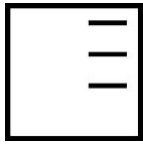


EU Monitor

Conference on the Future of Europe has started, questions remain

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Introduction

After a year of delay, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) has finally started on May 9th in Strasbourg - somehow typically for the whole process, with an unexplained 20-minute delay. Due to the ongoing pandemic, discussions will take place in a hybrid form, mostly online with hope for more in-person meetings happening from autumn 2021. While it is undoubtedly good news that the initiative has finally taken off, it is worth giving a closer look into the outcomes of a nearly 2 year-long period of preparations and institutional deadlock over structure and goal of the Conference. What is the final structure and what are its potential pitfalls? What are the topics to be discussed and what we can realistically expect as an outcome? How ambitious should we be in our expectations? And besides the risks, what are the possible benefits of the exercise, if we look beyond the promise for new direction for the future of Europe?

From the outside, it seems all set. After more than a year of deadlock, the EU institutions published the Joint Declaration in March, the launch has been successfully performed despite the pandemic and the online platform is running. However, behind the scenes the tensions between different actors prevail and many questions remain unanswered. Just few days before the official launch, European Parliament threatened to cancel the Sunday ceremony amid heated discussions with the Council representatives over a composition and a role of the Conference Plenary. Disaster was averted only last minute in the morning of May 9th, when the Executive Board adopted a compromise emphasising the need to include Plenary's conclusions in the final reports.¹ However, the subsequent publication of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe, a document which details some of the practical

aspects of the Conference logistics, still entails the need for further clarifications.²

Structure of the Conference

During the year between the originally planned and actual start of the Conference, we have seen the three European institutions in a deadlock over how the Conference should look like, what it should lead to and who should lead it. This stalemate threatened to harm the very existence of the project and to stall the momentum that it had gathered during its conception. And while we can see that the pandemic played a role, it is equally true that the contradicting visions of the three main institutions are symbolic for the traditional positions of those actors that the institutional paralysis probably would not have been avoided altogether, even if the leaders did not have their hands full with fighting the virus.

The eventual outcome is very “European” at core. The principle of representativeness and equality won over simplicity and efficiency. The CoFoE ended up having not one, but three presidents (i.e. Joint presidency of the President of the European Parliament, European Commission and head of the presiding Member State³), an Executive Board of nine, co-chaired by the three institutions (by Guy Verhofstadt, Member of the European Parliament, Ana Paula Zacarias, Secretary of State for EU Affairs for the Portuguese Council Presidency and Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Democracy and Demography). The Conference leadership is also supported by a Common secretariat.

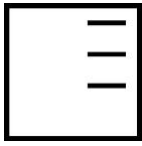
The Conference itself consists of four components. At the center, given the ongoing pandemic restrictions in all EU member states, is the **multilingual digital platform** – an interactive site visually not unlike the rest of EU institutions' websites.⁴ The idea is that it is a “place for citizens to share ideas and send online submissions. They

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-power-to-the-plenary-costa-claims-victory-get-ready-strasbourg/>

² https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/4522/Consolidated_text_Rules_of_Procedure.pdf

³ Initially it was not clear who is supposed to preside the Conference on behalf of the Council, as some documents just generally referred to the President of the European Council, which would make Charles Michel the main figure. However, the reality of the past months showed that the presiding Member states will take up the role.

⁴ [Futureu.europa.eu](https://futureu.europa.eu)



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will be collected, analysed, monitored and published throughout the Conference”.⁵ In the autumn when hopefully most of EU citizens will receive a vaccine and it will be possible to organize in-person meetings again, four **European Citizens’ Panels** will take place. Those should be “representative in terms of geographic origin, gender, age, socioeconomic background and/or level of education”⁶. Organizing those panels should be outsourced to an external company familiar with the concept of citizen consultations. **Conference Plenaries**, expected to meet four times (but at least once per 6 months, as outlined in the Joint Declaration),⁷ “will ensure that the recommendations from the national and European citizens’ panels, grouped by themes, are debated without a predetermined outcome and without limiting the scope to pre-defined policy areas.”⁸ The Conference Plenary will be eventually composed of representatives of various stakeholders – EU institutions (not just the main three, but also European Economic and Social Committee and European Committee of the Regions, national parliaments, citizens and civil society.⁹ The Executive Board will draw and publish the conclusions of the Conference Plenary.”¹⁰ These central events should be accompanied by a number of **Decentralised events**, taking place both online, and in-person and in various hybrid forms and organized by “people and organisations as well as national, regional and local authorities across Europe”.¹¹

