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The Slovenian Presidency of Council of the EU

Towards the Post-Pandemic Europe

After Portugal, the presidency of the Council of the EU moved from the Iberian Peninsula to the Balkan Peninsula as Slovenia took it over on 1 July 2021. Its presiding over the Union will round off the work of its co-members of the Trio, Germany and Portugal, whose key task was to better facilitate efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. As both Germany and Portugal have achieved positive results in putting Europe back on its feet, Slovenia's presidency will concentrate on setting the ground for the development of a post-pandemic Europe. However, it does not mean that Slovenia will have an easy job; on the contrary, there are many pressing issues that the Council will need to deal with. This Insight aims to uncover what lies behind its motto "[Together. Resilient. Europe](#)", while analysing how its presidency will shape the EU, as well as the enlargement policy, in the second half of 2021.

Through Lessons Learnt Towards Structural Improvements

As the Portuguese presidency came to an end, Slovenia has taken over the rudder of the Council. It does so for the second time since joining the EU, more than any other EU member state since the 'Bing Bang' enlargement of 2004. This time around, however, its presidency arrives under more difficult circumstances. As was the case with the Portuguese presidency that preceded it, Slovenia's key focus is on building a more resilient Europe in the context of the ongoing health crisis. In fact, the word *resilience* is the key expression that dominates the Slovenian presidency [programme](#).

This showcases the new reality brought upon Europe by the pandemic, especially when compared to the pre-pandemic Presidencies, such as the Finnish in the second half of 2019, whose [programme](#) barely and only referred to resilience in terms of safety against hybrid and cyber threats. As times have changed, and the EU's priorities adapted accordingly, Slovenia will have it on its shoulders to encourage further reflection on the lessons learnt from the pandemic and to see whether and in which directions the EU can evolve in order to prevent future crises from taking place.

Health Crisis and Resilience

In order to make sure lessons are indeed learnt from the fight against the pandemic, Slovenia will conduct a [comprehensive review](#) of the COVID-19 crisis since its inception. As the pandemic has revealed gaps in foresight, including demand/supply dimensions, preparedness, and response tools, the idea behind the review is to focus on exploring how to improve the EU's ability to anticipate and deal effectively with crisis situations which, due to their nature or their extent, exceed the capacity of individual member states to manage them. Besides focusing on fostering action at the EU level, the challenge will be to simultaneously focus on strengthening the capacity, sustainability, and resilience of the healthcare systems of the member states. To that end, Slovenia plans to make progress on the legal framework for cooperation between member states in the face of serious cross-border health threats, including the preparation of pandemic preparedness plans and coordination mechanisms. Taking action in this area has become warranted as the pandemic has demonstrated the need for coordinated EU level action to respond to health emergencies.



With the process of mitigating the effects of the pandemic still ongoing, Slovenia will prioritise the kick-off of discussions on a legislative proposal to establish the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA). Its importance lies in the fact that it would aim to facilitate better EU readiness and response to serious cross-border health threats by enabling rapid availability, access, and distribution of needed countermeasures. Considering the existing gaps and the EU's [unpreparedness](#) at the onset of the health crisis, Slovenia may be expected to strongly advocate for swift agreement on HERA between EU institutions, whereas its exact remit will be [set out](#) in a legislative proposal later this year. Once it is adopted and put into force, it is expected to become one of the central elements for strengthening the European Health Union, as well as Europe's overall strategic autonomy.

Putting the Economy back on its Feet

Economic recovery is another priority that has emerged from the pandemic. The idea is to better tie such a recovery to the green transition and digital transformation of the EU, all the while taking into account the demographic challenges. To that extent, stimulating investment through the provision of substantial funding under the new 2021-27 [Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (MFF), in particular via the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) (the Facility), will become of utmost importance as the intention of these instruments is to help member states to overcome challenges caused by the pandemic, restart the economy, and achieve societal recovery. In that regard, Slovenia, as a presiding member state, will facilitate and make every effort to ensure that procedures for approving national recovery and resilience plans are completed as soon as possible. So far, all but one member state have [submitted](#) their recovery and resilience plans, while 18 of them have already been [approved](#) by the Commission. Judging by the speed of submitting and approving the plans, it seems like both the member states, and the Commission together with the Council, have taken the necessity for a swift recovery seriously, which is why no significant impediments are expected.

