



Conference on the Future of Europe: Insights from the Organized Civil Society and the Social Partners

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Foreword

The Conference on the Future of Europe was set in place with the overarching purpose to improve the interaction between citizens and the EU political apparatus, enabling the former to express in an articulated manner their concerns and ambitions for the future. Together with representatives of the three Institutions, national parliaments and other civil society stakeholders, this citizens-focused, bottom-up process had a dual objective: first, to create a new political space of public deliberation enhancing the transparent civic engagement that the EU is currently lacking; second, to provide a new and fresh impetus in the European integration process contributing to and reinforcing the legitimization of the EU project, which has been long criticized for its lack of democratic accountability.

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The Conference concluded its work with 49 proposals and 326 measures proposed by its plenary, focusing -among others- on green and digital transitions, the strengthening of the European social contract and the tackling of rising inequalities, as well as the creation

of a sustainable and competitive economy as a means to increase the prosperity of the European society. Although these outcomes have been debated in terms of originality and political feasibility, it is undeniable that the process through which they originated has left its marks. In this first year after the conclusion of the Conference, there are encouraging developments regarding the embeddedness of deliberative democracy in EU policymaking, not least by the Commission's initiatives to organize three citizens' panels on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility.

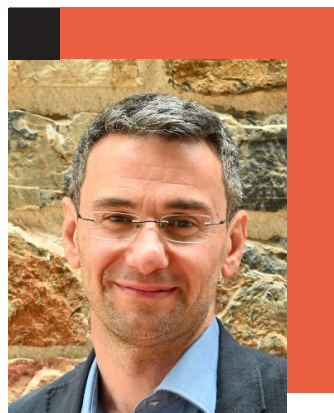
In this third publication of our joint working paper series, we turn our attention to a distinct set of Conference participants that consists of representatives of the organized civil society and social partners. They constitute key pillars of any attempt to build an inclusive and more deliberative EU policy-making system and hence, their insights and take aways of the Conference are significant and should be properly reflected upon.

Keeping the flame alive: EU deliberative democracy one year after the end of CoFE

An Overview of the Key Developments post-CoFE (June 2022 – June 2023)¹

In the concluding remarks of the Report on the Final Outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), published in May 2022, the EU institutions are called for concrete action building on the outcomes of the Conference and the deliberative momentum. Otherwise, the engaged citizens would be much disillusioned and the criticism of the EU as an elite-only project would be intensified. Illustrating great reflexes, the Commission responded already in June 2022 with the adoption of the Communication “Putting vision into concrete action”. The document contains reflections on the submitted proposals as well as additional proposals and actions -more than 500- that move in the same direction as the citizens’ ones. The key ideas and outputs of the Conference found their way to the Commission work programme for 2023, with 35 out of the 43 new initiatives being directly or indirectly linked with CoFE’s proposals.

In December 2022 a feedback event on CoFE was hosted in Brussels with more than 500 participants engaged in the European Citizens’ Panels, National Citizens Panels, and the Conference Plenary. The event meant to symbolize the realisation by the European institutions that consultation does not end with citizens’ deliberations and that tangible outcomes stemming out of CoFE outputs are necessary unless deliberative processes



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end up degraded to public relations exercises. By the time of the December event, besides the Commission's initiatives mentioned above, the European Parliament had adopted right after the conclusion of CoFE, in June 2022, a resolution calling for a 'Convention for the revision of the Treaties' and the Council had undertaken, in November 2022, a preliminary technical assessment of the proposals. These measures were not deemed adequate by the participating citizens, who expressed their discontent and frustration. A noticeable systemic communication gap existed between the citizens, who called for specification and concreteness, and the political and institutional representatives, who insisted on grand ideas and generic praises for the CoFE.² The need for a continuous and transparent feedback loop became apparent and remains a desideratum till today.

One year after the end of the Conference, in an overview by the Commission of what has been achieved by June 2023, action has been initiated on close to 95% of those Conference measures that are within the Commission's competence and in accordance with the Treaties. Perhaps the most significant one and that of particular interest to the deliberative enrichment of the EU policy-making system is the organization by the Commission of three citizens' panels with the participation of approximately 150 citizens per panel, randomly selected, from all 27 member states. From mid-December 2022 to the end of April 2023, citizens worked together in small groups and later in plenaries to provide recommendations to the Commission on the issues of food waste, virtual worlds and learning mobility. A total of 67 policy recommendations were produced on these three thematic areas.

Ensuring geographical representativeness, gender balance, and appropriate consideration to other socio-demographic elements (primarily age, education, and occupation), these panels constitute a direct derivative of the Conference, both in terms of organizational process and political rationale. Therefore, their existence testifies to the success of CoFE, being part of its legacy, suggesting that citizens' participation is becoming -admittedly to a small degree yet- a component of the EU policy-making system. This is further reinforced by the officially expressed by the Commission praise to their outputs and acknowledgement of their impact.³

However, it is yet unclear whether the citizens' panels are output oriented or legitimacy-enhancing. Both goals are welcome and legitimate, but many concerns have been expressed about their pursuit through the panels. Regarding the former, in order to have an impact, these panels should be better aligned with the existing policy-making cycle and get organised as early as possible in the formulation stage of a policy or a legislative proposal.⁴ Furthermore, the so far chosen issues had a technical dimension, especially the one on 'virtual worlds', with few chances for a meaningful contribution by participants with little relevant expertise. As

regards the latter, i.e. their legitimacy enhancing function, the three panels were organized solely by the Commission. If the process is 'hijacked' by the Commission, citizens' panels are in danger of being assimilated by the Commission's technocratic *modus operandi* without reference and input to the broader policy-making process and the other EU institutional bodies. After all, despite the many organizational hiccups and administrative bottlenecks, the involvement of the three main EU institutions gave political gravitas to the CoFE endeavour and the related citizens' engagement. The challenge for the Commission is to bring the other two bodies on board, which is currently a daunting task given their varying degree of interest and diverging vision on this issue.⁵ Furthermore, the three themes were chosen by the Commission with little if any involvement of civil society. Thus, they were not fully reflecting citizens' concerns, which is another point of concern regarding the legitimacy-enhancing value of the panels.

