



Wilfried
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**The Potential Outcome of the
Conference on the Future of
Europe in a COVID-19 World:**

IN FOCUS

Strengthening European Democracy

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Summary

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Initially planned for 2020, the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe has been postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic. Scheduled to run for two years, this conference will bring together European institutions, civil society representatives, and citizens of all ages to debate on the future of Europe. Thus, this conference has the great merit of facing the issue of citizen participation, confirming the constant desire of strengthening European democracy. Similarly to the European Convention on the Future of Europe, this conference would also include citizen consultations, supported by a digital platform allowing online debates and contributions.

Although it is difficult to predict the concrete outcome of this conference, major changes are not expected, but rather more reform proposals on the EU's architecture and its decision-making processes, which will lead to deeper European integration. However, before the conference can start, the three main EU institutions must still agree on its modalities and, importantly, its chairmanship. It clearly reveals that the main difficulties barring the road to the conference are not of a technical nature, but rather political.

Nonetheless, launching the conference as soon as possible would be a tangible, major achievement, confirming that democracy is still fully functional in Europe, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. It would confirm the European Union as an advanced democracy, and probably the biggest democracy in the world.

Keywords Future of Europe – Conference - Stakes – Set Up – Outcome - Strengthening Democracy



Introduction

In the context of this pandemic, thinking about the future of Europe takes on even greater meaning. Initially planned by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the project of the Conference on the Future of Europe has the great merit of facing the problematic of citizen participation in the European political system.

This conference was supposed to be launched in 2020 and run for two years, bringing together European institutions, civil society representatives, and European citizens of all ages. Nevertheless, the pandemic crisis has now brought so many uncertainties regarding the practical organisation of this conference that its main stakes have to be reaffirmed, and its setup, timing, and potential outcomes have to be rethought.

Main stakes

When Ursula Von der Leyen took over the Presidency of the European Commission in December 2019, one of her main concerns was improving citizen participation in the European Union, and above all, restoring faith in democracy in Europe. It has to be clearly stated that this Commission has chosen to tackle a huge challenge, to say nothing of the pandemic crisis.

The ideal conception of a living democracy includes the existence of a high degree of citizen participation in the political system. That being said, low turnout in each European election seems to be one of the characteristics of the European political system. Since the first election for the Members of the European Parliament in 1979, except for the last one in 2019, turnout decreased with each election, reaching less than fifty percent in 2014. In 2019, turnout was slightly higher than fifty percent.

Even if nowadays, a low turnout can be found in all democratic political systems, with different potential meanings and causes, it remains a tension element and a form of criticism towards the EU's institutional configuration. Concretely, even if these figures must be put into perspective, they create a tension between citizen participation and the stakes of the EU institutional development.



Through the years, the European Commission tried to address this situation by developing different types of activities, with varying degrees of success, to inform citizens, explain the EU, and even debate about Europe. More precisely, under the last three Presidencies, the Commission organised different types of debates and/or citizens' consultations on the future of Europe. Under Barroso's Presidency, Citizens' Dialogues were organised in every EU member state. Then, the Citizens' Consultations organised during Juncker's Presidency led to the release of the white paper on the Future of Europe in March 2017.

Moreover, online citizen consultations and dialogues have been undertaken, and some are still in progress, like the European Citizens' initiatives, which allow citizens to propose new EU laws tied to the Portfolio of the Vice-President for Values and Transparency.

Thus, entrusting the mission of organising a Conference on the Future of Europe to a Vice-President for Democracy and Demography embodies this European Commission's ambition to improve the participation of citizens in the EU political system. It also concretises President von der Leyen's conception that "European citizens must play a leading and active part in building our Union", by improving participation in EU democracy.

The conference setup

Once the decision has been taken to organise this conference, an important point remains to clarify: the setup. The European Commission Vice-President, Dubravka Šuica, has the responsibility to find a way to set up a complex architecture, allowing a wide range of participants to engage in a large number of citizens' consultations, while offering the possibility to contribute and/or debate online. It is clearly not an easy task. The pandemic makes this even harder.

President von der Leyen made clear that the Vice-President for Demography and Democracy has to work closely with the Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, Maroš Šefčovič, and the Vice-President for Values and Transparency, Věra Jourová, who is also chairing the Commissioners' Group on a New Push for European Democracy. It implies a high level of coordination between these three Commissioners and within the institution to define, realise, and manage the conference and all the activities related to it.



