



Taking Stock, Moving Forward: Reflections Following the Conference on the Future of Europe

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Foreword

On 9 May 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe concluded its work with the presentation of the final Report to the Presidents of the three European institutions. The Report includes forty-nine concrete proposals for the improvement of the European integration process and the *modus operandi* of the EU institutional architecture. It cannot and does not fully capture the depth and richness of the discussions and the deliberations that occurred throughout the Conference. Many interesting proposals and ideas do not appear in the final text but have fertilized the fruitful and productive interactions within the European public and will continue to do so in the future. At the same time, the Report neither elaborates nor critically reviews the deficiencies of the process, not only in terms of logistics but also occasionally in terms of substance and direction of the process.

The purpose of this publication is to offer an overview of the most important insights of the Conference, highlighting not only what is worth replicating but also what needs attention and remedy in case of a new round of citizens' deliberation on the future of Europe. The conclusion of the Conference should not signal the end of an one-off, pan-European, democratic experiment. We need to reflect upon the need and value of constant citizens' engagement. Deliberative democracy can go hand by hand with representative democracy, as long as it is appropriately structured and meaningfully conducted. This publication aims to contribute to this direction.

Jenny Kapellou
*Head of the Hanns Seidel
Foundation Office in Greece*

George Pagoulatos
Director General, ELIAMEP

The Future is Now – What next after the Conference on the Future of Europe?



Janis A. Emmanouilidis

*Director of Studies & Deputy Chief Executive
European Policy Centre (EPC), Brussels*

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), originally proposed by President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, has been an unprecedented transnational experiment in deliberative democracy that kicked off on Europe Day 2021 and ran for one year. The Conference has been a complex process involving 800 randomly selected citizens as well as representatives from EU institutions and other EU bodies, national governments and parliaments, social partners, and civil society organisations. In the end, this process produced a plethora of ideas and recommendations in areas that will determine the future of Europe: from climate change and the environment, to health, social justice and equality, economy and security, digitalisation and democracy, as well as values and culture.

But although the Conference officially ended on 9 May 2022, the post-Conference process and the overall debate on the future of Europe has clearly not come to an end, especially now that the EU and its members have entered a new era following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Although we can draw some key lessons from the experience, it is still too early to make a final assessment, as the Conference's overall balance sheet will ultimately depend on the changes it will bring about when it comes to reforming the European Union both in policy terms and regarding its future governance structure.

So, what are the key lessons one can derive from the Conference? What must happen to make sure that its outcome will be translated into tangible actions reflecting the *Zeitenwende* that we are experiencing since 24/2? And how can the Union enhance and modernize EU democracy by moving towards a higher level of citizens' participation?

Key lessons from the Conference experiment

The Conference on the Future of Europe aimed to give Europeans a say on what they expect from the EU and provide them with a greater role in shaping the future of the Union. But what are the main lessons from this transnational experiment of citizens' participations and how can future processes profit from this experience?

Key lesson # 1 – long list of ambitious proposals, but lack of visibility and political support

The *Report on the Final Outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe* (final report) covers nine broad areas¹ and brings forward a list of 49 proposals including 326 measures.² The proposals mirror the outcome of citizens' deliberations that took place in the framework of four European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) involving a total of 800 randomly selected citizens from all over the EU. The measures proposed in the final report are not spelled out in concrete detail. However, in sum they clearly point towards a higher level of European integration, as an implementation of the recommendations would require a substantially increased level of cooperation among EU member states. As such, the outcome of the Conference has shown that citizens are willing to go further than their governments, which often hesitate to pursue ambitious innovations at the Union level.

However, it is by no means sure that the Conference will enhance the political pressure needed to implement EU reforms, given that the CoFoE did not attract much public interest and lacked political support. The Conference suffered from a low level of visibility as most Europeans are not even aware that it took place. The meetings of the ECPs and the Conference Plenary, which brought citizens together with representatives of European and national institutions, failed to generate excitement among the wider European public and the media, who did not report widely about the Conference.

In addition, from its outset, the Conference lacked a sense of purpose and strong commitment from all member states. The European Parliament (EP), the Commission and national governments had different opinions about the ultimate purpose and objectives of the Conference. Most member states were

critical of the overall idea, expressing fears that the endeavour might raise expectations that the Union and its members would not be willing or able to fulfil. By initiating a debate about the 'future of Europe' without ensuring the support of all those involved, the Conference got off on the wrong foot.

Key lesson #2 – strong citizens' involvement, but lack of purpose and insufficient links to the (sub-)national dimension

Despite the lack of public interest and political support, the enthusiasm of the participating citizens gave the Conference a solid lifeline. The Citizens' Panels were able to actively engage citizens, broaden their perspectives and leave a long-lasting impression on them. When asked for their feedback on the process, almost all citizens expressed their excitement and satisfaction with the proceedings. They appreciated the opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas and to engage with policymakers and fellow citizens from other EU countries. Their motivation and patience, even when faced with some technical or logistical hitches, confirmed the important democratic function that deliberative processes can fulfil.³

But while citizens were strongly engaged in the Conference, many of them were asking themselves whether their ideas, contributions and proposals would, at the end of the day, make a difference. The circumstance that the overall purpose of the Conference was not clearly spelled out from the outset raised questions about the Conference's potential effects on EU policymaking. In future, it will thus be important that the overall purpose and objective(s) of citizens' deliberations will be spelled out as concretely as possible from the beginning. This clarification is also needed to ensure the buy-in and shared commitment of EU institutions and member states, given that they are the ones ultimately responsible for translating the outcome of citizens' deliberations into concrete policy decisions at the European and national level.

Another key lesson from the Conference experience is that transnational deliberations were not effectively linked to debates happening in the member states. Those who participated in the ECPs and in the Plenary were largely unaware of the Conference's national dimension. The absence of systematic links between the different levels of deliberation – from the local, regional, national to the European level – was a key structural deficit of the Conference. Without a common methodological framework, national debates did not reflect transnational discussions in the Conference either. Moreover, since every country was free to conduct events if and as they wished, it was essentially impossible to compare and link national debates with each other. In future exercises it will thus be necessary to enhance the links between transnational and (sub-)national debates. To foster wider European debates across national

frontiers, it will be necessary to intensify debates on EU-related issues in the member states and link these discussions with debates in other member states and at the European level.

Key lesson # 3 – inclusive approach, but lack of time and concreteness

The Conference allowed for bottom-up deliberations involving ‘ordinary’ citizens from all over Europe. People were randomly selected from across all member states to represent the EU’s sociological diversity according to five criteria: geographic origin, socio-economic background, level of education, gender, and age. Observers have critically noted that the final sample of citizens under-represented minority groups and over-represented well-educated people. However, in the end, the selection process did make the grade when considering the substantial challenge of getting 800 citizens to commit to attending (both in-person and online) a demanding deliberative process that extended for months, while the Conference proceedings had also to cope with practical complications linked to the COVID19 pandemic.

However, deliberations in the ECPs and the Conference Plenary were burdened by a lack of time and concreteness. Although the Conference managed to come up with a plethora of proposals and measures, the limited time citizens had to deliberate as well as the wide scope of themes discussed in the Conference made it difficult for participants to go into depth. Both factors affected the quality and outcome of deliberations, especially given the fact that citizens lacked basic information about EU institutions, their functions and competences, and the decision-making process in general, let alone details about the current state of play in each of the multifaceted policy fields they were asked to discuss. Consequently, participants tended to exchange random points instead of having a more informed and in-depth exchange that would have led to more tangible recommendations. The breadth and depth of the broad themes discussed were too large to be able to raise citizens’ awareness about the different issues or have proper deliberations during the sessions.

In addition, the process has shown that bringing together citizens and representatives is no simple task, as the exchanges in the Conference Plenary and individual Working Groups have on many occasions exemplified. Although the interaction between the citizens and the representative dimension improved over time, this particular challenge deserves more attention and analysis if one aspires to improve the way citizens and representatives will cooperate with each other in future deliberative exercises. Overall, the experience of the Conference has shown that future forms of citizens’ participation should give participants more time and avoid broad topics by making the

subject(s) discussed as precise as possible. If the aim is to come up with ideas and suggestions, a narrower topic and more specific questions would lead to more tangible outcomes.

The post-Conference process – what next?

The Conference officially ended on 9 May with a celebratory event in Strasbourg, when the final report was handed over to the Presidents of the EP, Commission and Council. But the post-Conference process is already underway and the debate on the future of Europe has become more important than ever. In this context, it is now important to do two key things: first, to translate the outcome of the Conference into tangible actions reflecting the priorities of the changed environment we are confronted with following the invasion of Ukraine. Second, to make sure that the EU continues its path towards a higher level of citizens’ participation in an effort aiming to modernize EU democracy by responding to the increasing calls to provide citizens with enhanced opportunities to shape policy outcomes in the European Union.⁴

The implications of the Zeitenwende and the need for a Wise Wo/men Group

Following the end of the Conference there is a need to make sure that its recommendations are translated into concrete actions that reflect the realities of the new era we live in. Russia’s invasion has radically changed the continent’s geopolitical and geoeconomic environment and this needs to be reflected in the Union’s way forward. Not only has the war opened a new major chapter in the “permacrisis”⁵, which the EU (and others) have been facing over the past decades. It also represents a structural break with the past, profoundly disrupting Europe’s security architecture and undermining fundamental assumptions in most areas of EU policymaking.