The Focus of this Publication

In the two previous Working Papers published in this series, emphasis was given on academics and think tankers who followed CoFE-related developments either participating in its various groups, sessions and panels or closely monitoring and analysing CoFE's deliberative features. In this third Working Paper, we shift our attention to organised civil society and social partners. Following our outreach campaign, we secured a roughly balanced sample of three plus two stakeholders from each of the two groups. Three of them wear the civil society 'hat', coming from the European Environment Bureau (EEB), the European Disability Forum (EDF) and the Civil Society Europe (CSE). The other two contributors represent social partners, coming from the Services of General Interest (SGI) Europe and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). All contributors are members of organizations with many years of action and experience, operating at national and European level.

The European Environment Bureau (EEB) has a significant imprint on environmental issues in Europe and abroad with its member-organizations spread in more than 40 countries. It is considered to be the largest network of environmental citizens' organizations in Europe. Its main vision of a sustainable future for human and nature is expressed through its involvement in a wide range of environmental policies. It takes initiatives to address environmental problems by putting forward a series of proposals mainly at EU as well as at the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development level.

The European Disability Forum (EDF) is an organization that represents more than 100 million people with disabilities in Europe. Its vision and mission are to assist people with disabilities to be fully integrated and be considered as equal members of

the society, fighting for the substantial implementation of their rights outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since 1996, the EDF has developed communication channels with the EU institutions, constituting their primary interlocutor on all issues concerning people with disabilities in Europe.

The Civil Society Europe (CSE) is an umbrella network of civil society organizations and sub-networks that share the same fundamental European values of equality, solidarity, inclusiveness, and democracy. Its main mission is the strengthening of the interactions between the European civil society organizations and the EU policy-making institutions. The CSE was founded in 2014 as an initiative of organizations that had worked together in the European Year of Citizens Alliance. In 2021, it took the role of civil society organizations coordinator and created the Civil Society Convention for the Conference on the Future of Europe. The purpose of this cooperation platform that brought together more than 82 organizations across Europe was to orchestrate the

role of civil society groups and maximize their impact in the CoFE deliberations.

Regarding social partners, Services of General Interest Europe (SGI Europe) is one of the three European general cross industry social partner, along with Business Europe and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). It is the primary interlocutor of EU institutions in the framework of legislative initiatives concerning services of general interest and their effect on the internal market. Its members are companies and associations from Europe, whether public or private, and from all administrative levels (national-regional-local).

Finally, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) includes 103 trade unions in 41 countries, 93 of which are national trade union confederations and 10 European trade union federations. ETUC as an agent of social dialogue represents the interests of European workers in the EU political system, lobbying for a Social Europe, where employees and their families enjoy a prosperous working and social environment.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Mr. Grigoris Mikelis for his excellent research assistance and his contribution to the organization of this publication.
- 2 For an overview, see P. Petit (2022) 'In EU Citizens' Panels, the institutions must not leave citizens behind', EPC Commentary, 13 December 2022.
- 3 See, for example, the interview by Commissioner for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/participatory-democracy/video/a-seat-at-the-table-europeans-place-in-eu-decision-making/>
- 4 See J. Greubel (2022) 'A new generation of European Citizens' Panels - Making citizens' voices a regular part of policy-making', Discussion Paper, European Policy Centre, 21 October 2022.
- 5 See P. Petit (2023) 'EU-level citizens' participation needs wider institutional support', EPC Commentary, 21 June 2023.

A mixed bag of outputs

I would like first to ask you to share your institutional role and engagement in CoFE. Whom did you represent in the Conference?

I was part of a rather small group of eight NGO or civil society representatives. This was a relatively small group, and I mention that because when the conference was set up, with the plenary and the working groups, there was no provision for any additional seats or any specific seats actually for civil society. This was the case not only at the beginning but also well into the negotiation process of how CoFE would be set up. They did not really foresee any civil society seats!

At the beginning, the argument was that civil society would be covered through the seats given to the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the social partners and there was no need for additional seats to civil society representatives. After we lobbied hard for civil society participation outside the EESC and the social partners frameworks, we got eventually what we got: 3 seats went to European Movement International and 5 seats went to the Civil Society Convention for the Conference on the Future of Europe. We then basically allocated the latter ones to 5 representatives of different constituencies: the Social Justice Movement, the Environmental Movement, the Youth Movement, people with disabilities, and organizations working on European Democracy. So, I was the one representing the Environmental and Climate Organizations.



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Could you please share with us an overall assessment of this initiative? What were your expectations when it began and how did it turn out to be?

