

CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: PUTTING CITIZENS AT THE CENTRE

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Introduction

On 10 March 2021, the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission signed the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, paving the way for a first ever exercise of participatory democracy of this scale at the level of the European Union. This joint undertaking of the three EU Institutions, together with the Member States, aimed at opening a new space for debate with citizens, to address Europe's challenges and priorities. In the Joint Declaration, the three institutions committed to listen to European citizens and to give them a say on what matters to them, through a citizen-led series of debates and deliberations. The three institutions also committed to examine swiftly how to give an effective follow-up to the proposals made by the Conference.

Placed under the authority of the Presidents of the three Institutions, acting as its joint Presidency, the Conference submitted its final report to the three Presidents on 9 May 2022, after more than a year of intensive deliberations. Honouring the commitment made in the Joint Declaration, the three institutions started working immediately on the follow-up. This work is still ongoing.

The aim of this article is to give an overview of this journey from an insider's perspective, referring in particular to the work carried out by the Council and its representatives throughout the Conference and its follow-up until now.

Construction phase: Setting up the structures of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Joint Declaration

The Joint Declaration [2] established the Conference as a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise, and therefore provided for several forums for citizens to share their ideas on the future of Europe: a Multilingual Digital Platform, European and National Citizens' Panels, and different events at national, regional and local level. It also established a Conference Plenary to debate the recommendations from National and European Citizens' Panels. All these forums were set up to allow citizens coming from different geographic origin, social background and age (with a special focus on young people) to participate in the Conference and to share their ideas on what they expect from the European Union.

To steer the work of the Conference, the Joint Declaration set up an Executive Board composed of three representatives from each of the three institutions – the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. In addition, other representatives from those three institutions, and representatives of national parliaments, the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as social partners, were invited as observers. The

[1] This article is a collective endeavour of the six members of the Common Secretariat of the Conference coming from the General Secretariat of the Council: Marta Arpio, Liis Jaansalu, Rebecca Rhlalou, Matteo Riceputi, Miroslav Stoyanov and Marie-Charlotte van Lamsweerde. The Common Secretariat of the Conference was composed of an equal member of officials from the European Parliament, Council of the EU and Commission. The authors wrote this article in their personal capacity as members of the Common Secretariat of the Conference and they do not intend to represent the views of the Common Secretariat as a whole. Views expressed in this article are their own and in no way reflect the views of the Council or the European Council, nor the General Secretariat of the Council.

[2] The Joint Declaration is available on <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/>.

Executive Board, responsible for taking decisions regarding the work of the Conference, was co-chaired by one representative of each of the three Institutions (Co-Chairs) and assisted by a Common Secretariat (of limited size and ensuring equal representation of the three institutions).

The Council was represented in the Executive Board by the rotating Council Presidency acting as Co-Chair, and by the two incoming Presidencies as members [3]. Four other Council representatives, from the successive forthcoming Presidencies, participated as observers. Therefore, during the Conference, the Portuguese, Slovene and French Presidencies acted as the successive Co-Chairs on behalf of the Council. In contrast to the other institutions, this implied a changing membership in the Executive Board, and a changing Co-Chair every six months, with the General Secretariat of the Council ensuring continuity when supporting the Presidencies.

According to the Joint Declaration, the decisions of the Executive Board were taken by consensus between the representatives of the three Institutions, and consensus was consequently also the rule applied in the preparatory discussions among the three Co-Chairs and amongst the three Co-Heads of the Common Secretariat. This tripartite structure allowed to take into account the position of the three Institutions at all levels, but also made it more difficult to reach decisions within the Conference governance structures.

The adoption of the rules of Procedure

One of the first main tasks of the Executive Board was to agree on the rules of procedure for the Conference in order to complete its

architecture. This was not an easy matter, notably due to the different positions of the representatives of the three institutions.

As the Co-Chairs drew up these rules, the issues subject to most discussion related to the Conference Plenary, and in particular:

- The role of the Plenary: Initially, there were different conceptions as to the role of the Plenary. For the Council Co-Chair, the Plenary's role as provided for in the Joint Declaration was to debate recommendations from citizens' panels, which were to remain at the centre of the Plenary discussions. Those views were shared by the Commission Co-Chair. The Council Co-Chair also considered that according to the Joint Declaration it was for the Executive Board to draw up the conclusions of the Conference Plenary, and therefore the Plenary should not have any autonomous decision-making powers. The European Parliament Co-Chair, on the other hand, considered that the Plenary, in addition to debating citizens' recommendations, should also have a decision-making role, with decisions taken by the representatives of the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the national parliaments.
- The role of citizens in the Plenary: For the Council and the Commission Co-Chairs, citizens had to be substantially represented in the Plenary and be considered as a full component, in the same way as the three Institutions and the national parliaments, given that the Conference was a citizens-focused exercise. For the European Parliament Co-Chair, the main role for citizens was in the Panels and in the Multilingual Digital Platform and hence, the representatives of