In its reactions to Russia’s invasion the EU has been more decisive, united, and faster than in previous crises. Together with its allies, the Union and its members have provided important military, economic and humanitarian support to Kyiv and put severe economic pressure on Moscow to stop its atrocities in Ukraine. Yet, the recent difficulties surrounding the agreement of the EU27 on the imposition of an oil embargo against Russia reveal increasing differences among EU governments – differences that also reflect some more fundamentally diverging views on how to deal with the *Zeitenwende* that we are experiencing since 24 February.

While the EU has managed to survive previous chapters of the permacrisis, it has not been able to make the far-reaching structural changes necessary to address the underlying causes

and multiple consequences of the crises that Europe has experienced in the past 15 years. But this time there is a need to seek and identify more durable solutions. Europeans should not find themselves in a position further down the line, where they will question themselves why they did not act earlier, more decisively and more forcefully. Today, many are asking themselves why the EU and most member states did not draw the right conclusions already in 2008 or in 2014 – this should not happen again.

Although the EU and its members have reacted more decisively to the war of aggression than many expected, this is not the time for self-congratulation. The EU27 need to do more: EU institutions and member states should expect and prepare for the worst to avoid the worst – this was the approach taken in the context of the COVID19 crisis and this motto should again guide the Union's actions after the *Zeitenwende*.

But the reactions of three main EU institutions to the Conference on the Future of Europe have been a mixed bag. The EP responded strongest to the Conference outcome as a vast majority of parliamentarians called for the initiation of the ordinary revision procedure (Article 48 Treaty on the European Union (TEU)) including a Convention, noting that several of the proposals require amendments to the EU Treaties.⁶ The Commission has categorised the Conference proposals and declared that it will announce “new proposals” when President von der Leyen will deliver her State of the Union address in September 2022.⁷ In addition, the Commission has announced that it will propose ways to ensure citizens are given a “closer role in EU policymaking”.⁸

Compared to the EP and the Commission, national governments have reacted very defensively to the Conference outcome. At the EU Summit on 23/24 June 2022, the European Council simply took note of the proposals set out in the Conference’s final report, while EU leaders had no in-depth exchange about the measures brought forward by citizens and did not agree on potential next steps in the post-Conference process.⁹ The European Council has not clarified how it intends to react to the proposals/measures that came out of the Conference; and the Council has merely published a table with a “preliminary technical assessment” of the proposals and related specific measures contained in the final report.¹⁰

The collective reaction of the EU27 to the Conference has been insufficient both with respect to the expectations of citizens and in view of the watershed moment we witnessed on 24 February. Given the call for reforms coming from citizens and considering the necessities resulting from the *Zeitenwende*, the EU27 should have the political will and stamina to prepare the Union for the new era – with no taboos when it comes to im-

plementing major policy innovations and establishing more effective governance structures. To do so, the EU should demonstrate both unity and ambition along a concrete reform path.

As EU leaders are not (yet) ready to agree on an adequate follow up to the Conference, the European Council should put in place a Wise Wo|men Group – including both experienced political heavyweights and representatives of younger generations – tasked with identifying core policy priorities and governance reforms that reflect current imperatives as well as the outcome of the Conference.¹¹ A Wise Wo|men Group could help EU leaders to agree on a list of urgent policy innovations, identify ways to improve the Union’s governance structure, and forge a detailed reform roadmap.

Several policy topics demand particular attention. The list should include the Union’s approach toward its neighbourhood and enlargement (in light also of the decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status), as well as the EU’s role in defense investments and the scope of its mutual defense clause (Article 42.7 TEU). There is also the need to redefine radically the Union’s energy dependence and its efforts to counter climate change, which are related to the EU’s economic resilience and strategic autonomy in core areas.

Regarding potential governance reforms there is a need to make progress also with respect to different other aspects mentioned in the final report. The list should include efforts aiming to strengthen the protection of basic values and principles such as the rule of law, and to improve the Union’s decision-making capacity through extended use of qualified majority voting in the Council. Finally, the Group should also consider how to deepen EU democracy by balancing the benefits of representative institutions with the need to enhance citizens’ participation in the Union’s policymaking processes by adding new instruments to the existing toolbox (see also next section).

Many reform objectives can be accomplished under the existing EU Treaties. But the Wise Wo|men Group might conclude that some innovations will also require treaty amendments to ensure that the EU will be structurally able to respond swiftly to current and future challenges. In this case, the Group should compile a list of specific changes. Identifying such amendments could help ensure that future efforts to adapt the Union’s primary law will differ from the experience of the Constitutional Convention in 2002/2003, as these efforts would adhere to a more clearly defined mandate and limited timeframe.

Potential additions to the EU’s participation toolbox

Participatory democracy is here to stay. EU institutions and governments can ill-afford to merely pay lip service to the need to

enhance democratic participatory processes. They must offer them concretely in the day-to-day policymaking of the EU while ensuring that the outcomes of citizens' deliberations find their way into actual policy practice. New spaces should be created where citizens can inject opinions, ideas and recommendations directly into EU decision-making; spaces that go beyond the existing consultation mechanisms.¹² The Conference experience has shown that randomly selected citizens can work together to deliberate on policy concerns relevant for Europe's future. They have proven that they are able to provide input that often exceeds the established silos of policymaking and comes up with policy suggestions that are more ambitious than the ones supported by EU governments.

The Conference should not be a one-off experiment. Ultimately, the process of enhancing the participation of citizens should be about changing the Union's democratic culture: an adapted mindset is required not only in EU institutions but at all levels of governance and among citizens.

The final report calls on the EU to develop new citizens' participation mechanism¹³ and periodically hold Citizen's Assemblies.¹⁴ There is now a need to translate these general recommendations into concrete actionable proposals reflecting the lessons learned from the Conference. The Conference experience does not call for a 'CoFoE 2.0' further down the line. However, it does contribute a great deal of knowledge about the dos and don'ts of deliberative processes that should guide future efforts to establish new forms of citizens' participation at the European level.

When seeking new ways of citizens' participation, the Union should follow a functional approach aiming to enhance the involvement of citizens in key moments of EU policymaking. Instead of putting in place a permanent citizens' assembly, the Union should add specific deliberative instruments to its democratic repertoire that will make a difference in key phases and moments of the EU's policymaking cycle. Four proposals aiming to enlarge the Union's existing participatory toolbox seem particularly relevant: (1) European citizens' deliberations on key legislative proposals; (2) multilevel citizens' deliberations on major transformative topics; (3) 'big tent' for a on the EU's strategic priorities; and (4) European citizens' deliberations in conjunction with a European Convention.¹⁵

Proposal #1 – European citizens' deliberations on key legislative proposals

This instrument of citizens' participation should offer citizens the opportunity to provide input on key legislative proposals presented by the Commission. What is needed is a deliberative process where a group of randomly selected citizens from all

member states are given the time and resources to contribute more meaningfully to the main orientations and concrete elements of key legislative proposals brought forward by the Commission.

The implementation of this proposal would not require any legal and/or legislative changes¹⁶ and given its exclusive right of initiative, it should be the Commission that determines whether a consultative deliberation should take place, depending *inter alia* on the potential public interest in the subject at hand and key policy issues identified in the EU's strategies priorities. In her speech at the final event of the Conference, President von der Leyen announced that the Commission "will enable Citizens' Panels to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key proposals".¹⁷ Now it remains to be seen what she will announce in more concrete terms at her State of the Union address in September.

Proposal #2 – multilevel citizens' deliberations on major transformative topics

Given the political challenges related to the implementation of major transformative projects, there is a need to raise public awareness about the potential benefits and costs of certain strategic policy decisions. In addition, there is also a need to increase people's buy-in, while simultaneously upholding pressure when it comes to implementing policy decisions into concrete action at the European and (sub)national levels. Citizens' deliberations on major transformative topics can help to generate EU-wide public pressure to develop concrete policy proposals. They would take the public's pulse on difficult policy choices and help Europeans understand and exchange positions and arguments with citizens from other EU countries.

The instrument, which could be implemented on the grounds of the current Treaties,¹⁸ should involve EU-wide, multilevel citizens' deliberations that concentrate on major transformative topics, including those identified as the Union's strategic priorities for the upcoming politico-institutional cycle. To foster a structured debate at different levels, the multilevel process should foresee local, regional, national, and European citizens' panels involving different sets of randomly selected citizens dealing with strategic challenges for Europe's future, like the 'green transition' or the 'digital transition'.