We wanted to take part in this process, hence the lobbying mentioned above, because we believed that it would be something important and meaningful. It was clear to us from the beginning that it was not going to be a purely citizen-focused process, but that there would be a mix of randomly selected citizens, elected politicians and institutions. Thus, we wanted to make sure that we are part of that exercise. Early on we understood that CoFE would be the biggest ever political exercise involving citizens participation and citizens deliberation in the history of the European institutions. For the first time such a massive endeavor would take place in an organized and articulated manner. It would involve very high-level representatives of the European institutions as well as the national level of policy-making, all the way up to the level of President, which was definitely a strong and unique factor. An additional positive element was the availability of resources to organize that kind of format and process including the identification and invitation of 800 citizens quite representative of the European population. The result was a set of quite specific recommendations across a very broad range of topics, so that's quite impressive. I was also very happy to see how the citizens throughout that lengthy process grew into their role and became professionalized, being able at the end to defend passionately and effectively their recommendations. This development has its own importance for the whole exercise. So, overall, I think that CoFE was a success, and I know that some of the citizens who were involved in the process think the same. I regularly meet with some of them on various occasions and they are still under the CoFE mystic impact. So, definitely there is what I would call the long-term CoFE impact on people who have remained engaged in the integration process and have chosen to continue being active on those subjects in one way or the other.

Did the outcome of the Conference meet your expectations? Do you think there was a space for improvement? What could have been done in a better way?

I think that in terms of process there are quite a lot of things that could have been done better and should be done better in the future. First, the nature of the central question put to the participants was extremely broad. At the end of the day the Conference was about the future of Europe -on democracy, on environment and climate, on social justice, on digitalization-, so many big topics. Second, even though it was a very long process, I still believe that there was not sufficient time for the citizens to come up with meaningful enough recommendations. I can say that especially for the topics of environment, climate

and health, the citizens' panel and the working group had little time to discuss these very complex issues in depth. Ultimately the adopted recommendations were so broad and discussed in only a few meetings of the citizens' panels. In other cases, the focus was so specific that citizens could not come up with any concrete and detailed recommendations. Overall, my main criticism would focus on the breadth of the discussed themes and the lack of time to get enough knowledge and still have time to discuss them in depth. In addition to that, there was a lack of information and little -if any- briefing of the participants on how these topics had already been dealt with. So, once participants managed to identify the issues concerning them the most, they had no idea on which of these concerns policy initiatives had already been undertaken.

To give you one example, all the people in the working group I participated agreed that we need to reduce the amount of pesticides used, but then nobody was there to give them a summary of current pesticide regulation in Europe and inform them about the new targets, the market barriers, and so on. Thus, in the end the adopted recommendation was just that we want to significantly reduce the amount of pesticide used. But what does that mean? It is very easy for the Commission to come back and say, "Oh, we already have a strategy that says 50% reduction by then". Hence, our recommendation was just too vague to really influence policy-making.

Another important thing was the modality of creating an environment of trust, especially for citizens' panels. I was only an observer there; I didn't participate actively. But when it came to the working groups, there was this big committee meeting room and the European Parliament building in Strasbourg with which some of the participants may have been familiar but for an ordinary citizen it was out of scale. (S)he had never been there and had never spoken in such an environment. I still remember the expression in some people's faces when they first entered that room, and that must have been pretty scary. And then there was the Chair, who was sitting high up on the podium, a lady from the Czech Ministry of Environment, with professional politicians all around. There was no get-together, no getting to know each other, not even an introduction to who is in the room unless they introduced themselves when taking the floor. So, basically, one could only guess by what people were saying and identify their political and ideological background or their national constituency. "Oh, that must be a green politician, and that must be conservative politician, that must be a national representative". Overall, it was not an environment that immediately created some kind of trust. Furthermore, the presence of professional politicians in the room, like members of the European Parliament, created a power imbalance. For instance, there was a person in the room who was the rapporteur of the European Parliament on farm policy and a long-standing lobbyist before becoming an MEP, thus a full-fledged expert on agricultural policy. If you have something to

say as a citizen and your arguments are countered by such an expert, you must have a lot of confidence to defend your views. A final issue that hampered deliberation progress was that often the discussions turned into a political battlefield between the politicians in the room rather than the citizens.

As you have mentioned, several issues ended up with some concrete recommendations but still a lot of things could have gone better, content wise. However, to many CoFE observers, it is not the content of the process that counts at the end of the day, but rather the process itself, in terms of democratic legitimization and added value to European democracy. Would you agree with that?

There is no denying the fact that the process is important and has its own value. I can see the combined value of having a process, giving people the space and, eventually, also impacting on the individuals that participate. But, as far as I am concerned, this should always be the second consideration. Our first consideration and objective should be consulting with and hearing from citizens, from all walks of life, their concerns, proposed solutions, and feeding this information into the policy making. So, it is not just about information and civic education, but first and foremost about having an impact on political decision-making. If that increases the legitimacy of the process, the citizens' support for the European institutions, and political trust overall, these are great corollaries. But I think the first focus should always be on improving policy-making. If I represent an institution, I want to make sure that my proposals are relevant to what citizens need and what they want. This should be the primary objective of the whole endeavor. If then, other things come with it, that is great. However, I still feel that in many people across the EU institutions, but also within national governments, this idea of increasing legitimacy is the first motivation in a process like CoFE, rather than getting good insights into what is being done on the policy side. I think it should be the other way around.