Turning the Pandemic into a Geopolitical Opportunity

On top of the health and economic issues, the pandemic has also revealed geopolitical vulnerabilities of the EU, particularly due to its dependency on importing vital goods. Here, diversification of sources of supply in the health sector comes to the forefront, particularly as the EU is currently ["extremely dependent"](#) on China in terms of imports of a number of products precisely from this sector, among others. For this reason, the Slovenian Presidency intends to intensify the debate on boosting the autonomy of the EU in certain strategic areas, such as the supply of medicines, vaccines, and medical equipment. This further increases the importance of the aforementioned HERA initiative. Other relevant areas that require solidification include industrial policy and energy, as well as food supply, which is why the implementation of the renewed [Industrial Strategy](#) will also be of high importance in the next six months.

What makes Slovenia's facilitation of these reforms even more warranted is the fact that its Presidency comes at a time when EU-China relations have reached a new low.¹ In fact, the European Parliament remains adamant in [refusing](#) to ratify the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investments, originally reached in December 2020, while also calling for measures against the distortive effects of foreign subsidies. At the same time, the EU is still suspicious of China's proactive [mask and vaccine diplomacy](#), particularly as its foreign service appears to have neither the resources nor the authority to effectively counter [hybrid attacks](#) coming from China. As the EU will go through a process of [reviewing](#) its relationship with China in the second half of the year, as announced by the High Representative for EU Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, it is expected that Slovenia's role will be to ["generate some unity"](#), particularly as individual member states' positions still [diverge](#) from the EU's common position. Considering Slovenia's willingness to play a [positive role](#) in terms of bridging the gaps between the EU and China, it is expected that it will pursue ["a positive sum approach"](#) – balancing between the necessity to economically engage with China and to protect the Union from potential risks stemming from this cooperation between the two giants.

Putting Resilience into a Wider Perspective

Overall, Slovenia's overarching prioritisation of boosting Europe's resilience represents a clear continuation of efforts started by its Trio partners in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysed development and interconnectedness between different initiatives in this area - such as the HERA, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and the Industrial Strategy - represent initiatives derived from the lessons learnt so far and are meant for structural improvements of the EU. As all these initiatives are still in development, or are at the early stages of implementation, Slovenia will have an important role in terms of overseeing how these initiatives are brought to life. As such these can be seen as long-term measures which are supposed to usher the path towards further evolution of the Union, particularly in terms of building a Health Union. The breakthrough made during Slovenia's term will also set the stage for the upcoming Trio (France, Czech Republic, and Sweden) to take over the prioritisation of building resilient Europe by focusing on ensuring the adopted legislative proposals are swiftly, fully, and effectively implemented.

1. The latest stumbling block consists of the fact that China imposed sanctions on several European entities and political representatives, including five members of the European Parliament and the Subcommittee on Human Rights, as a [retaliatory act](#) in response to the EU decision to enact restrictive measures against four Chinese officials over human rights abuses against the Muslim Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region.

Conference on the Future of Europe: Setting the Stage for Changes

Big changes require mutual understanding. That is why the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (CotFoE) bears so much significance, as it aims to facilitate bottom-up solutions to the existing challenges. As the duration of the Conference was shortened, from the original two-year period to only one year, the role of Slovenia during this time becomes all the more important. In fact, Slovenia will have a transitional role in organising the Conference as part of the [Joint Presidency and the Executive Board](#),² together with the European Parliament and the European Commission. If Portugal was responsible for kickstarting the Conference, Slovenia's key responsibility will be to ensure that European discussions run smoothly. In fact, the smoother the talks are during the Slovenian presidency, the easier it will be for the subsequent French presidency to facilitate the adoption of the final recommendations for the development of the Union.