The key findings and recommendations of European citizens' panels on major transformative topics should be discussed with representatives of EU institutions, national parliaments, other EU bodies and civil society organisations in the context of a Plenary bringing together the citizens' and representative dimensions, including elected representatives from the regional and local level. The outcome of these multilevel deliberations (subnational, na-

tional, transnational) should be summarised in a final report, to which the EU institutions should be obliged to respond.

Proposal #3 – big tent fora on the EU’s strategic priorities

The EU’s answer to democratic challenges cannot only come in the form of new participatory instruments that are limited to citizens. Part of the answer must also emerge from improvements of the Union’s existing multilevel governance structures and stronger interaction between citizens and different levels of elected representatives.

The EU should thus examine the possibility of creating ‘big tent’ fora, where randomly selected citizens and elected representatives from different policy levels gather every five years to discuss the Union’s strategic agenda.¹⁹ Such fora could involve 500 to 600 members from all over Europe made up of citizens and a cross-section of elected representatives from all levels of European and (sub)national policymaking. The big tent fora would convene them to identify the EU’s potential strategic priorities for the upcoming politico-institutional cycle.

Aiming to inspire debates about the Union’s next strategic agenda in the electoral campaign before the 2024 European elections, participating members should in the first half of 2023 brainstorm on the key challenges that could impact the EU over the next decade and be asked about the priorities the Union should focus on in the upcoming cycle. The objective would not be to go into detail about how these priorities should be translated into concrete policy objectives or legislative proposals. Participants should rather present an overview of what they believe the EU should concentrate on in the years to come.

Proposal #4 – European citizens’ deliberations in conjunction with European Conventions

This option would allow citizens to provide input to any future European Convention in the context of the EU’s ordinary revision procedure (Article 48 TEU). The establishment of a European citizens’ panel ahead of a Convention, involving randomly selected citizens from all over Europe (including potential future EU countries), would embed citizens’ participation in future efforts aiming to revise the Union’s primary law.²⁰

In terms of content, the list of topics deliberated would reflect the proposals brought forward by member states, the EP or the Commission. This process would allow citizens to focus on a specific set of questions/issues without predetermining the outcome of their deliberations while also allowing them to insert their own topics into their deliberations and final recommendations.

The outcome of deliberations should be summarised in a final report for the European Convention to enrich and inspire the discussions among Convention members, including representatives of national parliaments, EU governments, the EP and the Commission. ‘Ambassadors’ from the European citizens’ panel should participate in the proceedings of the Convention as observers.²¹

The above four proposals are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive as they can be combined to offer both top-down and bottom-up approaches to participatory democracy in the EU. Overall, the objective is to achieve a gradual cultural change in EU democracy that EU institutions and member states support. Governments should thus endorse and actively promote the process of moving EU democracy to another level by adding new elements to the Union’s citizen participation toolbox as complementary add-ons to the representative dimension of EU democracy.

Conclusions

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been an unprecedented experiment in transnational deliberative democracy. But the conclusion of the Conference does not mark the end of the debate on the future of Europe. On the contrary, the severe consequences of the *Zeitenwende* we are experiencing since 24/2 require two key things: first, the European Council should put in place a Wise Wo | men Group tasked with identifying core policy priorities and governance reforms that reflect current imperatives as well as the outcome of the Conference. Second, to modernize EU democracy the Union should enlarge its participatory toolbox by adding new deliberative instruments aiming to enhance the involvement of citizens in key moments of EU policymaking.

The war in Ukraine has shown that only by acting together can the EU hope to remain an effective player. But this is by no means a foregone conclusion. The EU institutions and member states must respond to today’s transformative times by paving the way for an ambitious joint future. They need to match the understanding that we are living in a new era with a readiness to deepen EU integration in practice. They must show the political will and determination needed for a substantial reform of EU policies and governance structures reflecting the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Muddling through would not only be insufficient – it would be naïve and dangerous when issues of war and peace are at stake. Europe’s future will be determined now, and we should avoid moving ourselves into a situation where we will again regret why we didn’t do what we should have done at this critical juncture.

NOTES

- 1 The nine areas covered in the final report are: (1) climate change and the environment; (2) health; (3) a stronger economy, social justice and jobs; (4) EU in the world; (5) values and rights, rule of law, security; (6) digital transformation; (7) European democracy; (8) migration; and (9) education, culture, youth and sport.
- 2 See [*Report on the Final Outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe*](#), May 2022.
- 3 For a more detailed account see also the report by the High-Level Advisory Group of the Conference Observatory, [*Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?*](#), Brussels, 25 February 2022.
- 4 According to an eupinions poll four out of five EU citizens want to have a bigger say in EU politics. For more details see Hierlemann, Dominik, Roch, Stefan, Butcher, Paul, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., Stratulat, Corina, and de Groot, Maarten (2022), [*Under Construction – Citizen Participation in the European Union*](#), Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, Guetersloh.
- 5 See Zuleeg, Fabian, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., and Borges de Castro, Ricardo, “[*Europe in the age of permacrisis*](#)”, *EPC Commentary*, 11 March 2021.
- 6 See European Parliament Resolution, [*The call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties*](#), P9_TA(2022)0244, 9 June 2022, Strasbourg.
- 7 See Communication by the European Commission, [*Conference on the Future of Europe – Putting Vision into Concrete Action*](#), COM(2022) 404 final, 17 June 2022, Brussels; here p. 4.
- 8 Ibid., p. 5.
- 9 See [*Conclusions of the European Council on 23/24 June 2022*](#).
- 10 See [*Council document*](#)
- 11 For more details on the Wise Wo|men Group see also Van Rompu, Herman, and Laffan, Brigid, “[*Adding Ambition to Europe’s Unity*](#)”, *Project Syndicate*, 15 June 2022.
- 12 For a detailed overview of the EU’s existing participation toolbox see Hierlemann et al op.cit.
- 13 See *Conference on the Future of Europe: Report on the Final Outcome*, “36. Proposal: Citizens information, participation and youth”, measure number 1; Brussels, May 2022.
- 14 Ibid, measure number 7: “Holding Citizens’ assemblies periodically, on the basis of legally binding law.”
- 15 For a more detailed account of the below proposals see also report by the High-Level Advisory Group of the Conference Observatory, [*Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?*](#), Brussels, 25 February 2022.
- 16 Although the introduction of this proposal would not require any legal/legislative changes, the Commission should still adapt its Better Regulation Guidelines to give a formal role to these deliberations. The Commission College’s working methods should also acknowledge the role of consultative deliberations.
- 17 See [*speech by President von der Leyen*](#) at the closing event of the Conference on the Future of Europe, Strasbourg, 9 May 2022.
- 18 Even if the implementation of multilevel citizens’ deliberations on major transformative topics would not require any legal/legislative changes, laying it down in a legal instrument would be beneficial. As a minimum, the Commission should adapt its Better Regulation Guidelines to give a formal role to these deliberations. The instrument could also be added to the interinstitutional agreement on law-making
- 19 The introduction of ‘big tent fora’ would not require changing the EU Treaties. Nevertheless, it should be developed via an interinstitutional agreement and the Commission as well as the Council may decide to include provisions in their respective rules of procedure.
- 20 Recommendation 35 of European Citizens’ Panel 2 states that: “the EU [should reopen] the discussion about the constitution of Europe with a view to creating a constitution informed by the citizens of the EU.” See [*Conference on the Future of Europe, European Citizens’ Panel 2: “European democracy / Values and rights, rule of law, security”*](#). *Recommendations*”, (2021), p.15.
- 21 This proposal would not necessarily require changing the EU Treaties. The EP, Council and Commission could jointly support the idea by committing to it either in a political declaration or an interinstitutional agreement. However, in the case of a treaty change, Article 48 TEU should be amended to also reflect and codify the introduction of this new instrument of citizen participation in the EU’s primary law.

Five challenges of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) has been a unique exercise in deliberative and participatory EU-wide democracy. It is reminiscent of the 2001-2003 European Convention, whose scope and ambition however were much higher, in drafting a Constitution for the European Union. The CoFoE came with more limited scope and ambition, but was innovative nonetheless in involving a total of 800 randomly selected citizens from all EU countries, in addition to the delegates from the EU institutions, national parliaments and other components.



George Pagoulatos

Professor of European Politics & Economy, Athens University of Economics & Business; Director General of ELIAMEP; Member of the CoFoE Plenary as National Citizens Representative for Greece

The Conference Plenary comprised 108 representatives from the European Parliament, 54 from the Council, 3 from the European Commission, 108 from national Parliaments on an equal footing, and 108 citizens: 80 representatives from the European Citizens' Panels, 27 from national Citizens' Panels or Conference events (one per Member State), as well as the President of the European Youth Forum. 18 representatives from the Committee of the Regions and 18 from the Economic and Social Committee, 6 elected representatives from regional authorities and 6 elected representatives from local authorities, 12 representatives from the social partners and 8 from civil society also took part.

The workings of the CoFoE lasted from May 2021 to May 2022.