Do you think this point of view is shared with the other social partners that participated in the Conference? Have you teamed up with other social actors in CoFE? Have you tried to join up forces? Although not all civil society groups are advocating the same things, did you see an organized approach by the civil society and the social partners to push forward a distinctive citizens' focused agenda?

Yes, we did collaborate, both regarding our comments and criticisms around the process, but also in terms of the content developed for and with the working groups. We had a very close consulting and collaboration mechanism with the five repre-

sentatives of the Civil Society Convention to get input from a very broad constituency of civil society networks across Europe. We also produced our own report and recommendations on the topics of the conference that we sought to feed into the process. But even beyond that, we also had a coordination mechanism with the wider civil society, the social partners and the EESC seats. So, we would usually have coordination meetings before the working groups and the plenary among the eight civil society groups I represented. In this coordination mechanism I would also add colleagues from the EESC; we shared many of the concerns around the process, and we also voiced those concerns together, during the conference. After the Conference and up to date, whenever there is space to talk about the future of deliberative democracy in the EU, we keep meeting. Nowadays, with the ongoing European citizens panels, some of the questions come back and we are pretty much on the same page on most points.

To wrap it up, do you think that the whole endeavor of the Conference was a success? Can you see it being repeated? What are the lessons learned from this process and how should we best integrate deliberative processes in the EU policy-making system?

I think it is really a mixed bag. It was neither a huge success nor a massive failure. It is a success in the sense that it happened, it worked well more or less, people from all member states participated in it, people were motivated, it produced some results, and it got the attention of the political leadership. To my understanding, all these constitute a success to some degree. Why is it a mixed bag then? Because of the weaknesses that I have mentioned, first and foremost the recommendations that came out. Some of them are quite precise, but others are very generic and meaningless. The latter group will not have any impact on the policy-making process, and that constitutes a missed opportunity and a failure. Furthermore, the response from the institutions has not been satisfactory. The different institutions produced their own response to the recommendations of the Conference included in the final Report. They were discussed in the follow-up conference last December.

This follow-up Conference was a big show in the European Parliament, but the real follow up in terms of like, "this is a recommendation, this is what people are concerned with, this is what we are doing", remained vague. The institutions, especially the Commission, took it as an opportunity to inform participants on all the great things that they are already doing, focusing on showcasing what they have been doing, rather than on the things that they have been asked to do but have not done yet. Obviously, I can mostly speak about the area that I am working, i.e. on climate and environment. In their response, they listed 50 laws, regulations and new policies that they have adopted. However, they did not comment on whether these are being

implemented, whether there is available funding, and whether member states are willing to actually comply with them. In a few bullet points they are basically saying, *“oh, these are a few points where what you recommend might have an impact in the future”*. At the end of the day, it feels like saying *“thanks for the recommendations, we’re doing everything already”*. I think that is a failure, especially in terms of attitude.

I think that if we want to organize such a venture again in the future, we need to ensure from the beginning that (a) the topic is more precise and more limited and (b) that there is a clearer process of how we will follow up on the recommendations. We are all aware of the success stories of citizens’ assemblies in Ireland. Participants therein knew that the recommendations they would come up with, would be directly discussed in the Parliament, and they would eventually turn into a constitutional amendment or a new law. This is a guarantee we are lacking at the European level. So, there is always the risk that any such deliberation remains at this relatively vague level; the EU institutions can just onset by listing a list of initiatives and say, *“Oh, it is already being done, so thanks for confirming that we are doing a great job”*.

I felt the same on the topics of the citizens’ panels. They may be chosen because it is an opportune moment for the Commission to get from citizens buy in and import legitimacy on what is being done, or they are chosen because they constitute the most relevant topics that are of interest to society in any given moment. Currently, I think the first logic prevails whereas the second should drive any deliberative process.

Have you gained something out of this process from your participation? What would be your personal, not your institutional, take of all these?

I have definitely gained a lot from this, because I had never been part of any deliberative democracy exercise in the past. That was definitely a very interesting first-hand experience of what it means. Both seeing how difficult it is, to make it work on all those different levels, and to see what it can do to people, I mean, how they can grow in such a process, and how they can also learn to take a more political position. These issues have been super inspiring to see. However, as I said above, it was also a great learning experience to see how difficult it is

and how many things must be organized really well in order to make the process work at the end of the day. These are key challenges for a good deliberative democracy.

What would be your final word regarding your CoFE experience?

Maybe one last thing that is worth mentioning: I am aware of the fact that it is very difficult to make such processes truly representative, and to really reflect the diversity of who we are as Europeans in our societies. I think that the Conference had a limited approach to that. There were some criteria to endorse diversity, but others were not taken into consideration. However, when the lack of certain aspects of societal diversity were brought up in the discussions, the European institutions were not really willing to discuss that. For instance, we suggested that they should engage in a form of diversity assessment with the 800 citizens that were selected, to find out who these people actually are. Obviously, this exercise would have been done anonymously and in line with GDPR. The response we received was that this is not possible and it cannot be done legally. Furthermore, it turned out that the participation of women was extremely low on the digital platform. We brought this up arguing that online spaces are not used equally by all; there is a gender gap, probably also an urban-rural gap, there must be also an age and an education gap. So, it is not a given that an online platform is necessary inclusive, so we suggested that we should dig into this and communicate this to citizens. However, that was not seen as a concern. The institutions came up with excuses like, *“Oh, a lot of people just didn’t tick the gender box so, we don’t really know how many women were there”*. To us, it was obvious that there were not enough women participating in the process but there was no intention to admit this failure in terms of participation figures. So, I think the question of diversity, and how we can make such a deliberative process truly representative is an ongoing question. I would not have expected it to be perfect, in the first place, but then I would have appreciated very much at least the intention to delve into it and bring it to the surface rather than pretend it does not exist. To the best of my knowledge, this representation imbalance has not been remedied in the panels that have been operating throughout the year after CoFE.

