



## How can the Conference on the Future of Europe pave the way for the realisation of our dreams for Europe?

**Gabriele BISCHOFF**, MEP S&D Group, European Parliament

These are difficult times for those who believe in the European Union and who dream of Member States that grow together and remain united in diversity for peace and prosperity. In times of crises, it seems that national interests prevail more and more over European solidarity. Is there still hope for the European dream?

The call for a Conference on the Future of Europe comes at a time where the European Union is stumbling from one crisis to another, internally paralysed by the increasing inability of its Member States to take coordinated actions, while externally losing its credibility due to its unwillingness to speak with one voice.

**The necessity for a Conference on the Future of Europe has become all the more urgent with the outbreak of the corona pandemic.** Unlike previous crises, this one affects all European citizens directly and has a strong impact on their daily lives. Therefore, this time, the call for a coordinated European response has become stronger and likewise the disappointment bigger with the European Union's inability to take adequate measures. Surveys in the most severely affected Member States already indicate an increasing number of citizens who believe that being part of the union is a disadvantage for their country.



Even though, it is at first glance easy to criticise its weak crisis management skills at a first glance, it is important to underline that the European Union lacks both competences and financial means to adequately tackle the social and economic consequences of this unprecedented situation.

For those who still have dreams for a strong Europe, the Conference on the Future of Europe provides a unique chance for a profound reflection on how to realise these dreams in the future. If the right framework is set for this initiative, it can pave the way out of the crisis for a better future for all Europeans. Moreover, it can turn citizens from rather passive observers to active actors shaping EU policy. How can the European Union, which is currently weakened by the different humanitarian, economic and solidarity crises of the last decade, develop into a stronger actor? Which measures could turn the European Union more democratic, social and progressive for its citizens?

**The concept of the Conference on the Future of Europe will be crucially important and determine its success or failure.** For us Social Democrats, European citizens and their expectations as well as concerns are at the heart of this two-year process. **A bottom-up approach including an accessible and meaningful dialogue with citizens and civil society is essential for the success** of this initiative.

Taking an improved version of the so-called citizens' dialogue as the Commission, according to its communication, intends to organise is simply not enough for a conference that aims to determine the future of Europe. Citizens' dialogues offer platforms for experts and for the enthusiasts of European integration without involving those who are far away from daily European politics. **The Conference on the Future of Europe should therefore be an inclusive initiative with the participation of a representative selection of citizens from urban as well as rural areas.** The survey on European Dreams for the Future of Europe indicates an urban-rural divide when it comes to the role of European institutions in fulfilling citizens' dreams. Residents of capital cities tend to perceive the European Union as more important (25%) than residents of smaller municipalities (13%). Therefore, as Social Democrats we want the activities of the Conference on the Future of Europe to take place in different Member States, not only in the capitals but also in smaller cities and municipalities where the European Union seems to play a less apparent role in the daily lives of citizens. Likewise, the format



of the events should be diverse, including activities in universities, production sites and open public places.

Citizens in their diversity, not only experts on EU policy, should be at the heart of the Conference on the Future and they should be on equal footing with representatives from European institutions and national parliaments right from the start.

**The experience from the past teaches us the importance of an early involvement of citizens when it comes to institutional reflections on the future of Europe.** The last institutional debate led to the establishment of the European Convention in 2001 under the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. In a two-year process, representatives from the European institutions and national parliaments drafted the European Constitution at the end of which citizens in some countries could vote in favour or against what had been decided over their heads. This project was bound to fail by its architecture. Those for whom the European Constitution was written were only asked to approve the result of the Convention without being able to contribute to it. There are evident parallels between the set-up of the European Convention and the European Parliament's concept for the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, **this time we want citizens to be a core part of this initiative from the beginning on.**

Some Member States explicitly indicated their reservation towards this initiative. However, the opinions expressed by the heads of states and governments do by no means reflect the state of mind of its entire population. The most Eurosceptic governments have the most pro-European younger generations. Other Member States call for a start of the Conference on the Future of Europe as soon as possible. Recently, five Ministers of European Affairs have written a letter in which they underline that *"while the context has changed, the ultimate objective of the Conference seems more important than ever"*.

**We believe that a bottom-up approach by means of dedicated youth agoras, for example, as foreseen in the Parliament's concept for the Conference is able to change the dynamics of the discussions on the future of Europe in the Member States.**



A meaningful dialogue with citizens can only be ensured if their voices are heard and taken into account. What are their dreams for the future of Europe? What do they want to change? What institutional changes are necessary to realise them? Thus, it is important to underline that the

Conference on the Future of Europe will not only focus on institutional reflections around the *Spitzenkandidat* principle.

Hence, a **key parameter for the success of the Conference on the Future of Europe will be the question of courage on behalf of all those who are involved.** Do we dare to create an innovative and legitimate initiative with a strong backing by European citizens or do we just continue with business as usual?

## About the author

### Gabriele Bischoff

S&D MEP, Vice-Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs

S&D representative of the Parliament's Working Group on the Conference on the Future of Europe

## About the publication

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Policy Solutions joined forces with the objective of answering the following question: **is there a European Dream?** And if so, what sort of hopes and expectations do European citizens have for the future? Art. 2 of the Lisbon Treaty outlines the dream that the founding fathers had for the European Union (EU) as a political project – that one of a united and progressive Europe that promotes peace and the well-being of its peoples. FEPS and Policy Solutions present **“The EU Dream report”** that offers insights to answer this question and that aims to contribute with progressive thinking and ideas to the Future of Europe debate and conference. [The results of this extraordinary research are based on a comprehensive survey conducted in 14 EU member states with over 14,000 survey respondents offering thus a representative view as to how European citizens perceive and value the EU.](#) This is the FEPS way of shaking up the debate on what Europeans are dreaming of and how they see Europe addressing the most pressing contemporary challenges and where the Union is expected to strive for more!