Drawing on the experience of CoFoE, we outline five major challenges.

The challenge of institutional purpose

A first challenge the CoFoE faced was the lack of clarity regarding its functioning, scope, and even institutional purpose. It was not clear from the beginning, and remained unclear even after the CoFoE was completed, what exactly the EU institutions intended to do with its proposals, to what extent these would be able to carry an impact on EU policy and policy-making. In other words, the integration of the CoFoE in the normal EU governance structure remained highly ambiguous and problematic. This lack of clarity generated tensions between citizens and EU institutions, creating high expectations on the part of the citizens that were bound to be disappointed, and a defensive attitude on the part of certain institutions, especially Council representatives and national governments.

Reflecting this tension, representatives of EU institutions occasionally adopted a paternalistic or perfunctory attitude towards the Conference, formally participating in its workings but without substantially engaging. They treated it as a box-ticking obligation while tending to disregard its importance and output.

Conversely, many citizens displayed a certain institutional arrogance towards the Council, the Commission, and even the elected parliamentarians of the European Parliament and national parliaments. “We are the citizens, you must listen to us” was a phrase often directed against delegates of other institutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been valuable in adding a vital deliberative and participatory dimension to the functioning of representative EU institutions. Citizens’ participation and deliberation enriches the EU democratic process, but the valuable contribution of CoFoE value is a function of its complementarity to the functioning of the EU’s representative democratic institutions rather than a flawed ambition of replacing them with a version of direct democracy.

It would thus be wrong to perceive the direct involvement of citizens under the CoFoE as somehow antagonistic to the functioning of the EU’s representative institutions. In fact, the institutional and policy complexity of the European Union, and contemporary governance in general, provide a strong reason why representative democratic institutions are the only path forward, but one that should be further enriched by the direct deliberative dimension introduced by innovative schemes of direct citizens participation such as the CoFoE. Elected representatives and institutions should open more opportunities for

the direct involvement of citizens, enriching the representative pillar upon which EU democracy sits, rather than purporting to substitute it.

The challenge of process

Process remained underspecified and many procedural details were left unclear until the last moment. However, let’s not underestimate the magnitude of the task. 800 citizens participated in the CoFoE, who were randomly selected throughout all EU countries, along criteria of demographic representativeness. The procedure of bringing all components together was a momentous challenge in itself.

That said, the Conference was heavily weakened by the fact that much of it had to evolve online. Though this was not an exception in a pandemic-stricken world, the lack of proper interaction and socialization amongst citizens and the other CoFoE participants made it hard to develop a shared understanding.

The process left very limited time and space for deliberation. Work in the European Citizens Panels (ECP) was substantial. But when it came to the thematic Working Groups (WG) most lacked a concrete agenda or an active chair, and both were badly needed. This reflected a defensive attitude on the part of the EU institutions, who perhaps mindful not to be accused of imposing their agenda or patronizing the meetings left many Working Group meetings to evolve in an unstructured manner. By the time Working Group discussions were finally beginning to acquire some structure, it was too late, and the Conference was nearing completion.

In addition, the process at the Plenary, though normal by European Parliament Plenary working standards, was heavily disappointing. The succession of an endless chain of speakers with very limited time at their disposal produced a chain of brief and generic monologues but nothing resembling a debate. It is important in future to strengthen deliberation by allowing more time for European Citizens Panels and Working Groups, where free exchange and open dialogue could produce substantial results. It is clear that any added value of the Conference can mainly result from citizens actually deliberating, with more time available for the ECPs and the WGs to brainstorm, debate and be able to formulate ideas and proposals into greater depth.

As said, the interaction between citizens and elected representatives remained limited. Elected representatives in general did not substantially engage with the citizens, and when they did they tended to agree and offer congratulatory remarks in a way that could often be perceived as patronizing. Citizens on their

part were quick to accuse “politicians” of not listening to the citizens, even implying that the politicians’ democratic legitimization was weaker than that of the actual citizens. Clearly, the stereotype of “pure” benevolent citizens vs the political “elites” is a very dangerous one in the era of rising authoritarian populism.

The challenge of content

The Conference produced a final Report covering nine broad thematic areas, bringing forward 49 proposals which included 326 measures. Many of these proposals and ideas, including those which had been uploaded on the CoFoE digital platform, were substantial and innovative.

But an additional disadvantage of the process that affected content and final output was that participating Citizens by and large lacked prior knowledge of the European Union’s institutions and policies. This made it harder for them to contribute meaningful proposals. As a result, many of the proposals and suggested measures fell into one of the following categories: they represented wish lists of generic desiderata, or things the EU is already doing, or things the EU cannot do without major Treaty reform. These of course are still valuable proposals, as they provide important information on what citizens actually want from the EU. And indeed, the vast majority of the proposals indicate that the citizens demand more from the European Union, want more European integration that will allow the EU to do more on behalf of EU citizens, not less. Still, given the lack of knowledge background, an opportunity was missed for citizens to indicate lower hanging fruits, paths of beneficial policy innovation that are institutionally achievable without requiring major Treaty reform that many would agree does not appear to be politically feasible.

Therefore, a path forward in future should involve citizens being informed by experts about the basic functioning of the European Union, its institutions and competences, at least in the policy areas of Working Groups where citizens have chosen to participate. There can be ways such introductory background can be provided without displaying a bias or appearing manipulative.

In other words, and drawing a broader observation, the CoFoE also demonstrated the limits of direct democracy if citizens are not adequately knowledgeable and informed, and deliberation is insufficient. That is where direct democracy, at national and even more so at pan-European level, will tend to be less constructive compared to representative democratic institutions, able to rely on professional representatives with the obligation of being informed, the resources to acquire an expert understanding of issues, and the time and process to sufficiently deliberate before reaching legislative and policy decisions. Repre-

sentative democratic institutions, liberal constitutionalism and the rule of law, and the EU culture of consensus-seeking and compromise, are the necessary ingredients of European democracy, whose participatory dimension can be strengthened and enriched by the additional direct involvement of citizens. Such was the contribution of the CoFoE and it creates an important precedent upon which the European Union must further build and expand.

The challenge of relevance

The CoFoE had a broad EU agenda, spanning across almost all major thematic areas, as covered by the nine respective Working Groups: 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. On the one hand, there was a clear effort to render the CoFoE agenda as thematically comprehensive as possible. On the other hand, the thematic breadth made it more difficult to focus on certain topics the citizens regard as important and to deliver a more coherent final set of proposals. Lack of concrete focus and specific strategic priorities undermined the relevance of the CoFoE.

The CoFoE was launched following a 2019 proposal by President Macron, who had implemented many citizens conventions all over France in the framework of a Grand Debate. The CoFoE was to be launched in May 2020, but was delayed by one year given the Covid-19 pandemic. When it was finally launched, in May 2021, it could only last one year (instead of the originally anticipated two), its completion coinciding with the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. The urgent exigencies of the pandemic relegated the CoFoE into a low priority, low-visibility exercise, that was broadly regarded as a diversion from the higher and urgent priorities EU institutions were called to face. National and pan-European media devoted very limited attention to the workings of the CoFoE, which never acquired real visibility.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the sense of CoFoE irrelevance grew, as the tragic reality of the war, including its economic and energy implications, crowded out most other issues on the Conference agenda. In general, it has proven to be extremely difficult to sustain the momentum and the attention to a process like the CoFoE when urgent high politics crises dominate the European agenda. On the other hand, the CoFoE topic of EU in the World, and issues of EU foreign, security and defense policy, acquired greater gravity in the workings of the Conference. Raising the public relevance of a process such as the CoFoE is a major challenge to be tackled.

The challenge of follow up

The Report produced by the CoFoE was embraced by a large cross-party majority of the European Parliament, which called for the initiation of a Treaty reform process, given that several of the CoFoE proposals require Treaty change. The European Commission has been positive but more cautious than the EP, while national governments have been divided as to whether a process of Treaty reform should be launched. The European Council so far has avoided to provide any specificity on the matter, given the reluctance or strong opposition of a number of governments to the prospect of opening up the ordinary Treaty revision procedure envisaged in article 48 TEU. A decision to open up the Treaty revision procedure requires simple majority of member states, but of course agreement on the content of a new Treaty, should that be the case, would require unanimous decision, which is hard to imagine under current circumstances and in the foreseeable future.

Citizens' deliberation should become a recurrent feature of EU policy-making, over selected legislative proposals. And citizens participation should be brought into the process when it comes to major "constitutional" moments of the European Union, including a Treaty revision, in the framework of a European Convention. The pan-European digital platform introduced by the CoFoE must remain open to citizens contributions. Over time its usefulness can increase with it becoming a standard point of reference for citizens wishing to submit proposals and ideas for the better functioning of the European Union.