An integration project in need of constant renewal

In which capacity did you participate in the Conference of the Future of Europe?

I participated as a member of the Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe as President of the European Disability Forum of the European Confederation of People with Disabilities. It is an umbrella organization covering around 100 million people with disabilities, chronic diseases and their family members and has European organizations of people with disabilities as well as national confederations as members.



Ioannis Vardakastanis

President of the European Disability Forum (EDF) of the European Confederation of People with Disabilities

How would you assess the Conference on the Future of Europe? Do you think that such initiatives should occur more often in the future? Do they help in the adoption and implementation of European public policies?

There is no doubt that the European project needs to be constantly renewed, constantly enriched, constantly adapted to modern conditions. The European project, which is unprecedented in the world, in order to maintain this character, must always be as close as possible to and in constant contact with the European citizens. It must leave no room for nationalist, populist and extreme questioning movements to base their misleading discourse on the shortcomings, failures, delays, etc. of the European institutions and their representatives. The Con-

ference on the Future of Europe started with vision and enthusiasm on many sides, but its future is uncertain and weak.

The Conference itself and similar meetings, as we had the opportunity to point out, were not inclusive because they were not accessible. Not only to people with disabilities and chronic diseases, but also to other groups of the population experiencing social, digital or other types of exclusion.

Our view is that the Conference did not live up to the expectations of a reborn EU of equality, inclusion and equal treatment. We represent 100 million citizens, 15% of Europe's total population. We want and need to be part of the debates that shape the future of the EU. A future that must be inclusive, where policies are adopted that leave no one out, where the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is truly at the heart of the political debate that affects our lives.

Disability movements in Greece, in Europe and worldwide, have a voice and are present with expertise. Their participation in initiatives such as the Conference on the Future of Europe was particularly important because in this way, they expected to have a significant impact on the decisions taken at EU level and in the policies under development.

To this end, the participation of people with disabilities and chronic diseases in the Conference was essential. We therefore expected that the EU institutions would make every effort to ensure the effective inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. But inclusion failed here, as the platform of the Future of Europe Conference was not fully accessible to people with disabilities either.

Do you consider that these initiatives offer greater democratic legitimacy and can enhance democracy at the EU level?

Potentially, they can certainly serve the further democratic legitimacy of the European institutions and thus of the EU, if of course the proposals arising from these initiatives are directly used to reform the institutional functioning of the EU, to form a new relationship with citizens, to promote social dialogue, etc. They must address and approach the democratic legitimacy of the EU and its institutions through the inclusion of all citizens, without discrimination and exclusion.

The problem is that there is no match between words and deeds. As we have already mentioned, if the EU cannot respond

to what European citizens are going through today, in the storm of the energy crisis, in the war and conflicts on its territory, then we cannot expect a different behavior from the citizens, i.e. an anti-systemic one. The Conference was marginalized both by events and developments and by its very existence. On the other hand, we cannot even talk about a European Union of inclusion and equal treatment when legislation prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of life has not yet been adopted, when the scope of the European Accessibility Act excludes the built environment and transport, when existing EU legislation that promotes the rights of people with disabilities, such as the Employment Equality Directive, the Accessibility for Public Websites and Mobile Apps Directive, the Regulations on the rights of disabled passengers, etc., are not effectively implemented and when more than one million disabled people in the EU still live in residential care institutions, deprived of their legal capacity.

What did you gain from your participation and how would you rate your overall experience?

Given that I have been active at European level for the last 30 years and therefore I have taken part in similar processes in the past, there is no doubt that participation in such a project, where citizens, representatives of civil society, organizations, governments, etc. participate, is a win-win situation. However, the big question is not whether the participants win, but whether the EU wins, and that is the big question mark. So, the rating in terms of the initiative would be very good, but in terms of the outcome remains to be seen.

There are many areas of life where people with disabilities and chronic diseases cannot participate on an equal basis with the general population. Unfortunately, this was also true for this unprecedented democratic exercise, an initiative that did not achieve the inclusion we need for Europe. From the outset, we - as European Disability Forum (EDF)- decided that to be involved in the debates that shape the future of the EU, people with disabilities should be proportionally represented in the citizens' committees. Unfortunately, this did not happen. The EU institutions had to ensure a high level of accessibility to the digital tools, materials and meetings of the Conference and finally the different topics of the Conference had to address the specific situation of people with disabilities. None of the above was achieved. Nevertheless, we strongly believe that we all need to work through our institutions so that the conclusions of the Conference find their way into EU policies and actions.

Envisioning a socially and environmentally just EU

In which capacity did you participate in the Conference of the Future of Europe?

I took part in the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) as member of the CoFE Plenary in my capacity of Co-chair of the Civil Society Convention for the Future of Europe. This is an alliance of 82 European civil society networks initiated and coordinated by Civil Society Europe, with constituencies all across Europe, uniting hundreds of thousands of organizations and millions of citizens active in all areas of associational life: from education to youth and culture, social inclusion and anti-discrimination, environment protection, fundamental rights, democracy and transparency, etc.