Ursula von der Leyen has already drawn some lines on the composition of the conference, emphasising the importance of interinstitutional cooperation¹. Concretely, the Commission has to work closely with the European Parliament and the Council to agree on the concept, structure, timing and scope of the conference. She also stressed that the widest possible participation has to be ensured in order for Europeans to shape the outcome of the conference. Then, she added that the ways to make in-person or online participation as easy and as accessible as possible have to be explored.

On the other hand, the European Parliament created a working group composed of representatives of all political groups, a representative of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, and chaired by President Sassoli to prepare the conference and draw up proposals and an organisational framework.

In 2019, the Parliament stressed that citizens of all backgrounds, civil society representatives, and stakeholders at European, national, regional, and local level must be involved in setting the EU's priorities in line with citizens' concerns in a bottom-up, transparent, inclusive, participatory, and well-balanced approach. The Parliament believes that the conference is to offer a new type of format which would be an inclusive platform to offer new ways for citizens to express their main concerns and have them directly taken into account in the work of the institutions.

More precisely, in a resolution dated 15 January 2020, the Parliament indicated that a high-level patronage should be ensured by “the three main EU institutions at the highest level”, and should guarantee the process, providing for its oversight as well. The Parliament also outlined that the diversity of European societies should be fully represented and youth participation would be an essential part of the long-lasting impact of the conference².

Moreover, on 4 December 2020, the President of the European Committee of the Regions and the Presidents of European Associations of local and regional governments released a political declaration stressing

¹ Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission. 16 July 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_4230.

² European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe (2019/2990(RSP)) - P9_TA (2020)0010 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html.



the need to reinforce European democracy at all levels of government and bring Europe closer to its people³. In their view, the Conference on the Future of Europe is an important opportunity to offer citizens a true dialogue based on their needs, and it should start as soon as possible with representatives of this EU advisory body and European Associations of local and regional public authorities.

Furthermore, the European Economic and Social Committee and the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council have already co-organised a debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe and the role of economic and social councils in 2020. This meeting was established both in view of the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2022. It was also the occasion to once again confirm the high interest expressed by the representatives of the economic and social councils to participate in the debates on the Future of Europe.

Additionally, as this conference is supposed to tackle major European challenges such as economic recovery, climate change, the fight against poverty, social exclusion, etc., non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations are supposed to participate and contribute to the debates on the Future of Europe. Through the EU stakeholders dialogue set up by the European Commission, NGOs are already engaged in regular dialogue with public authorities, with the view of ensuring better implementation of EU initiatives and policies in EU countries. Therefore, an active participation/contribution of NGOs in the debate on the future of Europe must be actively expected.

Finally, the main European political parties, as democratically legitimate mediators between citizens and opinion leaders, have already begun to reflect on the future of Europe and would certainly be active contributors to the debates and reflections of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Something else which conference organisers have had to deal with lately is the participation of EU candidate countries. Voices have already been raised on this issue in strong support for the full participation of representatives from EU candidate countries in the meetings and debates

³ Political declaration of the President of the European Committee of the Regions and the Presidents of European Associations of local and regional governments. 4 December 2020. https://cor.europa.eu/en/documents/CoR_EuropeanAssociations_PoliticalDeclaration_final.pdf.



of the Conference of the Future of Europe. Even if the participation of candidate countries seems all but assured, this raised the sensitive unresolved question of Turkey's participation, in the context of widespread tension with the country, despite its candidate country status.

Therefore, as for the European Convention on the Future of Europe, this conference would have to be composed of representatives from the EU Member States, the national parliaments of the Member States, Members of the European Parliament, the European Commission, but also the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. In addition, representatives of EU candidate countries and civil society organisations must be able to actively participate in this important event for establishing a clearer picture of the future.

While it is not easy to organise large public events, bringing together representatives and citizens from all the European and candidate countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has made their establishment while trying to combat the spread of the virus even more complicated.