The experience of the CoFoE, in both its strengths and its weaknesses, must guide future efforts and initiatives to develop a stronger deliberative and participatory European pillar that will enrich and complement the functioning of EU representative democratic institutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Key Actors and the Challenges Ahead

In March 2021, the Presidents of the three main institutional bodies of the European Union, the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council, signed the [Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), kicking off formally an ambitious experiment of deliberative democracy in the European integration process. One year later, on 9 May 2022, the process was concluded, delivering a [Report on the Final Outcome of the Conference](#), which compiles in a condensed way the most significant and meaningful aspects of the process. The Report comprises an overview of the overall architecture of the Conference, the Plenary proposals as well as the recommendations of the four European Citizens' Panels and the National Citizens' Panels together with insights by the numerous national events organized in the framework of the Conference's activities and points uploaded at the Multilingual Digital Platform. The Commission responded swiftly to the final Report and the suggestions and policy proposals found therein. In its [June 2022 Communication](#), it offers a detailed assessment of the feasibility of these proposals but also considers concrete means to embed participatory democracy in EU policy making, by activating, for example, European Citizens' Panels ahead of key policy proposals. President's von der Leyen's State of the Union address, in September 2022, is expected to include specific proposals on how best to enhance this crucial aspect of public policy making in the EU.



Spyros Blavoukos

Senior Research Fellow and Head of the 'Ariane Condellis' European Program, ELIAMEP and Associate Professor, Athens University of Economics and Business

Should we then consider the process concluded and all issues settled? Was the Conference a seminal success story, despite all logistical and organizational hurdles, worth replicating or an embarrassing failure that didn't come up to the original expectations? More importantly, what should the next day of the Conference include in terms of citizens' participation in the European public policy making? Should we advocate the elevation of this experimental participatory architecture to a permanent feature of the European political public space? In order to address this set of interrelated questions, it is first necessary to review critically the role and attitude of key actors in this process, including the European public, the European institutions, especially the Commission, and the EU constituent member-states.

European Public: Too Indifferent to Participate?

Proponents of a Conference 2.0 endeavour have treated the launch of this process as the apotheosis of deliberative and participatory democracy and urge for its replication. The Conference was initiated to provide a complementary -but not supplementary- dimension to European democracy next to its representative component. The core argument in defence of the Conference was its potentially transformative contribution to the perennial quest for more legitimacy and democracy in the EU.

However, democracy requires a political *demos* and the European one is heavily criticized for its infamous apathy towards the EU and a lack of interest for political interactions at the EU level. From the early 'permissive consensus' thesis in the 1970s to the low levels of participation in European Parliament elections, broadly characterised as 'second-order' ones, the European public has been largely considered indifferent to the future of the European integration process. However, if one reads the Conference's final Report and visits the relevant sites of the

EU institutional bodies involved in the process, (s)he would be misled to expect and imagine a huge interest by the European citizens. Has the Conference finally managed to mobilise the European public? Three points require our attention.

First, the Report does mention more than 52,000 Platform participants and close to five million unique visitors by late April 2022, more than 650,000 participants in almost 6,500 events, close to 18,000 ideas submitted. The absolute value of these figures is undisputable; however, they remain without a clear reference base. Given the uncharted waters in which the Conference sailed, it was a reasonable political move to avoid setting any concrete reference point of anticipated participation from the beginning. However, an envisaged second round of Europe-wide political deliberation in the future can no longer proceed without a specific nominal threshold to measure success in terms of participation.

This is particularly true regarding the significant variance of participation and engagement by the national demois. Looking at the data of the digital Platform, from April 2021 to February 2022, there is a big discrepancy among member-states in the number of organized and uploaded events, comments, and ideas. Figure 1 provides an overview of the total number of activities per member-state while Figure 2 shows the same number per 100.000 citizens, to control for the size of the country and the population. Luxembourg emerges as the champion per citizen with Hungary ranking second. Although Germany and France top the list in absolute terms, they are located in the middle of the group in relative terms. Obviously, these figures have an illustrative value only and should not be used for premature conclusions on the readiness and eagerness of national publics to engage in a debate on the future of Europe. More work should elaborate on the kind of activities organized and the number and diversity of actors and institutions that mobilized the national demois, let alone their links and interactions with national governments.

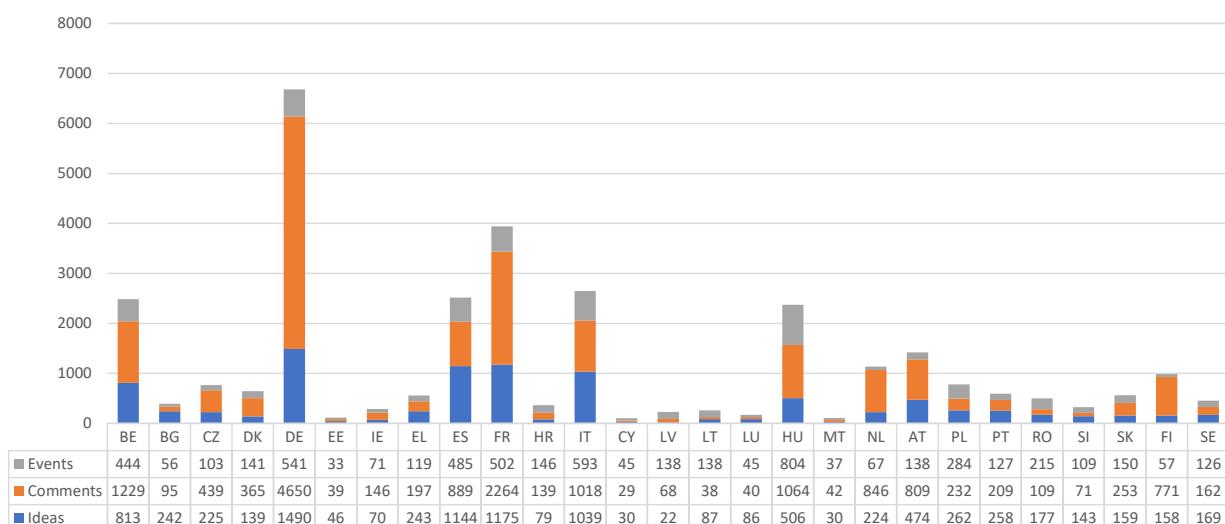


Figure 1: Contributions to the Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe per EU member state 19/04/2021 - 20/02/2022

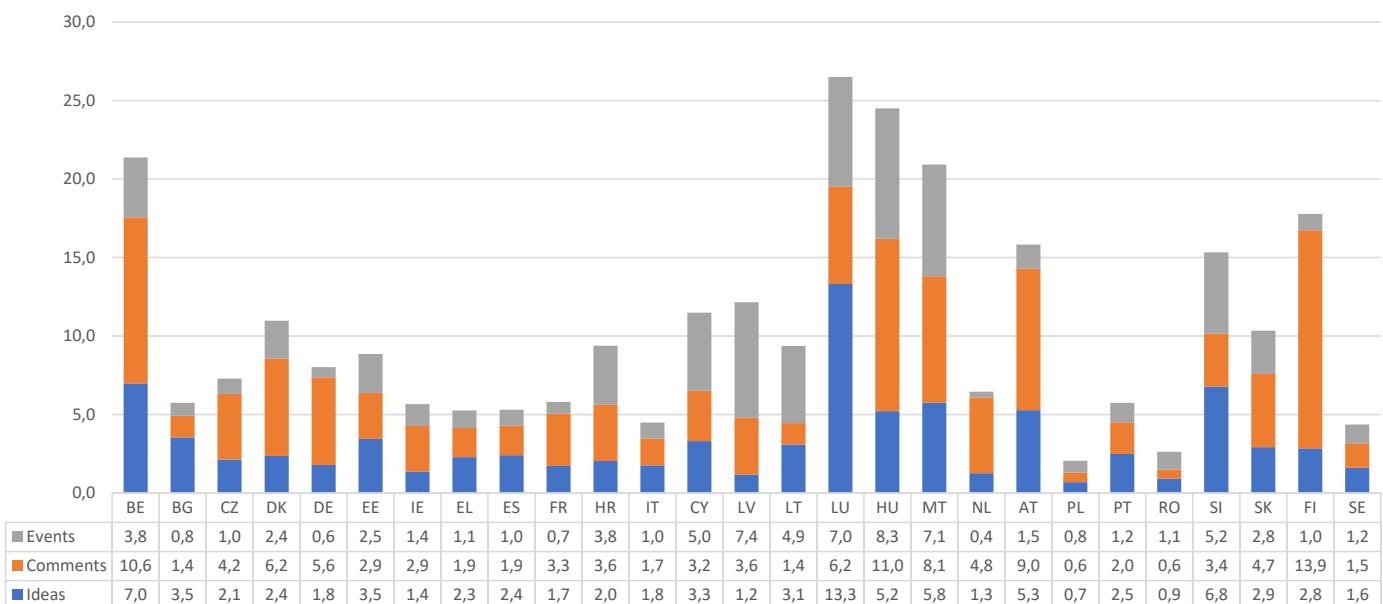


Figure 2: Total contributions to the Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe per EU member state per 100.000 population,
19/04/2021 - 20/02/2022

Second, and very much related to the first point raised above, the truth is that these numbers do not reveal much about the quality, scope, and depth of the public debate. This may not hold much for the deliberation that took place at the four European Citizens' Panels, the nine thematic Working Groups, and the Plenary, which has been fully recorded and available for analysis. Still, even for these meetings, a key insight is that their often unstructured framework that featured a series of successive monologues by participants without actual deliberation caused much frustration in the early phases of the Conference at least. It led to a gradual disillusionment by many selected members, who felt being played out and participating in a meaningless process. The themes were too many and the time was too short, with little interaction between the transnational and (sub)national debates as well as an overall ambiguity as to where all this fuss would lead.¹ If it had not been for the excitement and initial awe and bewilderment of the selected citizens, their assessment of the actual deliberative process would have been much harsher. This element constitutes one of the biggest disappointments of the Conference. True, the process gained momentum as it moved closer to the concluding date but again, this left several participating citizens with the bitter feeling that the first rounds were rather decorative and lacked substance. There are many excuses and justifications for this fact, from organizational hick ups to poor logistics and from citizens' inexperience to the massive nature of the envisaged deliberation, but an important take away is that any future Conference 2.0 venture should give much more emphasis on the early stages of the deliberative process.