The Convention was established in February 2021 and was actively engaged with CoFE works for more than one year to ensure scrutiny of the democratic functioning of the Conference and a real involvement of citizens and their representative associations in this process. Our engagement envisaged to bring forward the voice and the vision of citizens' associations for equality, justice and solidarity, as well as the protection (and practice) of human rights and environment, which we believe should be the core principles guiding all EU policies, both internally and externally.

The intersection of discriminations based on gender, age, race or economic status is a major challenge of today's societies;



Alexandrina Najmowicz

Secretary General at European Civic Forum (ECF), Co-chair of the Civil Society Convention for the Future of Europe, initiated and coordinated by Civil Society Europe (CSE)

many are prevented from enjoying the rights and possibilities for self and collective emancipation. Through our internal work and participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe's plenary and working groups, we strove to voice the concerns and amplify the voices of those who struggle to access their rights, who are most often at the periphery of participatory processes, invisible and disillusioned with societies of unequal relationships and competition between people.

How would you assess this initiative? Do you think that such initiatives should occur more often in the future? Do they help in the adoption and implementation of European public policies?

The Conference on the Future of Europe came at a crucial time for Europe and its people. The social and economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic, the climate crisis, challenges to democracy and EU claimed values demand proper and coordinated policies, increased transparency and stronger involvement of citizens and their representative associations. As Civil Society Convention, we strongly supported and continue to support this initiative, as it brought together hundreds of EU citizens with different backgrounds and experiences. This is essential to strengthen deliberative democracy at the EU level. The participation of organised civil society as a mediating channel would have been crucial in this respect. At a time when civil society was, and still is, in the frontline trying to mitigate the dire costs of the multiple crisis we are faced with, structured civil dialogue with the full range of civil society actors encompassing all its social and economic components is a fundamental element of the European democracy.

In a process aiming at putting citizens at the centre of the European deliberations, the EU should have started with involving citizens' representative associations in all steps of the preparations and governance of the Convention.

Regrettably, from the very start of the CoFE process, the involvement of civil society was limited, as civil society organizations (CSOs) were considered as mere multipliers of an initiative centered on individual citizens, which had a strong communication component. As a result, civil society was not involved in the definition of the Conference's objectives, methodology and governance structure. The Joint Declaration establishing the CoFE process allocated a mostly promotional role to civil society. CSOs were expected to publicize the Conference, notably through their own events, and encourage citizens to contribute content to the Multilingual Digital Platform. No specific role was foreseen for civil society in the Conference's governance, nor in terms of facilitation or input in the citizens' panels. The CoFE setting was such that relations between the CSOs and the citizens' panels were practically impossible, as if citizens should be

preserved from being influenced. However, institutional experts played an influential role in the citizens' panels and some of the experts involved in the first phases, including, for example, members of the EU agency Frontex, cannot be considered as neutral.

Generally speaking, the experts involved in the panels lacked diversity in many ways. Most of them were academics or representatives of think tanks or political institutions, with very few exceptions to this rule. There was a gender imbalance among the official experts (listed on the CoFE website). The lack of civil society experts resulted in limited feedback on the impact of EU policies and legislation on the ground.

Observers were invited to each of the citizens' panels very late, which made it very difficult for them to plan their participation in both financial and logistical terms. Also, civil society expertise was often mediated by the EU institutions or limited to an observer role.

For all these reasons, citizens in the panels were not provided with a broad enough spectrum of expertise and opinion. They were also not fully informed about ongoing policy and legislative developments at the EU level, and about challenges and issues at stake in the different areas. This led to the development of recommendations that were less impactful than they could have been. It would have been more effective to have included civil society and other experts able to present different points of view and thus present a broader perspective to citizens.

Moreover, inclusiveness and equal participation in the process is key to ensure its legitimacy and legacy. Random selection of citizens alone is often not enough; only by proactively reaching out to and hearing the voice of people that are remote from usual engagement channels and feel left behind by democratic processes can we reinvigorate European democracy for all. The participation of organized civil society as a mediating channel is crucial in this respect.

Last, but not least, engaging European citizens in deliberative processes without a clear vision on the outcome, impact and meaningfulness of their participation showed from the start a lack of commitment that shed weakness on the process and further on, in the follow-up phase, risks fueling frustration and disengagement in the long run.

Do you consider that these initiatives offer greater democratic legitimacy and can enhance democracy at the EU level?

The Joint Declaration on the CoFE stated that the Conference was meant to be "a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union [and to give them] a greater role in shaping the

Union's future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience". Taking into account all the limitations in the organization and facilitation of the citizens' panels, the latter led to concrete recommendations that contain a number of positive proposals. Despite all the difficulties mentioned before, the citizens' recommendations were mostly reinforced by the discussions in the Plenary and its working groups and were included in the final CoFE proposals. Questions remain, however, on the follow-up on these recommendations since the views of the European Parliament, the European Commission and EU Member States diverge.

What has been considered as a ground-breaking exercise, with the involvement of citizens in key EU discussions, had little impact on policies, and needs to be reviewed and assessed thoroughly in order to learn from the CoFE process and improve future deliberative formats in the EU context.

The EU institutions and Member States need to clearly and transparently define the objectives and methodology of the follow-up of the CoFE, as well as how the follow-up will be regularly monitored, in order to guarantee a comprehensive and effective implementation of the final CoFE recommendations. CSOs need to be involved in the definition of the follow-up and the monitoring process from the start, just as they need to be involved in the follow-up and monitoring processes themselves. This will help ensure that the follow-up of the CoFE is well-structured, effective and accessible to all, including persons with disabilities.

