

The Conference on the Future of Europe

The Way Forward with Citizens?

Executive summary

The Conference on the Future of Europe officially started on May 9th, 2021, after a year-long delay, difficult inter-institutional negotiations, and last-minute agreements. For the first time, randomly selected citizens from across the EU will gather in transnational citizens' panels to discuss and shape the Future of the Union, together with citizens' contributions collected online by means of a multilingual platform. However, the scale, scope, and potential implications of a deliberative exercise on nine key policy areas, including European Democracy, creates high expectations from civil society. It also comes with high stakes for EU institutions and with a complex architecture that could alienate ordinary citizens.

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Last Sunday, on Europe day, the European Union officially inaugurated its Conference on the Future of Europe, a Europe-wide exercise of participatory democracy. The event, live streamed from the Strasbourg premises of the European Parliament, was attended virtually by 500 citizens. For European citizens however, the Conference had already kicked-off some weeks ago, with the launch of the multilingual digital platform on April 19th.

Designed as an opportunity for European citizens to debate on Europe's challenges and priorities, the Conference's ambitions to shape the Future of the EU for the next decades. Expected as soon as Spring 2022 – right on time for the French Presidency of the Council – the Conference's outcomes should serve as a basis for EU institutions to design a series of policy initiatives.

In the Background of the Conference

The narrative behind the birth of the Conference traces back to the 2010s, its series of crises and the lukewarm performance of the EU in tackling them. From the financial crisis to the migration crisis, climate change and democratic expectations, governance and democratic deficits have become recurrent issues jeopardising the legitimacy of EU actions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe aims to hit these two targets with one bullet: citizens' inputs on key areas of EU governance will be collected using a mix of participatory methodologies, while deliberation between citizens and institutions should allow innovative and long-term solutions to emerge.

Originally scheduled to start on 9 May 2020 and to last two full years, the Conference will eventually last one year only. The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the causes of its delayed start; shifting priorities, emergency politics and sanitary measures limiting physical gatherings dealt a temporary blow to the Conference, yet do not alone explain the year-long delay.

It took more than 13 months for the three institutions to agree on a common position on the nature and scope of the Conference. The Parliament was the first to adopt its position in January 2020, followed shortly after by the Commission, while the Council agreed its position only in June 2020. From January 2020 until February 2021, the three institutions remained stuck in a gridlock over the leadership and scope of the Conference. A key topic of disagreement has been whether to include institutional affairs and potential Treaty changes within the Conference mandate. Only in March 2021, pressed by a ticking-clock and shortly after the Council tabled a revised version of its initial mandate, did the three institutions agreed on a Joint Declaration, signed in Brussels on March 10, 2021.

Scope, Structure and Governance

| European Parliament <i>Resolution, 15 January 2020</i> | European Commission <i>Communication, 22 January 2020</i> | Council of the EU <i>Revised Position, 3 February 2021</i> | Joint Declaration <i>10 March 2021</i> |
|---|---|---|--|
| SCOPE | | | |
| Unlimited Scope and non-exhaustive policy priorities | Two strands: - policy strands - institutional strands | “Policy first approach” | Key policy topics (incl. the Union’s democratic foundations) + additional issues raised by citizens |
| CITIZENS’ INVOLVEMENT | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference Plenary - Citizens’ agoras - Youth’s agoras - A listening phase | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Issue-specific deliberative panels - Local events - multilingual digital platform | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference events (kick-off, mid-term, final) - Thematic conferences in Member States - Citizens’ panels in Member States and at European level - Local events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference Plenary - Citizens’ panels in Member States and at European level - Local events - multilingual digital platform |
| GOVERNANCE | | | |
| Executive Coordination Board composed of the 3 institutions, under EP leadership | N/A | Joint Chairmanship of the 3 institutions | Joint Presidency of the 3 institutions |
| OUTCOME | | | |
| Concrete recommendations, open to legislative proposals and/or Treaty change | Set of recommendations to feed the legislative agenda | Policy recommendations (excl. Article 48 TEU) Report to European Council in 2022 | Report to the Joint Presidency on concrete recommendations for EU action |

As it is common with the EU, the Joint Declaration is the product of a compromise between the three EU institutions. Two significant wins for the European Parliament are the 1) the organisation of citizens' panels to be held at both national and European levels and 2) the political commitment of all three institutions to follow-up on the outcomes of the Conference. Yet, the Council got the last word on the content and scope of the Conference, with policy topics being discussed in priority, and no commitment taken on Treaty change. The Commission's strong emphasis on communication and outreach is reflected in the development and launch of a new multilingual digital platform.

In terms of structure, while the Joint Chairmanship provides the political patronage, it is the Executive Board the key body tasked with steering the day-to-day business of the Conference. Citizens' panels organised at European level are charged with discussing issues in key policy areas based on input received from local events organised in the context of the Conference and based on ideas uploaded to the digital platform. The panels and the platform will feed in turn the discussion in the Conference's Plenary.