Third, the deliberative quality of the events organized at national level, either by the EU member-states' governments or by the multitude of engaged actors, remains doubtful. To begin with, transnational activities were very few; the overwhelming majority of national events brought together national citizens

with very few exchanges of views across member-states. Thus, the potential of generating a truly trans-European political osmosis was close to zero from the beginning since there were no such requirements. This is another important lesson for future ventures to enhance the transnational dimension of political deliberation. More importantly, there is very little information on how these events unfolded; the end product in the form of the ideas is available but we know very little about the process of delivering them. A reasonable expectation is that member-states and national political *demos* with prior experience and exposure to such deliberative processes have fared much better than others with no such historical record. But unless some further evidence and documentation becomes available, any analysis will have to rely upon anecdotal evidence. This is a methodological shortcoming that cannot be addressed and hinders any attempt to unpack the black box of national deliberations.

My personal anecdotal evidence, stemming from more than thirty such national and transnational events organized by ELIAMEP between April 2021 and May 2022 that engaged approximately 1200 citizens, generates much hope, and does not confirm the hypothesis of an indifferent European political *demos*. Without claiming representativeness in citizens' participation in the organized events, most of the participants were eager to hear and share their views about the next day of Europe. Not surprisingly, their knowledge and understanding of the *modus operandi* of the European integration process was low to average, which inevitably affected the scope and depth of the deliberation. But there is no question about the refute of their alleged lack of interest or apathy towards Europe. To the contrary, (almost) all participants were fully conscious of the fact that the heart of public policy making lies nowadays in Brussels and that their active participation -beyond the national and European electoral process- is a *sine*

qua non for an EU more responsive to their needs. They had a knowledge gap vis-à-vis the modality and opportunities to join the public debate, but they had a high awareness of the benefits of political public engagement, even if only to avoid -what they perceive as- possible negative policy developments, beyond ideological or partisan affiliations. In a nutshell, and attempting a generalization leap from the Greek experience, the European public is not indifferent to the EU, but it misses the knowledge and opportunities to participate in European public affairs. This is one of the most encouraging conclusions, corroborated by many participants at the central (i.e. Plenary and European Citizens' Panels) level of deliberation as well.

European Institutions: What Role for the Commission?

First-year students of European integration become familiarised with the omni-present role of the European Commission in the EU policy making system. Has this role been replicated in the Conference and what role should we envisage for the Commission in a future deliberative process?

The Commission was one of the three signatories of the Joint Declaration that kicked off the Conference, but its role remained quite fuzzy ever since. Already before her election by the European Parliament, in July 2019, President-elect von der Leyen expressed the wish to involve EU citizens as part of a broader attempt to boost EU democracy, being very receptive to the EP's call.² This was intended to compensate the European Parliament for its defeat in the bras de fer with the European Council over her election as President of the Commission and the shelving of the Spitzenkandidaten principle.³ Von der Leyen pushed on the new Commission to this direction, as illustrated in the political guidelines and the mission letters to the Vice presidents/Commissioners that were to be closely involved (Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography, Vice-President for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, and the Vice-President for Values and Transparency). The [Commission's template for the Conference](#), published in January 2020, was less developed than the EP's one but finely tuned with it, both objective- and thematic-wise. However, in terms of methodology, the Commission endorsed a less regulated and guided process, leaning on existing, and previously tested, consultative models, such as 'citizens' dialogues' and the 'European citizens panels on the future of Europe' instead of the large citizens' assemblies advocated by the EP.⁴ At the end of the day, the Commission was able to push forward the transnational digital multilingual platform it espoused and came into terms with the deliberative framework advocated by the EP that revolved around the European and national citizens' panels.⁵

However, this initial enthusiasm of the Commission appeared to wane in the course of the pandemic only to resurface at the

final stages of the deliberation. In the interim phase, the Commission focused mostly on its brokerage and organizational role rather than providing political impetus in the process. It was overwhelmed by the task to secure the highest possible citizens' participation with due emphasis paid to include the 'non-usual suspects', i.e. citizens with little say and engagement in the European public debate.⁶ After the conclusion of the Conference, in May 2022, and the published Report, the Commission swiftly proceeded in the analysis of the forty nine suggestions put forward in the nine thematic areas of the Conference, grouping them in three clusters: proposals already in existence or in an advanced stage in the policy making pipeline, proposals for which there is some degree of preparation and proposals either partially or completely outside the scope and capacity of the Commission to act. Treaty revision is not ruled out, but emphasis is given on the existing opportunities to implement these proposals, not least by resorting to the potential of the «passerelle clauses» in the Treaties.⁷

The Commission's reflexes and the quality of the delivered response show the way for the future involvement of the Commission in any future EU deliberative process. The Commission gets much of the credit for the relatively smooth functioning of the process. What the Commission should and could do better is the task of raising citizens' awareness and knowledge about the thematic areas prior to the beginning of the deliberations.⁸ In other words, a clear division of roles may be discernible in the aftermath of the Conference. In this division, the Commission should be actively engaged in coping with the organisational logistics and have the overall responsibility of running the Conference 2.0, not least by ensuring the high level of citizens' preparedness for a meaningful deliberative process. Furthermore, what emerged by default at the end of the process should be integrated in the architectural design of the Conference, throughout the various stages of the deliberation. The Commission should provide continuous input on citizens' proposals, in particular clarifying which ones are already part of the Union's *acquis* and which ones constitute far reaching proposals requiring substantial Treaty changes. Acting in a neutral way, without commenting on the political feasibility or desirability of any proposed action by the citizens, the Commission will substantially contribute in this way to the amelioration of the output quality. This conceptualization of the Commission's role in the process does not negate the potential political leadership of the Commission but rather puts it in a more pragmatic perspective, much closer to its policy making role and assets.

EU Member-States: The Elephant in the Room

While the European Parliament embraced the Conference from the beginning and the Commission took on a managerial

role facilitating citizens' participation, the Council was the EU institution with the most lukewarm reception of the Conference, albeit with significant variation among individual member states.⁹ The contentious nature of the follow up to the Conference and especially whether a Treaty revision process should follow the Conference experience has been one of the most divisive issues, as illustrated by the non-paper submitted by thirteen member-states against the launch of a formal Treaty revision.¹⁰ The [June 2022 European Council](#) took note of the proposals put forward in the Conference Report without, however, any further concrete suggestions on the way forward.

The different level of engagement by member-states can be attested by their willingness to organise national citizens' panels. Throughout the Conference lifetime different types of events took place, with a mixture of centralised and decentralised approaches. However, according to the final Report, only six governments mobilised to organise central national citizens' panels.¹¹ This is an alarmingly low number, which provides much food for thought about the governments' reluctance to organise a key deliberative activity related to the Conference objectives. Following a direct communication with member-states officials, six more countries have claimed to organize such an event (the seventh being Denmark, in which case, though, it was cancelled due to the pandemic), although at a later stage, after February 2022, which explains why they have not been accounted for at the Report.¹² If this information is correct, we can conclude that an additional few member-states' governments mobilized, albeit with a substantial delay. The holding of a national panel was not their priority from the beginning, thence the delay, but rather the result of peer pressure by other governments or domestic actors. Overall, governments' reluctance to engage with the Conference, despite their rhetorical commitments, remains uncontested.

Further research should examine in depth the reasons behind the lack of governments' engagement. A mixture of lack of belief and interest in the process as well as organizational inexperience is the most plausible account. Peer pressure and best practices of other member-states may explain the swelling of national citizens' panels, even at the very final stage of the Conference. Given these insights, a future endeavour should seriously contemplate the compulsory nature of national panels, at an early stage of the process to provide meaningful national input in the European citizens' deliberation and the Plenary. It should be made clear that their conclusions do not commit by any means national citizens participating in the European-level deliberation but are nonetheless indicative of the national demoi's perceptions and aspirations of the European integration process.