Besides coordinating the event as a co-chair, the central event of the Slovenian Presidency, which will aim to contribute to the Conference, will be the 16th [Bled Strategic Forum](#) to be held at the beginning of September under the title "The Future of Europe". Its aim is to be a profound consideration of the issues, risks, and opportunities lying ahead for Europe, particularly in the areas of enlargement, tourism, decarbonisation, digitalisation, and foreign policy and security. Although Slovenia traditionally organises the annual Bled Strategic Forum, this year it will have added value as it will be organised in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe. This year's Forum becomes even more important considering that Slovenia has a rare and unique opportunity to simultaneously co-organise the Conference and provide an original contribution to it.

What could be another contribution of Slovenia to the Conference is a broader inclusion of the Western Balkans in the debates. For Slovenian political representatives, their participation in the Convention for the Future of Europe in the early 2000s is still a fresh memory. Although still a candidate country two decades ago, participation in the Convention was a significant step on its successful path of EU integration. At that time, all candidates were included in the Convention. Although the six candidates and potential candidates have not received the official invitation to participate in the Conference, the EU has managed to [crack the door open](#) just so the civil society organisations and citizens of the Western Balkans could also participate with their European counterparts at the [Conference digital platform](#). Slovenia will therefore have the opportunity to explore [additional possibilities](#) to actively engage the civil society of the Western Balkans in the debates and thus extend the talks on Europe's future beyond the borders of the EU.

The (Im)Probable Prioritisation of Rule of Law

Besides the talks on the recovery from the pandemic and the Conference on the Future of Europe, talks on strengthening the rule of law are also expected to remain on the EU's agenda in the second half of 2021. Bearing in mind Poland's [recent refusal to adhere](#) to the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU and Hungary's passing of an [anti-LGBT law](#), it is fair to say that some of the key European values are under serious threat in these two member states. In fact, taking action in the area of the rule of law will remain a topic of discussion during Slovenia's Presidency, as the Commission published, in July 2021, the [rule of law reports](#) for each member state – continuing the practice established a year before with the aim of making the EU's rule of law framework more robust. As these reports require that follow-up actions are taken to address the identified hurdles, Slovenia will have the opportunity to coordinate the discussions between member states, as well as between the Council and the European Parliament, on the Commission's report on the rule of law situation in the EU, including national chapters.

However, despite the fact that Slovenia prioritises rule of law in its [presidency programme](#), it will not have an easy job convincing other stakeholders in the EU that its dedication to this issue is genuine. This is the case as its leadership has witnessed quite heavy [criticism](#) for undemocratic tendencies. In fact, the accusations range from putting [political pressure on the judicial system](#), and over [hindering the work of the Office of the European Public Prosecutor \(EPPO\)](#), to [eroding media freedom](#) and [narrowing the civil society space](#). Due to these accusations, Slovenia is lately increasingly being put in the same basket as Poland and Hungary – countries dubbed as ["illiberal democracies"](#). Considering such an unfavourable context, and due to fears that it might steer the discussion away from the rule of law, or simply ignore it, it is reasonable to expect that its presidency will be under the watchful eyes of European stakeholders and international watchdogs.

A New Hope for the Western Balkan Enlargement?

Slovenia has positioned the EU's relations with the Western Balkans high on the political agenda. In fact, the Western Balkans are mentioned as many as 21 times in Slovenia's programme, which stands in stark contrast to the [Portuguese](#) and [German](#) programmes – which mention the region three times and once, respectively. This allowed Slovenia to highlight the region not only from the perspective of external relations, as its other Trio partners did, but also to provide an outlook on how to engage with the region in a comprehensive manner. The areas in which the Western Balkans are referred to include cybersecurity and hybrid threats, fight against human trafficking and other forms of organised cross-border crime, common foreign and security policy, migration management and police cooperation, connectivity and transport,

2. The Conference is placed under the authority of the three institutions, represented by the President of the European Parliament, the President of the Council, and the President of the European Commission, acting as its Joint Presidency. The Joint Presidency is supported by an Executive Board, which is responsible for taking decisions by consensus regarding the work of the Conference, its processes and events, overseeing the Conference as it progresses, and preparing the meetings of the Conference Plenary, including citizens' input and their follow up.

research and innovation, social affairs and youth, and health. In other words, Slovenia will indeed attempt to share with other member states its vision of the Western Balkans as an essential piece of the puzzle when it comes to boosting Europe's recovery, resilience, and strategic autonomy.