The structure of both the leadership and the Conference itself is rather complicated, but most importantly, clear relations between the components are not always clear. How will the outcomes of the decentralized events translate to the conference website or plenary? Who will be the gatekeeper and agenda setter between the various levels – and how transparent the process will be? How will the conclusions and recommendations be

operationalized and translated into concrete policies and visions for the future of Europe? In the opening ceremony, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen admitted that it will not be easy to translate the many ideas to concrete policy proposals – for the sake of transparency, however, the methodology of the gatekeeping is an absolute key question.

The more we know, the more questions we have

Sequencing the conference

Time and hierarchical sequence of Conference activities remains at the core of the confusion. While the platform should be available for gathering citizens’ input throughout the whole conference, it should serve as a basis for the discussions in the citizens’ panels, planned for the autumn of 2021 – and subsequently also for the plenary sessions. But if those are supposed to take place over the autumn, how will the Conference ensure that a proper follow up is in place also for inputs submitted at the beginning of next year, for example? Conference plenaries should discuss the proposals of a wider public debates and draw conclusions. As POLITICO notes, such an approach means “coming close to what the Parliament wanted and making it hard to ignore such debates”.¹² However, it still remains unclear who exactly will be those citizen representatives among the 433 participants. The Rules of Procedure state that “80 representatives from European Citizens’ Panels, of which at least one third shall be younger than 25, the President of the European Youth Forum and 27 representatives of national events and/or national Citizens’ Panels will participate. This represents a total of 108.”¹³ No more details were given on how those citizens will be identified. Also as the first Plenary is expected to take place already before the summer 2021, it is

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will be associated when the international role of the EU is discussed. Representatives of key stakeholders may be invited.

https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/4522/Consolidated_text_Rules_of_Procedure.pdf

¹⁰ <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-power-to-the-plenary-costa-claims-victory-get-ready-strasbourg/>

¹³ https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/4522/Consolidated_text_Rules_of_Procedure.pdf



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difficult to imagine that it could already welcome representatives of debates set up to start in the autumn.¹⁴

Institutional confusion is not the only problem with the timeline though. With many crucial currently debated reforms, such as the Fit for 55 package, new European industrial strategy and others, timing is of a great importance. Legislation coming out of those initiatives will shape the reality of European economies in the near future and it would be naïve to imagine that the legislative train would pause to wait for the consultation outcomes. It is therefore questionable whether the Conference can have any real impacts on policies that are currently in the key moment of discussion, both in the European Parliament and the Council.

Methodology of participatory tools

Another uncertainty concerns the Citizens' panels, where the methodology of their set up was not yet revealed. To ensure a proper representation based on nationality, gender, age, social, economic and educational background requires a special methodology, which means the Conference will have to outsource the task to a private company. However, while the Panels appears to be an attempt at a participatory democracy tool, the set up seems to be very different than the usual citizen assemblies. Those usually take months of working with the same group of people, clearly define questions and a wealth of background information available for the participants. A glance at the set up in the autumn and four countries,¹⁵ it does not seem likely that a representative group of citizens from all over the EU would have a chance to spend few weeks meeting regularly.

Financing

Decentralized events rely heavily on own activities of the non-governmental organisations and private sector. Those are, however, expected to operate on a pure voluntary basis, without any financial means

being available to help with event organisation. And while for bigger platforms that might be feasible, it significantly scales down the potential for involvement of those who could serve as one of the most important multipliers, given their natural outreach and contacts – such as local authorities, NGOs, academia and others.