Thanks to information and communication technologies, the so-called digital technologies, a digital platform offering access to all participants wishing to fully intervene and contribute to the debates on the Future of Europe could easily be created. Moreover, thanks to its previous citizen consultations and debates, the European Commission has the capacities and all the competencies to develop and manage a digital platform which would support and allow stakeholders to exchange, debate, and provide contributions to improve participation in the European democratic process. This is far from being the main difficulty.

As if to complicate matters, debates and consultations at national, regional, and local level are to be expected, which intend to reinforce the democratic aspect of the overall conference. This creates an active involvement of EU national, regional, and local public authorities in the general process. Furthermore, it is also expected that civil society organisations could take the initiative to organise debates, providing input to the overall conversation. Dedicated grants are meant to be made available to support the achievements of all these public consultations, and a secretariat would be created to support all the activities related to the implementation of the conference.



In other words, due to its organisation and composition, the Conference on the Future of Europe will have great similarities with the European Convention on the Future of Europe, chaired by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 2002. The key difference would be that this conference would also include national and local consultations supported by a digital platform, allowing online debate and contributions from stakeholders.

One of the most important remaining talking and blocking points to be addressed at the highest level is the chairmanship and its composition. A collegial presidency composed with a member of the three main EU Institutions would be the best solution to avoid political tension regarding the Chair of the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, this position is not fully shared between European leaders and different political groups. Certainly, the main EU actors are willing to avoid entrusting the Presidency to a single person.

Therefore, beyond the large number of participants expected, we can clearly see that the main difficulties towards organising the Conference on the Future of Europe are not of a technical nature, but rather political.

Timing

Ideally, the work of the Conference on the Future of Europe is meant to last two years. It was also supposed to start during the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second semester of 2020, and finalise its work during the French Presidency in the first semester of 2022.

More precisely, the conference was supposed to be launched on 9 May 2020, during the plenary session of the European Parliament at Strasbourg, and run for two years, bringing together Europeans institutions, national and local authorities, civil society representatives, and European citizens of all ages. It is easy to understand that the main idea was to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the declaration of Robert Schuman, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, for the creation of a European organisation responsible for pooling French and German coal and steel production, giving rise to the first European community. Such important symbolic momentum wasted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Of course, due to the pandemic and perhaps even more, the difficulties to reach an agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework, the launch of the conference has been postponed for an indefinite period.

Initially, the French and German governments proposed that the three institutions should have agreed on a mandate for the conference as early as January 2020. Then, the institutional questions and policy priorities would have been addressed, to produce concrete results before mid-2022.

In addition, the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament underlined that conference recommendations should be adopted on a regular basis, and new measures be put in place before the 2024 elections. Members of the European Parliament had specified that a joint declaration between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission would need to be concluded before the summer in 2020, for the conference to be launched in September and to be operating at full speed by the end of the year.

Despite these ambitions, there is still no clear mandate from the three main EU institutions to launch the conference. An agreement still has to be reached between the President of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council representing all the 27 EU National Governments. These institutions still have to find an agreement on the structure, the rules of proceeding, working methods, timing, and of course, above all, the chairmanship.

In addition, the French Government is also putting pressure for the conference to be opened in the European Parliament at Strasbourg. Consequently, if plenary sessions have to be resumed at Strasbourg to inaugurate the conference, we could easily foresee its postponement for an indefinite time.

Therefore, it would have been optimistic to think that the Conference on the Future of Europe could start before the end of 2020 because of the pandemic, and especially before reaching an agreement on the next Multiannual Financial Framework. However, it could have been a very positive message to citizens to organise the launch of an event in 2020, even if it would have been primarily symbolic. In any case, it would be a positive sign to inaugurate this conference as soon as possible, to confirm the importance of democracy and public debate for European institutions, even in this difficult time.



Potential outcome

Regarding the potential outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe, it clearly appears that the stakeholders have different expectations, such as new EU treaties and/or reform of EU organisations, leading to an improvement of the EU political system's functioning.

At the end of 2019, the European Parliament announced its wishes to look at the medium to long-term future of the EU, considering what reforms should be made to its policies and institutions. More precisely, the Parliament underlined that the Conference on the Future of Europe could result in treaty review and the establishment of a permanent citizen participation mechanism, as steps to improve EU democracy ahead of the 2024 elections.