In order to maximise cooperation with the region as its closest neighbour – not just geographically, but also politically – Slovenia has a chance to use the coming six months to finally break the year and a half long impasse in enlargement policy and to set the EU's engagement in the region on a new course. The priority of getting the enlargement rolling is not just a matter of Slovenian national interests, but rather the urgency to prevent the EU from losing its edge due to further stalling of the enlargement process. This becomes particularly relevant, having in mind that external actors, such as China and Russia, have been showing an increased interest in the Western Balkans region lately. As geopolitics is something that to an extent defines the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans, it may be expected for Slovenia to remind the rest of the partners in the EU of this circumstance and thus nudge them into investing more of their time and efforts into the region.

The fact that Slovenia will strongly prioritise the Western Balkan EU enlargement during its presidency will also make it more difficult for the countries of the region to continue simply simulating reforms. In other words, putting them in the spotlight shrinks the space for the governments in the region to continue with window dressing of the reforms. For that reason, the countries where there has been little reform progress lately should use the opportunity to demonstrate their full commitment to the reforms on their path to the EU. If they fail to do so under Slovenia's watch, a country which strongly and openly prioritises enlargement, their window of opportunity will significantly narrow down under the subsequent French Presidency. This is likely to be the case considering that France will have, as one of the most influential member states, a very busy agenda, while having to think about organising the French elections and wrapping up the Conference on the Future of Europe. In other words, as enlargement is unlikely to be as high on France's agenda as it is on Slovenia's, the reforms in the region need to be demonstrated sooner rather than later.

The key determinant of Slovenia's presidency in terms of enlargement will be the potential and long-overdue decision to give North Macedonia and Albania the start of accession negotiations that they have already merited according to the rules the EU itself has set. Yet, as Bulgaria is still insisting on its unilateral veto substantively unrelated to the Macedonian accession agenda, it remains unclear whether, when, and how this hurdle will be overcome. On its own, Slovenia does not have significant power to change the impasse. Nevertheless, the fact it has managed to put an EU-Western Balkan Summit on the agenda of the highest political leaders nevertheless creates a window of opportunity. The fact it has decided to organise the Summit is all the more impressive considering the ongoing health crisis and the requirements needed for the smooth facilitation of the Conference on the Future of Europe. If these high-level talks between the EU and WB leaders, which are to be held in Brdo in October 2021, do not result in any tangible and concrete change, it is unlikely that other Presidencies will be able to change much. As the impasse has lasted for over a year now, Slovenia's abilities to handle diverging sides and strike compromises will be of the utmost importance.

What can also make Slovenia stand out is the fact that it has a unique opportunity to work on out-of-the-box solutions to the identified enlargement impasse. In fact, there appears to be a growing number of those recognising that the binary 'in or out' concept of membership has become obsolete for a region that has been on its path towards the EU already for two decades. That is why the [proposal](#) to work towards permitting partial and progressive membership in stages, based on the achieved level of progress based on a more detailed, coherent, and quantifiable methodology for rating performance in relation to better specified conditionalities, appears to be gaining increasing traction. As Slovenia spearheads the Conference on the Future of Europe, it has solid ground and a timely opportunity to put the full development of these ideas on the agenda. By doing so, Slovenia can pave the way for creating additional incentives for regional leaders to engage in comprehensive reforms, all while providing concrete benefits to citizens.

3. To that extent, think tanks from the region and the EU, the Think for Europe Network (TEN) and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), have already made a joint plea in the wake of the Slovenian presidency to use the untapped potential of the revised enlargement methodology as a stepping stone towards transforming and accelerating the process.

About the European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance;
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness;
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy;
- 4) Europe&us.