The Conference's Plenary will be made of 108 national parliamentary representatives (4 per Member State), 108 MEPs, an equal number of representatives from the European and national Citizens' panels, 54 government representatives (2 per Member State) and of the 3 responsible Commissioners. Together with the Executive Board, the Plenary will elaborate the conclusions of the Conference.

Citizens' Engagement and Participation

Contrary to its predecessor, the 2001-2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, the Conference wants to put citizens at the centre of its work, experimenting participatory democracy rather than implementing another top-down exercise.

Participatory democracy, which aims to associate citizens to the decision-making process, is a rather vague concept and can take different forms. While mainstream political actors and institutions often look at citizens' participation with suspicion, there are at European level already well-established channels for citizens' participation at different stages of the policy cycle, with the European Citizen Initiative, the right to petition the European Parliament and the Commission's consultations and citizens' dialogues. Yet, those instruments lack a direct impact on the decision-making process and have largely failed to reach out to ordinary citizens.

As said, with the Conference on the Future of Europe, EU institutions want to go a step further. Citizens' participation is sought both online, with a deliberative multilingual platform, and offline, with citizens' panels to be held at both national and European level.

The Online Platform

Contrary to the European Commission *Haveyoursay* website, where citizens and stakeholders can share their views on draft and running EU policies, the *FutureofEurope* platform works as a repository of events organised across the EU, and a forum for proposals and discussions by and for citizens.

The platform suggests nine themes for discussion, plus an additional all-encompassing “other” category. The themes cover all the main political thematic areas: health, climate change and environment, digital transformation, migration, foreign policy, European democracy etc.

Upon registration, participants can:

- find or register an event;
- make proposals;
- comment on proposals made by others.

The platform offers the possibility to interact online with other participants’ proposals, thanks to an automatic translation system, and even to subscribe and ‘follow’ one or more participant. The platform also offers to compare new suggested proposals with already registered one, and to upload pictures or documents to support one’s proposals.

If the platform is not as interactive as would be an online chatbox, and if its deliberative features remain limited, it has the advantage of simplicity and the proposals gathered online should feed the work of citizens’ panels, to be held physically.

Citizens’ Panels

Citizens’ panels are without doubt the most innovative feature of the Conference. They build on the successes of citizens’ panels and citizens’ assemblies held recently in several EU Member States (Irish Constitutional Assembly, French Convention citoyenne pour le climat, the Ost-Belgian Citizen Assembly and German Burgerrat). It falls under the responsibilities of Member States to organise national Citizens’ panels, design their architecture, select participants and report on the main outcomes. France for example, already announced 18 citizens’ panels and a specific consultation targeting its youth.

However, while becoming more and more common at the national level, citizens’ panels are yet to be tested on a European scale. The Conference’s European citizens’ panels consist in the first institutionalised pan-European experience of citizen deliberation and consist in a true democratic challenge. It remains still to be seen, however, how they will be implemented in practice exactly. At the moment of writing this piece, concerns are already arising on mismatch with the provision of four European Citizens’ panels and the nine policy areas figuring on the platform.

Another significant feature of the Citizens’ panels is the selection of participants. Contrary to similar exercises organised at a pan-European level by the European Commission, such as Citizens’ Dialogues and Citizens’ Consultations, participants in the Citizens’ panels will be drawn by lot. Sortition is a characteristic feature of citizens’ assemblies and should guarantee that participants in the panels are representative of EU diversity. Yet, the criteria for the stratified random selection of panel participants, as communicated by the Commission, do not take in consideration marginalised communities such as non-binary people, racialised communities and EU residents without EU passports.

Pending Issues

EU institutions have a political culture of debates and consensus, yet first and foremost within and between themselves, rather than with EU citizens. So far, citizens' participation at the EU level has always been implemented following a top-down approach propelled by the European Commission, which has allowed EU institutions to largely silence dissonant voices and bypass public opinion.

Against this backdrop, the random selection of participants in citizens' panels and the commitment to follow-up on the recommendations formulated by citizens are a welcome development, although it remains to be seen how they will be implemented in practice. The hesitancy to include representatives from the citizens' panels in the Conference's Plenary, with the three institutions originally disagreeing on this point, leaves some doubt about the political willingness to follow up on citizens' recommendations. Difficult negotiations on the functioning of the Conference Plenary only reached an agreement on Friday, after seriously jeopardizing the Conference inaugural kick-off. Ultimately, 108 representatives of the Citizens' panels will siege in the Conference Plenary, however, it remains unclear how decisions are to be made within this Plenary and whether citizens' representatives will be taken into account on an equal footing.

This episode casts further doubt on the capacity and the willingness of EU institutions to follow-up on citizens' inputs. The Conference on the Future of Europe might be a unique experimentation of participatory democracy at the pan-European level; it also is a very political exercise, in which stakes are high for many key European actors, from EU institutions and Member States, to civil society organisations and individual players. To the risk of excessively mitigating expectations, it is worth remembering it. The inaugural event gave a flavour of what might come: a European Parliament who wishes to gain the right of initiative, a Council Presidency pushing for a policy agenda and an upcoming (French) Council Presidency for Strasbourg to remain the seat of the Parliament and a Commission whose focus is largely on outreach. What citizens want, however, remains to be seen.