The conference conclusions have called for a strong and better involvement of civil society in the decision-making process. The

process should be underpinned by an overall strategy for the involvement of citizens and their representative organizations. EU institutions and Member States should conclude an inter-institutional agreement on EU civil dialogue to implement Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty; such an agreement has also been called for by the European Parliament (EP) in its June 2022 resolution.

What did you gain from your participation and how would you rate your overall experience?

Through our participation in the CoFE process, as CSOs Convention, we had the opportunity to convey strong messages and our vision for a socially and environmentally just EU as the precondition for achieving an inclusive, sustainable and just future for all. Achieving this vision requires transformative measures in multiple policy areas to tackle inequalities, social and racial injustices: a sustainable economic model, the promotion of equal opportunities and the implementation of fair working conditions, as well as the provision of social protection for all.

European democracy must deliver a better life for European citizens. It must be able to tackle the challenges of social and economic inequalities, the critical moment for the environment and the representation of the most marginalized people in society using an inclusive approach.

As civil society organizations active at the European level, the CoFE process was short of our expectations, but we shall continue to engage our constituencies across Europe and reclaim a more structured participation in EU policy making. Times are not easy – there is no point pretending not to see it - but we shall not give up!

An enriching exercise of direct interaction with citizens

In which capacity did you participate in the Conference of the Future of Europe?

I was nominated on behalf of SGI Europe, one of the main European social partners that participated in the Conference. I was a member of the Plenary and more specifically I was engaged in the working group on environment and healthcare.

How would you assess the Conference overall? What is your personal take on it and do you think that such initiatives are useful and should occur more often in the future?

From a very personal point of view, I think this was really a game-changer. The methods of the CoFE can become a new way of EU policy making, if, of course, it is well developed, appropriately adjusted and refined in use. But we are not there yet. If there is no follow up to this initiative, it will remain a very nice experiment with no concrete outcome stemming from it. I think that it could be institutionalized and become a regular feature of the EU policy making system. This heritage can be seen in the citizens' panel methodology put forward by the Commission throughout last year. The take of SGI Europe members on the CoFE is however different. For them, the CoFE is not perceived as a game-changing exercise. The majority of SGI Europe's members keep wondering about the



Valeria Ronzitti
Secretary General,
SGI Europe (Services of General Interest)

time we spent on this, and what is the added value to them. They represent a specific constituency, with concrete interests on a local level and with daily challenges that had to be addressed during the pandemic. In such a very long-term process, and considering the context, they could not see the immediate results.

Do you think that this kind of assessment is shared by most social partners or is it only shared by your own institution?

I think that, among the EU stakeholders involved in the CoFE, SGI Europe was one of the most positive about it. Many other stakeholders expressed concerns about the exercise from the very beginning or engaged in it with a focus solely on their specific perspectives and needs.

As SGI Europe's members provide services of general interest that are closely linked to the citizens, the CoFE was very close to our daily operations. We are very much used to listening to citizens because they are our clients and the end-users of the services we deliver. So, for me, it was easier to adopt a broader focus and engage constructively in the debates brought forward by citizens while defending SGIs' values and principles.

Do you consider that these initiatives offer greater democratic legitimacy and can enhance democracy at the EU level?

Initiatives like CoFE can provide democratic added value only if it is carried on in the right and appropriate way. Otherwise, it acquires a purely symbolic meaning, a formal democratic process with the EU institution having ticked the box "we have consulted citizens" without any proper impact. So, it can really be a very powerful instrument for democracy if it is well used, which means that it requires a lot of investment from the EU side in orchestrating such an endeavor.

What did you gain from your participation and how would you rate your overall experience?

The main achievement for SGI Europe in the process is that all the priorities put forward by the citizens were very much aligned with our own priorities. As I said, we deliver services that are very close to the citizens, and realizing that citizens were calling for what we have been calling for years, i.e. more investments in healthcare, more investment in transport, energy, the physical and the social infrastructure, was really reassuring. For us, this was a very helpful exercise to check our rapport with citizens as regards the future of Europe.

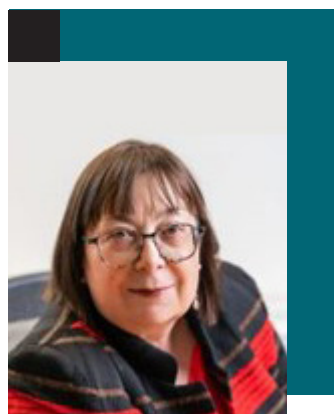
I think that the CoFE was, overall, a very enriching exercise to directly interact with citizens. We always shape policies that at the end of the day should benefit them, but we do not have in our daily practice in Brussels the occasion to have this direct relation. Thus, for me personally, this experience was very helpful, bringing me much closer to the ground, which is very difficult to get in the "Brussels bubble". I was also really impressed to see that day-by-day, participating citizens were getting closer to Europe and were grasping the importance of Europe.

However, as we cannot yet see the results of the experiment, I believe it will take time to convince our members about the added value. The CoFE does not provide an immediate return on investment: we invested in it, but we cannot see immediately the results. It will take time, and SGI Europe decided to keep the process alive as much as possible, supporting also the citizens that want to continue to be closer to the EU institutions. That commitment to connect citizens and EU institutions is also at the core of my commitment as Vice President of the European Movement International (EMI), which is an organization that defends European values and democracy. Through my involvement in that organisation, I am also able to keep a close link with citizens who participated in the Conference.