Conclusions: Concrete Proposals in the Quest for Ithaca

It took Ulysses ten years to return from Troy to Ithaca; a long sojourn full of adventures and accumulated knowledge. The existence of an end point to the journey is a *sine qua non* for not giving up in front of adverse conditions. To continue with another historical metaphor, Rome was not built in one day. The Conference on the Future of Europe is not the end point of the EU reform process but rather another brick in the wall of a democratic and legitimized European Union. We need to critically assess it and make the necessary steps to mitigate its deficiencies.

From the preceding three-tier analysis, the following four insights should be kept in mind to galvanize any future discussion:

First, the European public is neither indifferent nor agnostic to the European integration process. It lacks knowledge and understanding but is eager to participate in a structured political deliberation process, assuming a greater degree of background preparedness and a clear objective.

Second, given the Conference experience, the next venture should set clearly defined mobilization thresholds at national and European levels and give more emphasis on the quality of the deliberative process with the elaboration of sophisticated Key Performance Indicators measuring the quality rather than the quantity of the citizens' interactions.

Third, the Commission can play a pivotal role throughout the process. It should take over the organisational tasks and the responsibility to provide background understanding of the thematic areas under deliberation to the participating citizens. Furthermore, it should monitor the ongoing discussions providing relevant information on the proposals put forward to avoid misdirection and waste of time and energy by participants. Finally, it should ensure the follow up of the Conference 2.0 proposals very much in the same way as it has done in its June 2022 Communication.

Fourth, Member-states' governments should be further mobilized not least by rendering the organization and holding of national citizens' panels a compulsory feature of the next pan-European deliberation process and encouraging transnational interactions.

NOTES

- 1 High-Level Advisory Group Report (2022), '[Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)', pp. 5-7.
- 2 U. von der Leyen (2019), "[Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission: A Union that Strives for More. My Agenda for Europe](#)", Publications Office of the European Union, pp. 19-20. "The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people, civil society and European institutions as equal partners. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council, and the Commission. I am ready to follow up on what is agreed, including by legislative action if appropriate. I am also open to Treaty change. Should there be a Member of the European Parliament put forward to chair the Conference, I will fully support this idea".
- 3 P. de Wilde (2020) "The Fall of the Spitzenkandidaten", in S. Kritzinger, C Plescia, K Raube, J Wilhelm and J. Wouters (eds.), *Assessing the 2019 European Parliament Elections* (London: Routledge), p. 37.
- 4 Such consultative schemes were organized by the Commission between 2017 and 2019. See European Commission White Paper on 'The Future of Europe', 1 March 2017, COM(2017) 2025 final and the '[Citizens' Dialogues and Citizens' Consultations: Key Conclusions](#)', 30 April 2019.,
- 5 Alemanno, A. (2022) 'Unboxing the Conference on the Future of Europe and its democratic raison d'être', *European Law Journal – Review of European Law in Context*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/euj.12413> , p. 9.
- 6 Ålander, M., Nicolai von Ondarza and Ilke Toygür (2021) 'Conference on the Future of Europe: what do the institutions want?', in Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza, and Sophia Russack (eds) [Managed Expectations: EU Member States' Views on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), EPIN Report, 24 June, pp. 8-9.
- 7 https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication_1.pdf
- 8 Cf High-Level Advisory Group Report (2022), '[Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)', p. 7
- 9 Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza, and Sophia Russack (eds) (2021) [Managed Expectations: EU Member States' Views on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), EPIN Report, 24 June.
- 10 The thirteen countries comprised Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Rumania, Slovenia, and Sweden.
- 11 Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, and The Netherlands. See *Conference on the Future of Europe - Report on the Final Outcome*, May 2022, pp. 22-25.
- 12 Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, and Poland.

When founding member states look at the future of Europe: Benelux countries' contribution to the CoFoE



Benjamin Bodson
Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations (BE)

As founding member states of the EU, the Benelux countries were expected by many to play a key role in the “democratic exercise which has never before been seen in our history or in the history of the world”, to quote President Macron in his speech to the European Parliament on 9 May 2022, that was the Conference on the Future of Europe (hereinafter: COFOE). A few weeks after its formal end, we argue that the Benelux countries have done the job. This contribution highlights key features of these countries’ experiences with the COFOE and provides an outlook on their perspective on the follow-up of this year-long process. Although there are clear divergences in how all three countries approached the exercise, they played their role in contributing to this experiment allowing citizens to raise their voice on the future of the EU. Despite different specific priorities, all three are among the signatories of a non-paper committing to follow up on citizens’ recommendations made in the framework of the Conference.



Ward Den Dooven
Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations (BE)

What Benelux countries wanted to achieve – and have eventually achieved

In an [open letter dated on 27 January 2020, entitled “A Benelux contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe”](#), the Benelux countries outlined their vision of the Conference by

starting with a short but clear message: “we want a better Europe”. They emphasized the “need to further build an EU that lives up to the expectations and ambitions of [its] citizens, and to strengthen the EU’s abilities to perform”. As such, they acknowledged the potential of the Conference “to bring Europe closer to its citizens, with the aim of strengthening democratic legitimacy and accountability, and further build trust and confidence”. They also shared two key messages, that were to be central in the approach of the three countries all along the process: (i) the “attention should go out towards delivering concrete results for the EU and its citizens”, and (ii) no one should create expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

Member states’ authorities but also civil society organisations contributed to the Conference through a wide range of events and initiatives. As we know thanks to a dedicated section on the [Conference’s digital platform](#) giving an overview of the main activities that member states organised or supported, these events and initiatives reached many thousands of citizens across the EU, including in Benelux. These fed into the Conference through platform reports, enriching the debate at European level. Inclusivity was a priority, particularly for the Benelux countries, with efforts made to include those who are not usually involved in EU issues.

Belgium and the Netherlands are among the only six member states – together with Germany, France, Italy and Lithuania – that organised National Citizens’ Panels. The recommendations of those National Citizens’ Panels were presented and debated in the January and March 2022 Plenaries of the Conference, as well as in the Plenary Working Groups, together with the recommendations of the European Citizens’ Panels on the same topics. Having followed this specific methodology in contributing to the Conference or not does not prejudge the actual scale of the countries’ overall contributions. A quick look at [the contributions to the digital platform](#), which also include events, shows that Luxembourg and Luxembourgish residents were among the most active of all Europeans. Dutch citizens appear to have been less active than their Belgian and Luxembourgish counterparts on the digital platform. However, it is important to note that the Dutch government had created its own digital platform, aimed at collecting the input of Dutch citizens on the Conference topics. Taking this into account, the population seems to have been as active in all three countries.

Let us now have a closer look to the actual contribution of each of the three Benelux countries.

Belgium¹

Belgium had quickly taken a strong positive overall attitude towards the Conference. Foreign Minister Sophie Wilmès, one of

the Council’s observers on the Executive Board of the Conference, called the launch of the Conference a “[historical, democratic, citizenly moment](#)”. She [emphasised](#) the importance of the Conference as a way for citizens to define the future of the EU in a way that addresses their concerns, and [fully supported](#) the initiative, citing Belgium’s [historical](#) and ongoing support of the European project and role as the seat of the EU institutions. 64% of Belgian respondents to the [Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe](#) preceding the start of the Conference said that they were willing to take part in the Conference activities, making of the Belgians the second-most enthusiastic population about the Conference before its start.

Belgian public authorities have widely promoted the digital platform of the Conference. As [declared on the Foreign Ministry’s website](#), Belgium wished to take the opportunity of the Conference “to reinforce trust in politics as a positive force by making democratic renewal a priority” and to experiment with new forms of citizen participation. Furthermore, Belgium concedes having “every interest in ensuring that its citizens do not lose confidence in the EU” and sees the Conference “as a unique opportunity to make participatory democracy a systematic part of European policy-making.”

Belgium did not sign the [non-paper](#) of March 2021 put forward by some other member states. De Croo [declared](#) that the Belgian government was not opposed to this non-paper but that it had “assessed the opportunity to sign it” and considered that “the document did not bring much”. By not signing this non-paper, Belgium showed that it considered that a list of priorities should not be predetermined, in line with the message of the [2020 Benelux letter](#). It was keen to respect the bottom-up approach promoted by the European Commission and to let citizens decide on the priorities of the Conference.

Belgium’s overall position is coherent with the general approach of its government towards the EU. When it came to power, the De Croo government indeed [promised](#) “pro-European engagement”, underlining that it opted “resolutely for a firm, pro-European attitude” and saw European integration as a preliminary step that was necessary to increase “levers to control [Belgium’s] strategic interests [and] values”.

