

The Conference on the Future of Europe Increasing citizens' ownership for a better EU

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In 2020 the Covid-19 crisis stopped many human activities all over Europe. One of them was the planned Conference on the Future of Europe that was scheduled to start on 9 May. At the beginning of 2021, we are still adjusting to the new circumstances that the pandemic and the fight against it have forced on us, but we now have the technological tools and experience to hold conferences in a virtual environment. No further time should therefore be wasted, as the issues at stake which the Conference on the Future of Europe should address to correct the dysfunctionalities of the European Union are too urgent to admit any further delay. Yet we are still struggling and in political deadlock over the format of the conference. This is, however, not a secondary feature, since it will affect the ability of this initiative to take on board the voices and opinions of European citizens, youth and civil society organisations, which have too often been overlooked.

A delayed festival of European democracy

The date of 9 May 2020 should have marked the start of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It was chosen in the spirit of Robert Schuman who, on 9 May 1950, laid the basis of the European Union as we know it today by proposing the establishment of a European Coal and Steel Community, “the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace”.

The launch of the urgently needed and long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe was planned for 9 May 2020, exactly 70 years after the signing of the Schuman Declaration and 75 years after the end of the second world war. This Europe Day should have been a festival of democracy, celebrating the further development of the European integration process under the leadership of its citizens. That was the initial plan.

But then the European Union was hit by a global pandemic at the start of the year, and this plan was turned upside down. The outbreak of Covid-19 has had far-reaching consequences

on the social and economic level. The urgent need for a coordinated European response with a thorough recovery plan for citizens and industries, especially in the most affected regions, has meant that other important initiatives have had to be postponed. The Conference on the Future of Europe was one of them.

Europe at a crossroads

The European Union is currently facing some extremely serious challenges. It did not need a pandemic to show us this, but the current context has highlighted the urgent necessity of reforms even more. To take an example, one of the immediate reactions to the outbreak of the pandemic was the closure of internal borders in the Schengen area, and it is shocking to witness workers' rights still being ignored today because there are no pan-European legal frameworks to protect these people – particularly cross-border workers.

The list of challenges to be tackled with great urgency is long: breaches of fundamental rights, rising social inequalities within the Union, big environmental challenges and the climate emergency, outdated asylum and migration policies that lead to inhuman situations at the EU's external borders, and the creation of a sustainable economic system for all. The list could easily go on.

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Only eleven years after the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the question now arises as to whether the EU's legal and political framework is fit to address our current challenges. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the obstacles to the creation of an effective and sustainable EU have at least been partially removed, as has been shown by the introduction of new EU own resources. However, a recurrent and problematic pattern can also be seen, which was already evident in the management of previous crises, such as the financial crisis over ten years ago or the refugee crisis after 2015. The EU did not manage to solve the fundamental problems that caused these crises, but instead limited itself to damage control by fighting the symptoms. Now, the time has

come to reflect on the systematic dysfunctionalities of the European Union, and how these can be overcome in the future.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity to address these pressing questions and to find suitable solutions. This needs to be done in close cooperation with European citizens, as past experience has shown that it is not enough to let only the European institutions deal with major challenges. By involving EU citizens directly in this debate they will be both empowered and instilled with a sense of ownership of the outcome of the debate.

We need to make sure that the Conference on the Future of Europe is not just the sum of 27 national conferences. Instead, truly European exchanges are needed, and the conditions

must therefore be created for a real European debate that does not stop at national borders. Furthermore, this conference is also a great opportunity to create a European space for debate and a pan-European political sphere. The vehicles for this debate must be the agoras with European citizens who meet in public in the most diverse places all over the EU. At the same time, the technical means to create a European dialogue should also be made available. Indeed, thanks to the language tools already used by the EU institutions to accommodate their multilingualism, and thanks to the enhancement of digital working spaces due to the social distancing obliged by Covid, these technical means are already available! They comprise, for example, the multilingual conference platform announced by the Commission. As many citizens as possible need to be integrated into the discourse through opportunities to participate in side events held both digitally, and in other formats.

