

EU MONITOR

Conference on the Future of Europe – another victim of the COVID-19?

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- **The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is one of the flagship projects of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission, introduced the aftermath of the 2019 EP election and aimed at connecting citizens with various EU stakeholders and empowering them in the European project. However, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it and preparations are restarting only now. A closer look shows that one year into the project, it lacks a clear vision. Key questions remain unanswered – what will be the format? Who will lead the negotiations? What should be the role of European institutions? And is the question of a treaty change completely off the table?**
- **The EU needs to open the essential questions and continue the dialogue on the future of Europe, despite the ongoing obstacles in the form of a global pandemic. However, only with a deep consensus on what the stated objectives of the conference is, how do they are achievable, how it is financed and how it is ensured that the implementation of the conclusions of it can be implemented can it mature from an ambitious idea to a viable project. It is essential that the CoFoE's launch is not rushed at the expense of readiness - good will on its own is not enough and a rushed start could lead to a PR disaster that could further hamper European citizens' trust in the EU institutions.**

Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is one of the flagship projects of Ursula von der Leyen's Commission, introduced the aftermath of the 2019 EP election. The ambitious idea revolving around citizen empowerment was supposed to build on a momentum created after the EP elections and further strengthen the citizens' involvement with the Union, by inviting them to "*actively contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe and play a leading role in setting the European Union's priorities*".¹ Each of the 3 institutions have since then presented their ideas - the European Commission presented its vision in a form of a Communication from 20 January 2020,² the European Parliament did so in a Resolution from 15 January 15³ and the European Council eventually presented a joint statement on June 24th.⁴⁵ The timetable of the preparations was delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the planned start on Europe Day, 9 May 2020, was put on hold. Debates

about the format and content of the Conference only slowly reappeared in May and June 2020 - and a closer look shows that the project does not have much clearer vision one year after its introduction. Key questions remain unanswered – what will be the format? Who will lead the negotiations? What should be the role of European institutions? And is the question of a treaty change completely off the table?

All institutions stress that the Conference should start as soon as possible, as the COVID-19 crisis presents a new challenge that needs to be reflected within the consultations - especially the European Parliament pushes for an early start of the Conference, ideally already in September 2020.⁶ Guy Verhofstadt, EP's nominee for CoFoE chair even stated that he believes the conference could start on a basis of a mere political declaration of the three institutions and details could be figured out later on.⁷

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https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_89

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https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-conference-future-of-europe-january-2020_en.pdf

3

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html

4

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44679/st09102-en20.pdf>

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<https://euractiv.cz/section/budoucnost-eu/news/staty-eu-podporuji-konferenci-o-budoucnosti-evropy-nema-ale-podle-nich-vest-ke-zmenam-smluv/>

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<https://euractiv.cz/section/budoucnost-eu/news/konferenci-o-budoucnosti-evropy-potrebujeme-vice-nez-kdykoliv-predtim-mini-europoslanci-zacit-by-mohla-v-zari/>

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<https://euractiv.cz/section/budoucnost-eu/news/konferenci-o-budoucnosti-evropy-potrebujeme-vice-nez-kdykoliv-predtim-mini-europoslanci-zacit-by-mohla-v-zari/>
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Looking back at various previous efforts to find a “new narrative for Europe”, such as the Citizen’s consultations and various high-level debates we have seen intensively since 2016 Brexit referendum, I argue that starting the conference without a clear vision threaten to result in a loss of trust of citizens. And starting the Conference before clarifying what exactly could and should be the outcomes leaves a little chance that the conference will result in more than yet another a “business as usual.”

