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The Conference on the future of Europe and the reform of the EU

by

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Abstract

The Conference on the future of Europe is underway. It may pave the way to a reform of the EU. Or it may go down in history as a lost opportunity, or even as an initiative which backfired, having created expectations that may not be fulfilled. Its success or failure depends on the behaviour of citizens and institutional actors within the Conference, and on the evolution of the European political landscape after the German and French elections.

Key-words

Conference future EU, reform, political landscape, citizens, institutions



1. The origins of the Conference on the future of Europe

The Conference on the future of Europe was initially proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron. He wrote a letter to all European citizens in view of the 2019 European elections mentioning the Conference as the instrument to involve them in a great participatory experiment to set the way forward for the EU. At that time Macron had a clear plan. The Conference was meant to provide momentum to France's proposal to deepen economic integration by creating a Euro-area budget. Macron's narrative on creating a European sovereignty could favour a strong push towards more integration. That he would use to overcome Germany's resistance with regards to more fiscal integration and risk-sharing at EU level.

Then the pandemic arrived and the Conference was postponed. The pandemic was a crisis that initially Member states tried to tackle alone, and failed. The EU attempts to coordinate the response, at least as far as the common acquisition of vaccines and in some solidarity among Member states eventually succeeded. The EU response to the economic impact of the pandemics was impressive. The EBC launched a massive program of pandemic purchase, even putting aside the old dogma that purchases should be linked to the capital key of each country. This way it could help those in need almost without limits. The Commission suspended the Stability and Growth Pact, relaxed the State aid rules, launched the SURE program and proposed the Next Generation EU, which the European Council eventually approved.

This new massive investment program is financed by EU-issued debt, and the EU was to get new own resources to be able to pay it back. For Macron it was a welcome and unexpected gift: German resistance had fallen, before the Conference even took place. The pandemics had succeeded in what Macron had failed so far. Chancellor Merkel had changed her mind. She once said that Eurobonds will never materialise until she was alive. Now she played a key role in establishing the NextGenEU financed by EU debt, even if not officially called "Eurobonds". The NextGenEU is supposed to be *una tantum*. But the fight to make it structural has already started. The Parliament, the Commission and the European Central Bank – supported by several countries, including France – clearly see this as an essential step to



complete the Economic and Monetary Union. The pandemic was the crisis that put the proposals of the 2012 Four Presidents Report and the 2019 Five Presidents Report on the establishment of a genuine economic and monetary union had finally into the EU agenda and deliberations.

It looks as if there is a lack of ownership of the Conference, which is formally co-promoted by the Council, the Commission and the Parliament. It was Macron's idea, with the aim to exploit it to get momentum to create a Euro-area budget. But the pandemic brought the NextGenEU, with the EU debt and the prospect of new own resources. Hence, there is no clear aim for what the Conference should bring about. Many countries are afraid it could bring to a Treaty change process. Other hope it will. All are afraid, because nobody knows what could be its outcome, what is it supposed to be, and what is the next step of European integration that could get momentum from the Conference.

2. The difficult start of the Conference

Eventually the Conference officially started in 2021, after a long struggle between the European institutions. The European Parliament was the main drive to get the Conference done, while the Council was less enthusiast about it. But the Conference is especially an extraordinary occasion for citizens and civil society to express their views on the future of Europe.

The European Commission systematically organises consultations on its legislative proposals, and there is a wide debate on everything about the EU in Brussels by NGOs, economic actors and associations organised at European level. Still, the Conference on the future of Europe is one of a kind for several reasons.

For the first time the European Union asks its citizens to express freely their views in an open manner on the future of their Union, and provides an interactive multi-lingual digital platform to do it (www.futureu.eu). Each and every citizen can easily register in the platform and insert her or his ideas, like and comments those of other citizens, as well as insert events on any topic related to the future of Europe. The Conference platform is divided in different



topics, so that users can find what they are looking for, and interact with other citizens interested in a specific issue. The thematic areas are: Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Digital transformation; European democracy; Migration; Education, culture, youth and sport; and Other ideas. Citizens can thus propose their ideas on the EU division of competences, decision-making process, institutions' powers as well as any specific topic and European policy.

The Conference is also a hybrid experiment in participatory and stochastic democracy, because it includes Panels of European Citizens selected randomly, but in order to represent the diversity of European society. These Panels' works are then presented to the Plenary session. The Plenary includes some of the citizens involved in the Panels, together with Members of the European and national Parliaments, members of the Commission and the national governments, as well as of regional and local governments and civil society.

The governance of the Conference is rather complex, with the co-participation of the European Parliament, Commission and Council in all bodies and decisions. The fact that it is unclear if the Council position on anything needs to be unanimous or not makes the management of the Conference a difficult task.

President von der Leyen in her state of the Union speech invited all citizens, and especially young people to participate. But what is lacking is a clear communication strategy. The Committee of the regions and the Economic and Social Committee have fought to be involved in the Conference plenary, but it is unclear if they are effective in mobilizing regional and local governments and economic and social actors to participate. It would not be difficult for local and regional governments to organise open Council meetings to be inserted in the Conference platform, or to insert in their websites an invitation for citizens to participate with a link to the platform. Just as ministries of education could invite schools to devote some time of their civic education to organise debates among students on the future of Europe. Nothing of this is happening, and the media are not reporting on the Conference works, nor are they contributing significantly to raise a debate on the future of Europe.



It seems national governments accepted to implement the Conference – an idea initially put forward by Macron and then supported especially by the European Parliament – but worry that the citizens may come forward with proposals for an ambitious reform, that many of them are afraid to undertake. At the same time, it will be difficult for them to ignore completely the results of the Conference. Especially if many citizens will participate in its works through the digital platform and if many events will be organised locally, in a bottom-up fashion around Europe.

3. The context of the Conference

In politics timing is everything. Concomitancy can have a deep impact on event or process apparently or logically unrelated. The Conference is supposed to finish in spring 2022, during the French presidency of the Council of Ministers. Thus, it suffers from the widespread belief that nothing will be decided while there is not the new German government and before the French presidential and parliamentary elections taking place between April and June 2022.

That may be true. But after the French elections, the time for important decisions may come. And the Conference may provide both the agenda and the momentum needed. To this end it is important that citizens participate in the digital platform of the Conference: <https://futureu.europa.eu/>. The national governments are afraid that citizens may set the agenda. And the ideas on the digital platform as well as the work of the Panels of European citizens show that there is a request for the EU to do more in different fields: from health to climate change, from foreign and security policy to migration, from the economic to the social realm. It looks like the Conference is providing the occasion for European citizens to express their desires. And apparently this implies more European public goods provided through European policies. It seems many Europeans do not grasp that the EU still lacks a number of competences and powers needed to act in certain areas. Still, they ask for the EU to act in those domains as well. This is challenge that may arise from the Conference: a push for more sharing and pooling of sovereignty, that is a strengthening of EU competences and of the powers of the EU supranational institutions, as well as the reduction of the use of unanimity in



the decision-making process, or the transformation of the new NGEU tools into structural EU instruments and powers.

It is impossible to know if the Conference will bring to a Treaty reform, a constitutional momentum, or if it will fail. But it is clear that its potential impact rest on a massive citizens' participation and on the evolution of the political context.

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