Moreover, in November 2020, the European Parliament approved a new resolution⁴, stressing the Parliament's aims to enhance democracy and enable full participation in the European political space, based on lessons from the 2019 European elections. Members of the European Parliament warned that the COVID-19 crisis has made the need for reform more crucial than ever. Consequently, the Parliament deeply regrets that the 2018 electoral law reform, aimed at enhancing the European dimension of the elections, has not yet been ratified by all Member States. The resolution indicated that potential reforms should be considered ahead of the 2024 elections, such as lowering the minimum voting age to 16, campaigning and funding rules, and the establishment of a European Electoral Authority, among other things.

Notwithstanding the recognition of the failure of the "Spitzenkandidaten" process, the Members of the European Parliament confirmed their wish that citizens should be allowed to vote for their preferred candidate for Commission President, and specified that nothing prevents European parties from putting forward a joint programme and a single, coalition-led candidate. However, the idea of transnational lists for European elections, the establishment of a common electoral constituency across EU member States, a collective responsibility for the Commission, and

⁴ Stocktaking of European elections - European Parliament resolution of 26 November 2020 on stocktaking of European elections (2020/2088(INI)) - P9_TA-PROV(2020)0327 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0327_EN.html.



the transformation of the Council into a second EU legislative chamber will certainly be the subject of intense debate within the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

As recalled by the statement of the President of the European Committee of the Regions and the Presidents of European Associations of local and regional governments, the questions relating to the reinforcement of European democracy at all levels of government, bringing Europe closer to its people, will be extensively discussed as well.

However, some EU Member States have already expressed their wish to not change EU treaties and/or to produce a new EU treaty. Stakeholders remain mindful of the difficult ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, arising from the works of the European Convention. Then, the debates and difficulties for finding an agreement between Member States on the next Multiannual Financial Framework let us foresee and fear great difficulties, perhaps even the impossibility, to reach an agreement of all 27 Members States to change EU Treaties.

Moreover, it is important to remember that, during her hearing at the European Parliament, Commissioner Dubravka Šuica stressed the fact that exploiting the potential of existing Treaties remains the Commission's preferred option, before resorting to treaty changes. Additional exploration of which improvements are possible inside the current treaty framework are still the main option and official position.

Therefore, even if it is difficult to predict the concrete outcome of this conference and the many debates and citizen consultations in the absence of a crystal ball, we should not expect major institutional changes, due to the difficult circumstances linked to the pandemic. Instead, we should expect additional reform proposals on EU institutional architecture and EU decision-making processes, aiming for deeper European integration.

Conclusion

The ambition to organise a Conference on the Future of Europe confirms the constant desire of the European institutions to improve citizens' participation in the EU political system, and to strengthen European democracy.



Although the European Commission is accustomed to organising citizen consultations and/or debates, this conference would be much harder to implement due to the larger spectrum of participants, the high number of consultations, and the large digital dimension expected and needed. Consequently, it is difficult to predict what the outcome would be, except that it would be directly related to the EU institutional architecture and EU decision-making processes; in other words, the outcome would be directly related to the reinforcement of European integration.

While the three main EU institutions should still agree on a mandate for launching the conference, the most important point of contention remains its chairmanship. Even if a collegial presidency would be the most suitable and recommended solution, this interinstitutional blockage reveals that the main difficulties to overcome in order to launch the conference are not of a technical nature, but rather political.

Moreover, there is still no clear mandate from the three main EU institutions to launch the conference. An agreement still has to be reached between the President of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council representing all 27 EU National Governments. These institutions still have to find an agreement on the structure, the rules of proceeding, working methods, timing, and obviously the chairmanship.

Furthermore, launching the Conference on the Future of Europe and bringing together the European institutions, European stakeholders, and citizens to participate in a wide debate through a digital platform would already constitute a major, tangible achievement, confirming that democracy is still fully functional in Europe despite the COVID-19 pandemic. It would not be only a new opportunity for European stakeholders and the representatives of almost five hundred million citizens from 27 countries to express their views on the future of Europe; before anything else, it would confirm the European Union as an advanced democracy, and probably the biggest democracy in the world.

In other words, beyond the potential outcome and whatever this conference might bring about, the highest achievement would be the organisation of the conference itself during the pandemic. It would confirm that whatever happens, the European Union is and will continue to be the most advanced democratic entity to be in the world.



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