Original plans and post-COVID situation

Shortly after the 2019 EP elections recorded the highest participation of EU citizens in decades,⁸ clear interest of citizens to influence the next heading of the European integration necessitated a new paradigm following several turbulent years culminating in the termination of the Spitzenkandidaten concept by the European Council. Partly in order to appease the discontent European Parliament and highlight her dedication to the engagement of the EU citizens, then president-elect Ursula von der Leyen introduced the idea of a Conference on the

Future of Europe in July 2019. The project was supposed to bring together representatives of all stakeholders from both the EU structures and Member states as well as citizens and jointly work on shaping the directions the EU should be heading in the future. Von der Leyen’s ambitions were backed up by dedicating a whole Commissioner portfolio to the Conference – Croatian Commissioner Dubravka Šuica was put in charge. Herself also a vice-president of the Commission, she is supposed to work closely with two other VP, Věra Jourová, who should lead the talks on transparency and legitimacy of the EP electoral processes, and Maroš Šefčovič, responsible for inter-institutional relations. Even though the Conference is a Commission’s initiative,⁹ it is supposed to have a joint ownership by all three main institutions.¹⁰

However, it soon became clear that the original schedule has to be reconsidered. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted attention of the EU leaders to more urgent topics and negotiations on the Joint declaration were launched only at the end of June.¹¹ And based on positions adopted previously by the individual institutions, it is already clear that finding a common ground

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20191029IPR65301/final-turnout-data-for-2019-european-elections-announced>

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https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_89

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https://euractiv.cz/section/budoucnost-eu/news/konferenci-o-budoucnosti-evropy-potrebujeme-vice-nez-kdykoliv-predtim-mini-europoslanci-zacit-by-mohla-v-zari/?fbclid=IwAR0xpDtGIUBE1pifTfitijwgZkgrCrBsDL_qx6ftDhUwIW-xqT0aYiimwo

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<https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-Conference-on-the-Future-o~35cd70>

will not be easy. The biggest differences can be found as usual between the positions of the European Parliament and Council.¹² It is therefore clear that significant amount of work needs to be done before the Conference can start and the proclaimed September date seems unlikely.

Questions to be answered before lunch

Goals and expected outcomes

All three institutions agree that the aim of the Conference is to reflect on current challenges and outline the future direction of the European integration – and to make EU citizens and their sentiments the center of such a debate. Such ambition, however virtuous, raises questions. How should a legitimate follow up be ensured? Who should set the agenda? And what can be potentially achieved?

Opening the treaties?

Questions of an outcome are closely linked to the possibility of a Treaty change, as it shows a level of ambitions. While the European Commission and the European Parliament did not exclude the possibility, the European Council took the option off the table in its June 2020

conclusions, stating that “the Conference does not fall within the scope of Article 48 TEU” and therefore the outcomes cannot serve as a basis for a Treaty change.¹³ Instead, the Council would like to reflect the outcomes of the Conference in the Council conclusions. Such a non-binding approach, however, raises fears that the CoFoE will be reduced to a mere debating exercise, without any significant follow up. The European Parliament, on the other hand, calls for concrete legislative initiatives or Treaty change as a follow up to the Conference.¹⁴ Finding a middle ground will therefore be essential for giving the CoFoE a chance to stand up to legitimate expectations, raised by the ambitions if the project.

Role of institutions

Another big question mark is connected to a general set up of the relations between citizens and the EU institutions in the process. Two possible scenarios exist – the institutions could take a proactive role and prepare potential scenarios that would serve as a basis for a discussion with EU citizens. Alternatively, they could resort to a mere listening role and favor the bottom-up approach, reinforcing the citizens’ role in the process. In the second case, the leadership of the CoFoE would draft the

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https://wms.flexious.be/editor/plugins/imagemanager/content/2140/PDF/2020/Overview_of_CoFoE_positions.pdf

¹³

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44679/st09102-en20.pdf>

¹⁴

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/651959/EPRS_ATA\(2020\)651959_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/651959/EPRS_ATA(2020)651959_EN.pdf)

conclusions and debate the outcomes of the citizen consultations. European Parliament's proposal counts with both approaches – the EU institutions should take a top-down perspective in the Conference plenary, while the bottom-up impulses should come from citizen agoras. An approach of combining the two principles needs to be carefully combined with the two working strands of discussions. The original proposal of the European Commission stresses the need for an inter-institutional debate between the EP and European Council in questions of the electoral reform – and while legally speaking the competences to change the electoral law are shared by the two institutions, the nature of such reforms means that a broader consultation with citizens should be ensured as well.