Battle of concepts – citizens as drivers or as passengers

Holding a Conference on the Future of Europe, as announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her candidature speech to the European Parliament, was something on which all the institutions were quickly able to agree. What remains open, however, is what the conference will look like in concrete terms. The set-up of the conference will determine whether this initiative prepares the EU's roadmap for the coming years or whether the conference ends up as another half-hearted initiative without any real impact. The three European institutions have now published their respective proposals on how the Conference on the Future of Europe should be organised.

A proposal by the European Parliament

In a resolution dated 15 January 2020, we MEPs called for the Conference on the Future of Europe to be organised with two closely interwoven dimensions. Firstly, we suggested a conference plenary with institutional representatives from the European Parliament, national parliaments, the Council, the Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, the social partners, and organised civil society.

The second dimension, which is key, involves citizens' assemblies. These would be composed of EU citizens who are selected at random, according to representative criteria that reflect the diversity of the EU. These so-called Citizens' Agoras would be complemented by Youth Agoras, which would take into account the special role of young Europeans in the future of Europe.

No thematic priorities would be defined by the institutional plenary in advance. Instead, these priorities would result both from the outcomes of the agoras and from the results of Eurobarometer surveys to be carried out for this purpose.

In the agoras, broadly defined policy areas would be discussed in parallel with the deliberations taking place in the conference plenary. The Parliament's resolution includes examples of areas such as European values, fundamental rights and freedoms, democratic and institutional aspects of the EU, environmental challenges and the climate crisis, social justice and

equality, economic issues including taxation, digital transformation and security, and the role of the EU in the world.

The Citizens' Agoras would aim to formulate political priorities for each of these broad policy fields and, in close cooperation with the institutional representatives, would eventually draw up concrete proposals for the implementation of these political priorities at EU level. The proposals would be submitted to the plenary, which would then decide on their feasibility, in consultation with representatives from the agoras.

Proposal of the European Commission

The European Commission has also proposed an open, inclusive, transparent, and structured citizens' consultation in principle. The Commission's proposal sketches a concept of the Conference on the Future of Europe in which citizens and experts would meet at regular intervals in panel discussions on specific topics. In addition, a new online platform would ensure the transparency of the debates and promote broad participation. However, the Commission does not stipulate in concrete terms how the proposals made by citizens would be managed. The Commission's proposal is thus business-as-usual in terms of citizen engagement, and does not go beyond the citizens' dialogues with which we are already familiar.

Proposal of the Council

The Council adopted its position on the Conference on the Future of Europe only in June. However, after more than half a year of internal discussions its position remains quite vague. In terms of structure, the Council foresees a subdivision of the conference into different levels. Structurally, this resembles the proposal of the European Parliament. In terms of content, the Council's proposal is fully in line with the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda: the focus is on sustainability, social challenges, innovation, competitiveness and transformation, fundamental values, rights and freedoms, and the international role of the EU.

However, like the Commission, the Council omits the sustainable impact and concrete implications that the results of the conference should have on future EU policies. A report to the European Council is foreseen as the ultimate output of the conference, and this could be a 'source of inspiration' for the future development of EU policies – but not more than that. Such disregard for the results of the conference is unacceptable given the importance of citizen involvement in shaping and legitimising the European Union.

Joint declaration of the institutions

Having presented their respective positions, the three institutions should now be negotiating a joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. This declaration is key, as it will set out the framework for the organisation and activities of the conference. Its content will thus be crucial to the success of the whole project. However, the negotiations have stalled, meaning that the structure and scope of the conference still remain unclear.

Looking at the major challenges ahead for the European Union, it is particularly frustrating that the current delay is mainly due to the disagreement within the institutions over the chair of

the conference. It is clearly unacceptable that the conference – already significantly delayed by the circumstances caused by the pandemic – has been further postponed because of this political deadlock. Anyone who seizes the importance and necessity of a Conference on the Future of Europe for the European integration process should show a certain pragmatism and willingness to compromise in this context. In the end, we need to make sure that the delays encountered thus far do not lead to a shortened ‘conference lite’ at the expense of the depth of debate. A meaningful debate throughout the Union will take time. It is therefore important to ensure the two-year framework of the conference, whether this means it eventually ends in 2022 or 2023.

