national parliaments and the EP undertake to communicate with the public more and better?
4) How to ensure that the citizens' input into the future of the EU debate will be properly addressed and their highest priorities put into action? (Particularly after the EP elections in May 2019.)