Experiences with the Citizens' dialogues that run between 2017 and 2018 show that if the format is to have any workable results, the discussion must be given a clear structure and have a strong moderation, otherwise it becomes a collection of opinions, rather than a consultation. The year long exercise, based on contributions from hundreds of thousands of citizens, some 1,600 citizens' dialogues and the online consultation on the Future of Europe ended up in a mere 20 pages of informative document offered to the European Council.¹⁵ The EU institutions should therefore come up with a set of proposals and discussion materials - maybe recycling the White paper on the future

of Europe? - while still leaving space for bottom-up initiatives.

Looking for a new narrative for Europe... again

The CoFoE might be a new project in terms of proposed structure and scope, but it is strongly embedded in a debate of the past decades. A search for a new narrative and brainstorming on the future of Europe is an exercise regularly occurring in the EU, even though it was given an unprecedented impulse by the 2016 Brexit referendum. The panic following a decision of one of the biggest and most important Member States to leave started a series of various attempts to prevent it from happening again. What started out as a Bratislava process in September 2016 was later on branded as "Road to Sibiu", featured many interesting inputs and summits: Rome Declaration of March 2017, European Commission's White Paper of March 2017 or the Sorbonne speech of the French president from September 2017. Emmanuel Macron also introduced the European Citizens's Consultations, which were carried out between 2018 and 2019. The many declarations and debates reflecting the European integration, however, never brought any tangible change. On a contrary, the Spitzenkandidaten fiasco of 2019 showed that especially the European Council prefers the "business as usual" scenario above anything else. Position of the CoFoE is therefore not easy – it

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<https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta->

[political/files/euco-sibiu-citizensdialogues_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/euco-sibiu-citizensdialogues_en.pdf)

needs to build on the previous debates and yet avoid their fate and persuade the citizens that this time everything will be different. And to do that, a clear vision and structures need to be set up.

Ownership and structure

“Broad ownership by all EU institutions, Member States and our citizens”¹⁶ is a catchy concept, but exactly how should it translate to practice? Thus far, it seems that there is little consensus among the 3 institutions.

Chair

It is clear that the Conference will need a clear governance structure, with a recognizable figure as a chair. European Parliament appointed Guy Verhofstadt, senior MEP from Renew Europe, as its candidate to chair the Conference.¹⁷ The European Council, however, prefers “an eminent European personality as its independent and single chair; this personality should be able to represent the joint interests of the three EU institutions and be selected by mutual agreement”.¹⁸ The European Commission’s proposal does not specifically comment on the topic and leaves the subject to the inter-

institutional negotiations – it’s “triumvirate” for the CoFoE is however clear – VPs Šuica, Jourová and Šefčovič.

Structure

All three institutions agree that the CoFoE should built on the previous experience with Citizens’ Dialogues and include a broad variety of actors on all levels of governance and decision making. The need for combining various formats, as well as the online and in person discussions, is clear; however, no clear joint proposal has been presented yet.¹⁹ The most detailed proposal was introduced by the European Parliament, which suggested a two strand approach. First should be a conference plenary, composed of a “large ‘delegation’ from the European Parliament (135), members of Council (at ministerial level, 27), national parliaments (between two and four per Member State), European Commission (three Commissioners), European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions (four members each), EU-level social partners (two per side) – which adds up to approximately 227 members of the Conference.”²⁰ Plenary would be completed by “thematic Agoras composed of 200-300 citizens, with representatives from each

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<https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe.pdf>

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<https://www.politico.eu/article/parliament-picks-guy-verhofstadt-for-new-president-role/>

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<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44679/st09102-en20.pdf>

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https://wms.flexious.be/editor/plugins/imagemanager/content/2140/PDF/2020/Overview_of_CoFoE_positions.pdf

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[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/651959/EPRS_ATA\(2020\)651959_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/651959/EPRS_ATA(2020)651959_EN.pdf)

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Member State based on degressive proportionality (with a minimum of three per country) and selected randomly by independent national authorities.”²¹ The European Council’s position broadly agrees with the institutional representatives identified by the EP and stresses a need for an inclusive and broad approach, which should include also a civil society and citizens. In its contribution, the Commission is proposing a model focused on citizens’ participation, where Conference-related events will take place all across Europe, reflecting Europe’s diversity. In addition to the town-hall-style citizens’ dialogues involving Commissioners and other speakers, a wide range of other Conference-related events should be organized by local, regional and national partners on the ground: these would include national parliaments, social partners, regional and local authorities and civil society.²²