[3] The successive Co-Chairs on behalf of the rotating Presidency of the Council were Ana Paula Zacarias, Secretary of State for EU Affairs of Portugal; Gašper Dovžan, Secretary of State for EU Affairs of Slovenia; and Clément Beaune, Secretary of State for EU Affairs of France.

the EU institutions and national parliaments were to be given a central role in the Conference Plenary. In that perspective, the latter advocated for a limited number of citizens in the Plenary, mainly to present the recommendations of the different Panels.

- The size of the Plenary: The Council Co-Chair advocated for a lean and streamlined structure of the Plenary to facilitate discussions, whereas the European Parliament Co-Chair defended a large representation of the European Parliament and of national parliaments, to enable a wide expression of the diversity of the various political groups and parties, thus resulting in a larger Plenary. To facilitate the work of such a large Plenary, the Parliament's Co-Chair also proposed to establish working groups.

The three Co-chairs finally presented the draft rules of procedure to the Executive Board on 9 May 2021. The compromise reached included the following elements:

- The Plenary would be composed of 450 members [4].
- Citizens would be represented with 108 citizens in the Plenary, i.e., the same number of representatives as the European Parliament and as the national parliaments;
- The Co-Chairs would have the possibility to propose the setting up of working groups to prepare the debates and the proposals of the Plenary;
- The role of the Plenary would be to debate the recommendations from European and National Citizens' Panels and the input gathered from the Multilingual Digital Platform in order to put forward, on a consensual basis, its proposals to the Executive Board;

- It would be for the Executive Board to draw up the final report of the Conference.

The rules of procedure [5], as presented by the three Co-Chairs, were agreed by the Executive Board on 9 May 2021.

The Conference timeframe

On 9 May 2021 – Europe Day – the inaugural event of the Conference took place. The event was hosted by President Macron in presence of Prime Minister Costa, on behalf of the Council Presidency, late European Parliament President Sassoli and European Commission President von der Leyen.

Aside from this inaugural event and the launch of the Multilingual Digital Platform on 19 April 2021, the Conference activities actually started in June 2021, with the first citizens' event in Lisbon organised by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council on 17 June, and the inaugural Conference Plenary on 19 June in a hybrid format (indeed, due to Covid-19 restrictions, a high number of Conference events had to take place in a hybrid format). In the inaugural Plenary, a general discussion took place on the purpose of and on expectations for the Conference.

After the inaugural Plenary, the European Citizens' Panels started its work in September 2021, so by the second Conference Plenary in October 2021 citizens were able to report on their work in the European Citizens' Panels, National Citizens' Panels and national events.

Since the Joint Declaration required that the Conference reach conclusions by spring 2022, the timeframe was short. Consequently, several activities (in particular, European Citizens' Panels and Plenary sessions) had to be organised successively and in parallel,

[4] See Article 16 of the Conference Rules of Procedure.

[5] The Rules of Procedure of the Conference are available on <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/>

within a short period of time. The Conference ended a year later, on 9 May 2022, Europe Day, with the closing ceremony.

During the one-year process, Conference activities had to be adjusted to take into account Covid-19 restrictions, for example with the postponement of two sessions of the European Citizens' Panels and of one Conference Plenary session. This meant that the timeframe of activities was further compressed.

Citizens' ideas, deliberations, and recommendations

Since the Conference was a citizens-focused exercise, the European and National Citizens' Panels, the events organised in the Member States and the multilingual digital platform were the key features of the Conference, as the main tools for citizens to share their ideas on the future of Europe.

Multilingual Digital Platform

The multilingual digital platform was an interactive tool allowing citizens to participate in the Conference by sharing and debating ideas directly on the platform, as well as to gather input from the various events taking place under the umbrella of the Conference. It also served as the main hub to inform about the activities of the Conference. Being open to contributions from all citizens from across Europe and beyond, in all the EU languages, it allowed to gather a wide range of ideas and promote broader forms of participation.

The platform was divided in nine topics that would constitute the main topics of the Conference: (1) Stronger economy, social justice, jobs; (2) Education, youth, culture,

sport; (3) Digital transformation; (4) European democracy; (5) Values and rights, rule of law, security; (6) Climate change, environment; (7) Health; (8) EU in the world and (9) Migration. A tenth topic, "Other ideas", allowed citizens to raise additional topics if they so wished.