Themes and algorithms

In his introductory speech on May 9th, president of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, mentioned that he hopes that the concept of Spitzenkandidaten will be one of the topics – and that the Conference will call for increasing powers of the European Parliament, mostly through giving it a right of a legislative initiative.¹⁶ However, with the unclear system of agenda setting and gatekeeping, the question is persistent – how will we know that the citizens did (not) raise some topic? While the multilingual platform is a useful tool, and according to the rules of procedure, “the moderation of the Platform will be under the supervision of the Common Secretariat acting on behalf of the Executive Board”, we know too little about its algorithms and functioning of the Common Secretariat to be able to understand which topics get picked upon and which not.¹⁷

Outcomes

The question of the Conference and possibility of reopening of the treaties gained a lot of attention from the start. In March, the group of 12 member states signed a joint to take the treaty change off the table completely,¹⁸ while other EU leaders, such as Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron, hinted being open to adjust to whatever comes out of the conference. Officially that is the current state of play – the legal outcome will be derived from the thematic one. Given how unclear the methodology of finding the consensus is, it does not provide guarantees that the final decision will not be simply a political one.

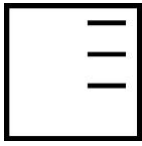
¹⁴ <https://euobserver.com/democracy/151802>

¹⁵ Interview - Belgium, France, Italy, Poland

¹⁶ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/the-president/en/newsroom/sassoli-at-the-launch-of-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-we-must-have-no-taboos>

¹⁷ https://futureu.europa.eu/uploads/decidim/attachment/file/4522/Consolidated_text_Rules_of_Procedure.pdf

¹⁸ <https://euobserver.com/democracy/151319>



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Furthermore, a lot has been said about the launch of the Conference in Strasbourg, but we know surprisingly little on the ending, except that it should be next spring. The closing will most likely happen ahead of the first round of the French presidential elections in April (as that is a reason for the insistence on ending in spring 2022 in a first place) yet it seems unlikely that the EU leaders would receive the outcomes already for the March 2022 summit. Talks about prolonging the consultation period beyond the one-year period are also heard in the Brussels corridors.

Outreach and communication

In order to fulfil its goal, the Conference needs not only to overcome logistical and political obstacles, it must first reach the European citizens – in the words of politicians, the “silent majority” that is not usually active in public sphere, but is generally positive about the idea of European integration. Considering that even with omnipresent political campaigns ahead of the (not only) European Parliamentary elections turnout in some countries does not reach even 20%, this is likely to be the biggest challenge. It would require a massive communication campaign, which, however, has not even started yet. Even the Europe Day campaign of the EU institutions did not fully concentrate on introducing the platform or the Conference itself – so how are citizens supposed to understand that this is “their moment?” Central promotion also has its limits and the message will need to be multiplied on national and regional levels, by local authorities. Which leads to the original questions – can governments, which are openly opposing the idea of greater citizen consultations, be expected to allocate their resources and capacities on a successful campaign for the Conference?

A ray of hope

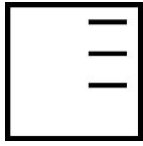
Considering the number of questions I raised, it may seem that nothing good can come out of the participatory exercise. That would, however, be a too negative assessment. Whatever the outcome, the Conference presents a new approach to citizen participation on the European level. It introduces new tools, which, successful or not in this case, could slowly contribute to making participatory tools a new reality and

democratic foundation, rather than an obscure new attempt at legitimisation of public policies. If the multilingual platform was elaborated and transformed into a permanent interface, it could be a viable outcome that can strengthen direct communication between the institutions and citizens.

The Conference could also be a platform to formalise trends that we see in various public opinion surveys, such as calls for a more ambitious climate policy, stronger social dimension or more competencies in the field of health.

Conclusion

The Conference on the Future of Europe arguably got off to the worst possible start. The pandemic and institutional infighting effectively killed the momentum of European democracy, briefly created by the European Parliament elections in 2019, and the final architecture of the exercise is too complicated to be transparent and/or efficient. As a result, the expectations of the expert community are extremely low, general public does not know it is happening, and the politicians keep fighting about it. Yet the way out is in a way just as “European” as the problems that got us here – the Conference can still be saved if its leadership presents a clear and transparent descriptions of how the processes will work – and all EU leaders will do their job promoting the Conference to their audiences.



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About the author

Zuzana Stuchlíková joined EUROPEUM as an intern in January 2013 was a Head of its Brussels Office from 2017 until May 2020. Zuzana received her bachelor diploma in Media studies and International Area Studies at Charles University in Prague and master degree in the European Studies MA program, during which she also studied at Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs in 2014. She worked as a research assistant at the Department of European Studies at Charles University in Prague and also as an intern at Trans European Policy Studies Association in Brussels in 2015.

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