Two main pressing question remain here. First concerns the possibility of organizing in-person meetings of the required scope anytime soon with regard to the new hygienic measures. Representatives of the EU institutions stressed the need for a combination of online and offline tools to hold the Conference in the pandemic era – however, while the epidemiological situation in Europe seemed to be getting better in June, when the institutions issued their latest statements, July saw numbers of case increasing

again and the appropriateness of holding in-person meetings of large scale, however limited, are again questionable. Role of the online space will therefore need to be enhanced compared to previous plans, which will likely require a longer preparatory period, while also raising questions on the level of impact as opposed to a physical format.

The second question concerns mechanisms of citizens selection. Various proposals count with different approaches, ranging from randomly selected citizens nominated to participate in agoras, through participation of general public in accompanying debates to engaging organized civil society to amplify the Conference’s debates. While it may not present the main concern of the EU institutions leading up to the Joint declaration, the methodology here is crucial for a CoFoE’s credibility and possibility to effectively engage with citizens, especially beyond the bubble of those already actively following European topics.

Topics and role of institutions

The Commission’s proposal introduced two strands of topics for discussions. First one is supposed to follow Commission’s Political Priorities and the European Council’s Strategic Agenda and therefore cover broad range of topics like the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, economic issues,

²¹ Ibidem.

²²

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/qanda_20_88

social fairness and equality, Europe's digital transformation, European values, EU's global role and others. The second strand should focus on addressing topics specifically related to democratic processes and institutional matters: notably the Spitzenkandidat system and transnational lists for elections to the European Parliament.²³

Those suggested strands are on its own still fairly vague and need to be broken down to a series of topics introduced to the plenary of the conference and thematic conferences/workshops in the Member States. Furthermore, the scope of questions remains to be defined - wide discussions covering broad range of topics and perspectives are more fitted for a lengthy two-year conference spreading over 27 member states, a more detailed approach, on a contrary, would allow for a more tangible results that could be easier to implement.

Budget

The Commission's proposal from January 2020 counted with "appropriate means" to cover the extensive costs of the CoFoE. EU programmes such as Erasmus, DiscoverEU or the European Solidarity Corps were considered to support and promote citizens' participation in the Conference – however, availability of funds for such an exercise under the new COVID economic realities still remain one of the key topics for the

inter-institutional debates. One can imagine that the pressure will be to limit the budget of the Conference and it can influence the final scope of the project – especially its regional dimension.

Participating members

Another question mark hangs above the possible participation of representatives of the potential EU members and candidate countries, mainly from Western Balkans. The extended format would follow the precedent set during the 2002-2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, which featured also representatives of the future members. Even though the negotiations were much more advanced back then, with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe than there are now with Western Balkans, inclusion of the potential members would send the signal that Europe counts with them in a long term – and at a very little cost. Alternatively, potential exclusion would bear an unnecessary risk of further alienating important allies in a vulnerable region.

Conclusion

The process of looking for a new narrative for the European Union has been a "buzz project" of the past years – unfortunately so far without any significant outcomes. Involving the citizens directly in the discussions is therefore a good step in a desirable direction, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought

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https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/cs/qanda_20_88

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unprecedented limitations and recently tied the European taxpayers together by a common debt. However, history of lengthy brainstorming processes on the future of Europe which slowly faded out and had no follow up on a top of an obligatory declaration, brings risks of losing credibility in the eyes of citizens. The EU needs to open the essential questions and continue the dialogue on the future of Europe, despite the ongoing obstacles in the form of a global pandemic. However, only with a deep consensus on what we want from the Conference, how do we make it happen, how do we pay for it and how we ensure implementation of the conclusions it can be transformed from an ambitious idea to a viable project. It is essential

that the CoFoE's launch is not rushed at the expense of readiness - good will on its own is not enough and a rushed start could lead to a PR disaster that could further hamper European citizens' trust in the EU institutions.



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