From October to December 2021, a [Belgian Citizens’ Panel](#) was organised in which 50 randomly selected citizens, sociologically as representative as possible of the general population, came together over three weekends to discuss the topic of ‘European democracy’ and how citizens could be more involved in EU affairs. For the organisation of the panels, the G1000-methodology was used. The Belgian Citizens’ Panel resulted in [115 recommendations](#) prepared, discussed and voted on by the 50 randomly selected Belgian citizens. Beside this initiative, other events were organised

by federal but also regional authorities on the different topics suggested on the Conference's digital platform. Add to these a vast range of [other activities](#) initiated by other public but also private actors on concrete citizens' concerns, such as a structured citizen dialogue on "Living in a border region", a hackathon on "The impact of healthy lifestyles and climate change on the quality of life" and a debate on "Barriers for young people in the labour market". Unsurprisingly, in building its contribution, Belgium opted for a decentralised approach that respected a delicate balance between all regions and communities of the country. The [synthesis report](#) issued by the Belgian Foreign Ministry shows a considerable overall contribution to the Conference.

The Netherlands²

The Netherlands' pragmatic approach towards the EU, supportive of its EU membership "[but not unequivocally positive](#)", led it to be rather inclined to support the initiative from the beginning. Any suggestion to make the EU more efficient and more transparent is welcome and should this go hand in hand with a wider involvement of the public, then it is the way to go according to the Dutch position. Dutch pragmatism induces also favouring debates on content and policy solutions over institutions and procedures. However, this pragmatic approach made that the expectations towards the Conference were rather low.

The Netherlands de-solidarized itself from one aspect of the Benelux approach by being the only Benelux country to sign the [March 2021 non-paper](#). Indeed, this non-paper called for "a focus on real policies and specific results – on the basis of the priorities already agreed to in the Strategic Agenda of the European Council" and therefore outlined priorities on the substance of the Conference. This approach came in contrast to the one stated in the [2020 Benelux letter](#), in which the stance of not prejudging the outcome of the Conference before its start was taken.

The Netherlands focused on organising its National Citizens' Panel "Visions of Europe - *Kijk op Europa*", which was carried out both online (the digital platform "[Kijk op Europa](#)" covering all 9 themes, already mentioned) and in person. It was organised in two phases: a first phase gathering people's thoughts and opinions on 'what' they expect and want, followed up by a second phase focused on understanding their underlying opinions – the 'why' and 'how' – through group dialogues. On 1 September 2021, the online part was launched, consisting of a questionnaire and a simplified selection tool where citizens could give their preferences, wishes and recommendations on the nine Conference topics. The questionnaire was distributed to a selected representative and inclusive group of 4.000 citizens. In October and November 2021, in-depth online and offline debates were organised with citizens, also to reach young people

and hard-to-reach target groups. The final report entitled "Our vision of Europe: opinions, ideas and recommendations" ("[Onze kijk op Europa; meningen, ideeën en aanbevelingen](#)"), gathering the citizens' 30 recommendations on the nine Conference topics, was published in March 2022. Moreover, several other Conference-related events took place across the country, with again the aim of reaching groups less likely to be implicated.

Echoing what can be heard from other actors involved with the Conference, Foreign Minister Wopke Hoekstra – who co-ordinated the Dutch contribution to the COFOE – stated on Europe Day 2022, last day of the Conference, that in his view "[we should organize more often citizen dialogues such as 'Kijk op Europa'. Especially when it concerns Europe and its relation to the rest of the world.](#)"

Luxembourg

The Luxembourgish government had swiftly shown [its support to the initiative](#). It was to be expected from a country which relies strongly on the EU. Its European DNA was recently symbolised by becoming the first EU member state, in 2019, to make of the 9th of May an official day off. Early in the process, Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn had emphasized the importance of "[listening to the citizens' opinions and experience on the lessons to be drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic, including regarding the Schengen area, the free movement and the fate of cross-border living areas](#)". Luxembourg contributed to the exercise by organising several events at national level in an open, inclusive and transparent approach, with a sincere willingness of privileging a bottom-up method. For instance, the *Chambre des Députés* organised [its own national campaign](#), consisting of a number of events such as thematic panels (on the widening of inequalities, the economic competitiveness of the European Union, the management of migratory flows and climate change), but also new participative formats such as 'bistro talks' all around the country, a bike tour and "*Parliament@Home*", an initiative inviting citizens to organise their own discussions at home and send their conclusions to the Parliament. The [results of this campaign](#) were formally endorsed by the Parliament in a report on 1 March 2022. Priorities that stem from this report show not surprisingly that Luxembourgers attach great importance to the free movement of people and to keep borders open to this end – Schengen is not a Luxembourgish village for no reason –, but also to having a more integrated social Europe to reduce social inequalities and a more efficient CSFP but also CSDP (including advancing towards a European army but "cautiously"). Other events also took place such as a hackathon for students and young entrepreneurs ([L'Europe en 2030: Hackathon pour jeunes entrepreneurs](#)), to discuss the Digital Compass and the EU industrial strategy, and a trinational exchange between German, French and Luxembourgish high school students.

Are Benelux countries ready to follow up on citizens' recommendations?

As this short piece has shown, Benelux countries have so far played the game. Their contribution to the Conference shows us at least two things.

First, the contribution of the Benelux countries echoes the EU's ubiquitous moto 'united in diversity'. The three countries chose diverging approaches in how to handle their country's input to the Conference, but did it with a similar vigour, ambition and in a spirit of innovation and strengthening of the EU's (participatory) democracy. This is a common feature with the Conference's overall setup: the decentralized approach allowed flexibility and innovativeness to experiment on how to strengthen citizens' involvement with the EU and drawing valuable lessons on how to make citizens' voice heard in the future.

Second, the Benelux countries seem as supportive today of the outcome of the Conference as they were of its inception. Rather than joining other member states in rejecting the idea of launching a process towards treaty change in a [non-paper published on 9 May 2022](#) to respond to citizens' demands, they favoured joining Germany, Italy and Spain in signing [another non-paper on 13 May 2022](#) suggesting a procedure for the way forward, underlining their commitment to "remain in principle open to necessary treaty changes that are jointly defined" and emphasizing – in line with the European Commission and the European Parliament's positions – the need of providing "feedback" to citizens. This is deemed "crucial [to] show the citizens involved that their specific proposals are being taken up, examined and, provided they are possible and can command a majority, quickly implemented." According to these countries, Benelux ones included, "the presentation of the final report on 9 May 2022 [did] not signal the end of the COFOE. Quite the opposite." It is "the beginning of [EU institutions and member states'] responsibility", as President Macron put it in his speech on 9 May 2022. In the same speech, President Macron's call for "a European political community" did not go unnoticed in Benelux. Dutch Prime minister Mark Rutte found it "interesting" and said he was [ready to engage with this idea and help drafting](#). This is not surprising considering the Netherlands' "long tradition of favouring European cooperation over European integration"³. Belgian Prime minister Alexander De Croo expressed a similar positive attitude. In [an important speech delivered in Berlin on 9 May 2022](#), De Croo shared his own view of what the EU's renewal should look like, or what he called the "European unification". Nevertheless, he did not mention a single time the COFOE, nor its results.

On 17 June 2022, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen expressed her commitment to implement innovative ways of

citizen participation in the EU's decision-making process. This move is clearly inspired by the COFOE's experience. Could we see a ripple-effect on other levels of governance? There are some indications that suggest so. For instance, Belgium, a member state that had stated that it wanted to use the Conference as democratic experiment, is now actively involving citizens in the groundwork of its next state reform.⁴ The Conference, and the buy-in from member states such as the Benelux countries, has provided a paramount change in the way democracy and citizen participation will function in the coming years.

It is still too early to judge how the Benelux countries' willingness to follow up on the recommendations of the Conference will turn into concrete initiatives, actions, or votes in the Council in the coming months. One could wonder what adequate 'feedback' and 'follow-up' really means. Let us see what the Benelux countries' answer to this question will be in the near future. The Belgian Presidency of the Council during the first semester of 2024, the last months of the European cycle, will certainly constitute an important milestone to assess the concrete achievements.

NOTES

1 For a pre-COFOE analysis of Belgium's attitude towards the Conference, see: Francesca Colli & Benjamin Bodson, "Belgium: clearly pro-CoFoE, but unclear on the details" in Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza, Sophia Russack (eds), [Managed Expectations: EU Member States' Views on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 3 June 2021, pp.15-16.

2 For a pre-COFOE analysis of The Netherlands' attitude towards the Conference, see: Adriaan Schout, "The Netherlands: broad support for the EU – avoid inward-looking debates" in Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza, Sophia Russack (eds), [op.cit.](#), p.30.

3 Idem.

4 See, for instance, the digital platform [deman-toekomst-zukunft.be](#) that gave the possibility, from April to June 2022, to Belgian citizens to share their views on the future of the country.



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© 2022, Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung e. V.,
Lazarettstraße 33, 80636 München,
Tel. +49 (0)89 1258-0,
E-Mail: europa-abteilung@hss.de
Online: www.hss.de