Strengthening democracy through meaningful citizen participation

“Your voice was heard today in Brussels. Because Europe can only succeed with the support of its citizens”. Those were the words of Angela Merkel in December 2018 after the conclusion of the so-called ‘Citizens’ Dialogues’ organised by the Commission in cooperation with the member states. But what has remained of this? The results of the dialogues were discussed at a summit of heads of state and government, and promises were made for the results to be taken into consideration for the future. Two years later, almost no concrete legislative proposals have emerged from them. The European Citizens’ Initiative has a similar ‘success’ rate. It is no wonder that more and more people are dissatisfied with the democratic participation system at EU level.

It is thus high time to give Europe’s citizens a direct voice, and to reflect on the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic with innovative citizen participation at EU level. The Conference on the Future of Europe offers a unique opportunity to turn this need into reality. One of the greatest dangers to the success of the conference is that it raises expectations that cannot be met. There needs to be a clear agreement on the impact of citizen participation. This includes information, for example in the form of a feedback process, on what ultimately happened with the citizens’ proposals.

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Seize the opportunity of the zeitgeist

At the last European elections, the first increase in voter turnout for decades showed that citizens of the Union increasingly want to participate in European political debate. We must build on this wave of interest.

By contrast, many citizens were also disappointed after the last European elections that the promise was broken of their vote having a direct influence on who would be the next president of the European Commission. This was also the reason why approval ratings for the EU’s democratic system dropped for the first time in years in the Eurobarometer after the

election of von der Leyen as Commission president. To calm the critical voices, the new Commission president raised the prospect of legally anchoring the *Spitzenkandidaten* principle and transnational electoral lists, provided that there was sufficient support for this. Commenting on public participation in the conference, von der Leyen said at the time: “People must be at the centre of all our policies. I therefore hope that all Europeans will play an active part in the Conference on the Future of Europe and that they will play a leading role in defining the European Union's priorities. Only together can we build our Union of tomorrow”. The conditions must now therefore be created to ensure citizens' participation.

Broad participation as a success factor

Broad participation will be crucial to launch an inclusive and collaborative debate among European citizens. To deliver the promised bottom-up process, the conference must go beyond the usual EU-friendly and well-informed stakeholders, and address all citizens. The conference should differ from previous formats of civic participation in the EU by enlarging the audience. In an inclusive and open process, those Europeans who do not feel directly impacted by European politics, or who feel the EU is not delivering for them, and who have doubts and reservations about the EU, should also be involved. It is only if we also take their criticism seriously that we can jointly draw up proposals that will lead to a more effective and accepted EU. It is precisely through broad citizen participation that the legitimacy of much-needed reforms in the EU can be increased. It will also be particularly important for citizens to understand clearly how they are involved in decision-making processes and what the ultimate impact of their participation is. Feedback loops must be created in a way that citizens can permanently monitor which proposals have been accepted and which rejected or amended and why. It is only a transparent process that can create the necessary trust for meaningful citizen participation.

Giving European youth a voice

At the same time, the meaningful participation of young Europeans must also be guaranteed. The current Covid-19 pandemic is having catastrophic consequences, especially for young people. An entire generation is currently being deprived of normal school and university life – perhaps even until they graduate. This affects socially disadvantaged young people in particular. In member states such as Spain, youth unemployment has again risen rapidly in the current pandemic. More than 40 per cent of the under 25s in Spain are currently unemployed. We must offer these young people prospects. The Conference on the Future of Europe should serve as a first step in this direction, allowing young Europeans to actively voice their concerns and priorities, but also their fears and criticisms. The fact that the younger generation wants to be part of the political discussion is shown both by the increased turnout of younger people at the last European elections, and by continuing protest movements such as the Fridays for Future, which are driven mainly by young people. This is why the European Parliament is calling for separate Youth Agoras. The young generations, who are naturally particularly affected by decisions on the future of Europe, must be given the necessary space to shape these decisions.

Innovation as a means of inclusion

One of the key questions to be answered in connection with the organisation of the conference is how to achieve the widest possible participation in order to obtain the strongest possible democratic legitimacy.

