

'We finally have our Conference on the Future of Europe!': now, what do we do with it?

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Introduction

Many in the Brussels bubble and beyond have followed the developments on the Conference on the Future of Europe very closely.¹ The Conference, a democratic brainstorming exercise turned institutional power battle, was supposed to start on 9 May 2020. Nothing worked out as planned last year and the Conference was no exception. After months of toing and froing on the leadership issue, the Joint Declaration on the Conference was finally signed on 10 March by the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, the European Parliament's President, David Sassoli, and the President of Portugal, Antonio Costa, who is currently occupying the Presidency of the Council of the EU. With this declaration, the Conference will kick off on 9 May, while it is expected to end in Spring 2022. This period is shorter than initially planned, and just in time for the French Presidency of the Council of the EU and also for Emmanuel Macron's election campaign.

The Conference was slated to serve as an opportunity to bring together citizens and decision-makers not only to address present and future challenges, but also to improve the functioning of the EU's institutions. Even though the leadership race has so far been the central issue, now it is time to focus on getting the best out of the Conference. Perceived as relatively limited, it is nevertheless a platform from which to create new ideas and define national priorities. It is definitely the moment to focus on objectives and future ambitions, while including citizens. There is no time to be sceptic.

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Any opportunity to move the European debate(s) further to make progress in integration should be cherished. This is the only way the EU can fit in such an ever-changing world.

The institutional battle to lead the Conference

Although COVID-19 has brought on a renewed sense of urgency to address the many issues concerning the future of the EU, finding an agreement on how to organise the Conference has still been difficult. The Portuguese presidency of the Council of the EU has made it a priority to make sure that the delayed Conference starts during its tenure over the first half of 2021. So far, much of the debate has centred on the Conference's

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leadership and to a lesser extent on the content to be discussed. Presiding over the Conference is considered to be more than just being a figurehead, as it is also the means to steer the direction of the debates. The initial discussions in the European Parliament over potential candidates have been intense, but have eventually ended up with Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt being proposed to chair the Conference –a controversial choice for many–. The topic of leadership was back on the table after the original dates were cancelled, but this time there was indecision over which body should take the reins. In January 2021 a proposal was made for a joint Conference presidency. Under this new plan, the Presidents of the Commission, Parliament and rotating presidency of the Council would share leadership duties along with an executive board with equal representation from the Commission, the Council and MEPs across the political spectrum. The proposal was adopted shortly after, giving the Conference the go-ahead for a symbolic beginning once again on 9 May 2021.

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What working methodology?

The main idea underlying the Conference is that it should be an opportunity to engage citizens as much as possible and give them a greater role in shaping the EU’s future. Several ideas have been put forth on how to organise open forums to attract voices from all regions, genders and age groups. The Parliament has suggested a set of structured ‘agoras’, based on those of ancient Greece. The European Commission thinks the previous ‘citizens’ dialogues’ are a good basis for beginning the Conference. They have also advocated events that are multilingual and involve panels on specific topics. The societal adjustment to online work brought on by the pandemic should lead to increased citizen access to the Conference’s events by the use of online platforms. Online events might also raise the participation of Europe’s youth, one of the groups most affected by the pandemic and an essential part of the Conference, as it hopes to pave the ground for the future they will inherit. According to some, the Conference may lead to the creation of a permanent platform for citizen involvement.

All these points help digest what the Conference is and is not. This is more about citizen participation than anything else. No ambitious Treaty reform is envisaged this time, in contrast to the Convention –that aimed to prepare the Union for Eastern enlargement and led to the Constitutional Treaty–. This does not necessarily mean that there will be no proposals that include Treaty changes, especially if very specific and with a broad consensus. However, so far, the perception is that the Conference’s core aim is to increase the participation and sense of ownership of European citizens in the integration project.

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What topics will and should be on the table?

While the different institutions reached some common ground over the Conference's framework, its scope has been a point of contention. There are a wide range of topics to be addressed in these events, including social equality, climate change and digital transformation. The importance and relevance of these issues are largely unquestioned, but calls for institutional reforms and treaty change have been polarising. Advocates for further European integration would like to see more Union-wide policies in the areas of health, defence and foreign policy. There are many who believe the EU must also increase its ability to act swiftly and respond to crises and who would like to replace the requirement of unanimity with qualified majority voting. Some also believe this offers an opportunity to make the Union more democratic by addressing the *Spitzenkandidat* (lead candidate) process for appointing the President of the European Commission and by adopting transnational lists for European Parliament elections. One could also add to the list the one-million-dollar question of how to handle member states that do not comply with the rule of law in the Union. This is clearly a pressing issue on the Union's agenda. Article 50 led to Brexit, so we could be at the dawn of the discussion of another Article for suspending membership. These are just primary topics on the agenda, although there is room for many others to emerge in the following months.

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The Parliament and Commission would like the recommendations from the Conference to lead to concrete policy changes and are open to amending treaties. The Council, on the other hand, has firmly stated that the Conference does not fall within the scope of Article 48 of the Treaty on the EU and that it therefore does not allow any changes to be made. There will be a report to the joint presidency at the conclusion of the Conference, but how any of this will translate into concrete policy changes remains to be seen.

What should we do with the Conference?

The Conference on the Future of Europe is widely viewed as a necessary and useful initiative, particularly in the context of the current crises and the fast-paced movement of global politics in the 21st century. The inability to come to an agreement on key details of the Conference illustrates why so many are looking to the event to be an opportunity to make institutional reforms that will better equip the Union to handle future challenges. Today Treaty change is mostly taboo within the EU. Since the Lisbon Treaty the EU has shied away from any Treaty changes despite the many structural crises it has undergone: the Eurozone crisis, irregular migration, Brexit and now COVID-19. It is understandable that both the tough discussions between governments and the ratification process in member states have inflamed these fears. However, categorically rejecting the Treaty change closes the door to many issues that must be placed on the agenda.

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Having said that, there is no need to focus only on this aspect. The Conference gives each country the chance to discuss the European project, to define its national priorities when it comes to the future and to involve its citizens in all these discussions. For both the democratic legitimacy of the European integration process and also to foster ownership –an important antidote to Euroscepticism–, the participation of citizens is essential. Hence, the process should be perceived as parallel tracks that feed into each other: on the one hand, innovative participatory platforms should be designed for citizens; on the other, each member state should engage in its own intellectual exercise and define its European wish-list for the years to come, while also incorporating citizens' preferences. The Conference should be seen as an opportunity to talk about the reform agenda without having to submit to pressure from any crises. It is clear that in this century the most striking steps in integration (be it the empowerment of the Frontex Coast Guard Agency on account of the political crisis caused by irregular migration, or the go-ahead for Next Generation EU, the EU's unprecedented recovery fund) were taken on account of the pressure caused by the crises. A structural roadmap for future reforms, however, could be anything but necessary for the European project. Right after the German and French elections there might be a window of opportunity to act on the reform agenda and go for European Parliamentary elections in 2024 with a strengthened EU. With Conference of the Future of Europe starting up, it is up to the EU's institutions, its national governments and parliaments and its citizens to make the best of this opportunity.

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