An important roadmap for a fairer and more social future for Europe

In which capacity did you participate in the Conference of the Future of Europe?

The ETUC participated in the Conference on the Future of Europe as the EU-level cross-sectoral social partner representing trade unions and more than 45 million workers across Europe. Social partners' role was clearly mentioned in the Joint Declaration and Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE). Trade unions representatives participated in the works of the plenary and also were included as observer in the Executive Board. The trade union priorities for the Conference on the Future of Europe can be read at the dedicated webpage ([The ETUC and the Conference on the Future of Europe | ETUC](#)).



Esther Lynch

Confederal Secretary, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

How would you assess CoFE overall? Do you think that such initiatives should occur more often in the future? Do they help in the adoption and implementation of European public policies?

The ETUC considers that the CoFE and its conclusions provide an ambitious and important roadmap to define a fairer and more social future for Europe. While not agreeing with all the conclusions, most of them constitute a progressive, ambitious and positive blueprint for the necessary change of direction for the European Union. The Conference proposals include key priorities

which – if delivered by the EU institutions – would contribute to “reshape the EU in a way that will guarantee its strategic autonomy, sustainable growth, improvement of living and working conditions and human progress, [...] in the framework of a renewed Social Contract”.

It is essential to ensure a real follow-up to the Conference conclusions by the EU institutions. This means changes to EU policies, budget and work programs, including new legislative and non-legislative initiatives, as well as changes to the Treaties, with a strong focus on reinforcing the social dimension.

The Conference proposals include important proposals which must be reflected in new initiatives and legislative proposals, for example: the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights; a review of the EU's economic governance and the European Semester in order to ensure that the green and digital transitions, social justice and social progress go hand-in-hand with economic competitiveness; guaranteeing fair digitalisation based on human rights, improved working conditions and collective bargaining, including establishing a ‘human centric’ approach that would incorporate the ‘human in control’ principle; ensuring Just Transition; reinforcement of the role of trade unions at national and transnational level; ensuring the respect of the right to lifelong learning and the right to training.

The ETUC calls on the European institutions to take the necessary steps to ensure that the COFOE conclusions become reality also in the areas of Treaty changes, including the introduction of a Social Progress Protocol in the Treaties to guarantee that workers’ rights, trade union rights and social rights take precedence over economic freedoms in the event of a conflict. It is also important to ensure qualified majority voting for social issues while fully safeguarding the role of social partners and ensuring a non-regression clause, as well as for other key issues, in particular taxation, own resources, all issues linked to the rule of law and the Multiannual Financial Framework.

Do you consider that these initiatives offer greater democratic legitimacy and can enhance democracy at the EU level?

Engaging a discussion with social partners and organised civil society on the future of Europe has constituted a positive exercise and the conclusions were positive. The clear risk is however that the European Commission and the European Council will respond to the CoFE conclusions and recommendations simply by highlighting initiatives that are already being prepared or are under discussion, without following-up on the most ambitious proposals of the Conference, which would entail the much-needed change of direction for EU policies and institutions. The ETUC calls on the European institutions to take the necessary steps to ensure that the COFOE conclusions will become reality.

The ETUC has taken note of the proposals of the CoFE with regard to participatory democracy. Any proposals on citizens’ panels must ensure that their role is defined very clearly and that they would neither slow down decision-making in Europe nor undermine or interfere with democratic processes and actors, including social dialogue and social partners. This means amongst others:

- Ensuring full respect for the prerogatives of Social Partners as defined in the Treaties, including by guaranteeing that these participatory mechanisms are not applicable in the preparation of legislative proposals in the area of Social Policy;
- Reinforcing the involvement of Social Partners in decision-making processes, in line with CoFE’s conclusions; and
- Ensuring that citizens panels be truly representative of the whole of society in Europe and selected in accordance with clear and transparent processes; they must not replace representative democracy decision-making processes and structures.

What did you gain from your participation and how would you rate your overall experience?

ETUC engaged in the CoFE to put Social Europe at the center of the discussions. It coordinated and supported the participation of its affiliated members to engage them with outreach activities, national debates and workplace initiatives. Under the ETUC coordination, national trade unions were actively participating in the online platform. The trade union proposals on the online platform of the Conference were the most supported or amongst the most supported in all the categories. This gave large visibility to trade union demands. The ETUC Resolution adopted in March 2021 stated that: “Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference. The Conference should not be a bureaucratic exercise nor focus only on institutional matters, it should constitute a key moment in the process of construction of the European Union of the future and be based on an ambitious agenda”. By reading the conclusions of the Conference, it is clear that this objective has been reached. The ETUC considers the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe an ambitious and important roadmap to define a fairer and more social future for Europe. The CoFE conclusions call for significant changes in EU policies, objectives and budget, as well as for new policy and legislative initiatives. The ETUC calls on the European institutions to take the necessary steps to ensure that the CoFE conclusions will become a reality and in particular the ETUC would see those proposals that improve living and working conditions of workers becoming a centerpiece of the future EU agenda. The ETUC will continue to mobilize to push the European institutions to ensure a proper follow-up to the CoFE conclusions in terms of policies, legislative initiatives and Treaty changes with a strong social focus.



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