Close cooperation with the regions

A key factor in reaching EU citizens will be working closely with European regions. By their very nature, European regions have particularly close links with citizens and can thus develop their own mobilising power. The regions and their representatives must therefore be directly involved in the conference. At European level, the Committee of the Regions will be a strong partner in this respect. Indeed, the Committee of the Regions has repeatedly stressed the importance of the conference and pledged its support. For the European Parliament, it is particularly important that the Committee of the Regions should be directly represented in the plenary session of the conference. We have to make sure that the debate on the future of the European Union is not only conducted in Brussels but also extended to the European regions. After all, the impetus provided by the conference will ultimately have a very real impact on citizens' daily lives. Conference-related discussions must not get bogged down in capital cities. Rural areas in particular have an important role to play here. It is thus important to ensure that the agoras and other events are not just held in the usual places, but also in remote areas.

Civil society as a partner

Another important factor in citizen mobilisation for the conference is cooperation with organised civil society. Here, too, we can draw on the experience of the last European elections, when civil society groups in particular were able to increase voter interest. Important contacts include trade unions, citizens' initiatives, welfare organisations, and a wide range of associations. In Germany, for example, there are more than 600,000 registered associations and another 100,000 unregistered associations. These figures show the immense potential for mobilisation when these civil society groups are involved in the discourse. At the same time, however, it is also important to remain in close contact with those sectors of civil society that are already shaping political developments in the EU, as partners. Political groups in particular, such as the S&D, can draw on a large network of partners to take the debate on the future of Europe to the whole of civil society. As the house of European civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee can play an active role with the involvement of NGO.

Culture as a communicator

In addition to reaching out to citizens in the regions and through civil society organisations, consideration should also be given to how to involve the European cultural landscape in the democratic process. The current pandemic very clearly highlights the special role that culture plays in our lives. Whether it be a cinema, a musical evening in a pub, a concert, a theatre or a club, many of the well-known cultural events are currently having to be cancelled or postponed. This hits us all hard because culture is an essential part of our lives. The special signifi-

cance of culture also makes it an ideal space for communication and discourse on social issues. The cultural sector has always served in a variety of forms to deal with political issues.

Cultural practitioners have proven time and again that they have an interest in cooperating to further develop the European idea. At the Berlin Conference 2020 in early November, for example, workshops such as 'Performing Europe' and 'Cultural Capitals and Arts Festivals for Europe' discussed how cultural practitioners and politicians could be encouraged to cooperate more closely. In recent years, the Creative Europe programme has also established a link between the creative industries and the European Union. These approaches should be used in the framework of the conference in order to work together on creative and innovative solutions to the challenges facing Europe.

Time to act

The early months of 2021 will be crucial in determining how the Conference on the Future of Europe develops. Various scenarios are conceivable as a result of the negotiations on a joint declaration by the institutions.

However, it is clear that the time of waiting and postponing must come to an end. At the beginning of the pandemic, the conference had to be postponed because of the emerging health crisis and the unknown effects of Covid-19. Enough time has nevertheless now passed for adaptation to the new circumstances and for the start of the conference to be organised in the digital space. The end of the conference will now need to be postponed until at least the end of 2022 to reflect the importance of the issues to be discussed. Since the current legislature of the European Parliament will end in 2024, no further delays can be allowed if the initial results of the conference are to be implemented in this legislative term.

In her contribution to last year Progressive Yearbook, Iratxe García Pérez, my colleague and group leader in the European Parliament, quite rightly pointed out that the S&D has a special

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role to play in the planning and implementation of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Perhaps part of this special role could be to take the first steps towards launching the Conference on the Future of Europe, even if there is not yet complete agreement among the institutions. If this initiative does not start soon, there is a risk that the momentum for a truly European conference will fade.

It was Jean Monnet, the author of the Schuman Declaration, who once said: "Man does not accept change unless he sees the imperative of the hour, and he does not see the need unless he is in crisis". The current pandemic poses immense challenges for the entire European Union and the consequences of the crisis are likely to be with us for a long time to come. At the same time, the Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique chance, and perhaps the last chance for

the time being, to strengthen Europeans' confidence in the EU and to develop together a vision for the future of our society. We must therefore launch the conference promptly to give it the necessary space for the important discussions on a common tomorrow. Let us seize the Schuman moment!