

Introduction

It is wrong to give up an endeavour just because its implementation encounters a series of difficulties. Guided by this thought, we overcame the numerous obstacles to organising the Eighth international conference of the Department of European Studies to Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski dedicated to „The Call for more Europe – ambitions and realities“. We have sought inspiration from the founding fathers, whose wisdom we always turn to when looking for answers to difficult questions. Jean Monnet helped us with his statement: „We are in a crisis. This is a good sign, because the opposite would mean that we are not changing anything.“

Discussing the future of Europe in times of crisis is very necessary. Three prerequisites will predetermine the outcome of the efforts to imagine and to create the future of the European Union: active citizens, committed experts and academics, and courageous politicians. The participation of experts and academics is undoubtedly important because they are expected to analyse, to discuss, to identify weaknesses, to criticize, to propose solutions, to be creative. The desired future of Europe could not happen without the involvement of academic expertise. Yes, the role of citizens and the academic community in shaping Europe's future is undoubtedly important, but overcoming existing problems can only be done through strong political will and the desire of European leaders to breathe new life into the European project with sustainable results. Learning lessons from the past and correcting the mistakes of the present are the first step to the future. This step should be taken by the politicians. In other words, we need not only active citizens and academic expertise, we need wise and brave politicians.

It is necessary to accept the fact that there is a new political reality in the European Union and a pragmatic approach should be applied. The future of the European Union depends on an adequate response to the realities of the 21st century and on the ambitions how to move integration forward. Overcoming contradictions, disputes and differences on specific issues and challenges posed by the real life can only be achieved by a strong motivation to build a genuine union. In this sense, the future of the European Union depends on several basic preconditions, expressed in the ability to develop the economy of knowledge, to meet the challenges of energy dependence and population aging, the ability to compete on the global market, the ability to be flexible in order to find the right combination of active labour market policy, flexibility, effective training and social protection; the ability to strike the right balance between openness and protection, the ability to think big, not only in a European but also in a global dimension. We need to strengthen the Union, having a fresh look and new approach.

More Europe or less Europe – is that really the question? How can we continue not only being together, but also to work successfully together? Or the question is rather how to find the balance between ambitions and realities in order to move forward together? During the conference, speakers from Bulgaria, Belgium, Germany, France, Romania and Serbia raised a number of specific issues for discussion –

differentiated integration, strategic autonomy, public communication, money laundering, fiscal union, lessons learnt from Brexit, the future of the EU enlargement, etc. Special attention was paid to the civic education, the European identity, the European values. The deliberations were inspired by new ideas and academic creativity. Thanks to all the speakers and participants, the conference was a fruitful event to discuss, to draw lessons, to imagine, to dream.

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We are going through difficult times. I can't but remind once again the inspirer Jean Monnet, encouraging his collaborators with the simple but sincere phrase: „We continue, we continue, we continue...“. This was the rationale and the spirit of the conference „The call for more Europe - ambitions and realities“.

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