Throughout the Conference, reports were regularly drawn up on the contributions submitted on the platform, to ensure that they feed into the Conference process. These reports gave a general overview of the breadth and diversity of ideas proposed on the platform and discussed at events, identifying common themes, and highlighting ideas that had attracted more interest or debate. This overview of ideas and debates on the platform was presented at the start of the European Citizens' Panels, therefore allowing participating citizens to take it into account, and the reports were also discussed in the Conference Plenary.

Although the use of the digital platform increased steadily throughout the Conference due to efforts to raise awareness about it, the participation of citizens on the platform remained uneven across Member States and across socio-demographic profiles. Overall, it was not as high as hoped. Indeed, from the launch of the platform on 19 April 2021 until the end of the Conference in May 2022, around 50,000 participants registered on the platform. In total, around 17,000 ideas and 6,000 events were shared on the platform. Despite these limitations, the platform proved itself to be a valuable tool for engaging with citizens and promoting debate across Europe. During the Conference, there were several calls from citizens and stakeholders to continue to use and further develop such a tool also after it had ended.

The European Citizens' Panels

The European Citizens' Panels were one of the most innovative elements of the Conference

as the first transnational and multilingual experience of deliberative democracy of this scale at EU level. Since their participants were randomly selected citizens from all Member States, representing different backgrounds, these panels were one of the best tools of the Conference for collecting ideas from citizens representing the EU's social and geographical diversity. From the Council's perspective, these panels – together with the National Citizens' Panels – therefore had to have a central role in framing a joint vision of Europe's future.

Before the start of the European Citizens' Panels, the governance bodies of the Conference, with the assistance of the Common Secretariat, established the principles and functioning of the Panels mainly on the basis of best practices from Member States and of the OECD principles for good deliberation [6]. These principles included notably the representativeness of participants, group deliberations, integrity, inclusiveness and the transparency of the process.

The Executive Board decided that four European Citizens' Panels would be organised, with the aim of coming up with collectively designed and owned Recommendations, to feed into the overall Conference deliberations. Each Panel was composed of around 200 citizens, one third of them younger than 25, who were randomly selected from all Member States on the basis of five criteria – nationality, urban/rural, socio-economic background, gender, and age – therefore representative of the EU's sociological diversity and who agreed to participate in this process. The selection

process was carried out by an independent external service provider, contracted by the Commission.

Given that, for practical reasons, it was not possible to organise more than four panels, the nine Conference topics were divided between the four Panels [7], meaning that each panel had to discuss several wide-ranging subjects within the limited available timeframe.

Each panel held three sessions moderated by professionals in participative democracy. Before the start of the Panels, one question that arose was whether citizens' first deliberations should be based on a list of specific questions related to the topics of their panel. Upon reflection, The Co-Chairs decided that citizens' deliberations should not be framed by any specific questions in the first session of the panels, in order to let them freely decide on the issues to be debated. While this approach meant that the scope of the discussions was very broad, it was thought that framing citizens' debates with a list of specific questions could have been perceived to be limiting their deliberations. Therefore, the first day of the first session of the four panels was devoted to the identification, by citizens themselves, of the priority topics that they wished to discuss further.

Another important issue raised in the preparations of the panels was how to inform citizens in a neutral and comprehensive way about the different EU policies related to the topics under discussion. The provision of expertise was considered an essential element of the process, in order to allow citizens to carry out meaningful deliberations.

[6] The OECD principles for good deliberation are available on: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf>

[7] Panel 1: Stronger economy, social justice, jobs/education, youth, culture, sport/digital transformation.

Panel 2: European democracy/values and rights, rule of law, security.

Panel 3: Climate change, environment/health.

Panel 4: EU in the world/migration.

To this end, specific slots with experts were organised at the start of each session, throughout the discussions in the different sessions, as well as when citizens were drafting their recommendations. Different experts were invited at the beginning of each Panel to provide information on the different topics of the Panels in a way easily understandable for citizens. During the deliberations, a liaison system between the Panels' facilitators, the Common Secretariat and the experts was set up to provide answers on the spot to citizens' questions.

In total, the four European Citizens' Panels adopted 178 recommendations on the nine topics of the Conference, which were presented and debated in the Conference Plenaries and in the working groups.

One of the successes of the Conference was, without a doubt, the unwavering motivation and commitment of the citizens in European Citizens' Panels to collectively deliberate on issues related to the future of the EU, despite the time and efforts required on their side. This allowed them to provide meaningful input into the Conference and made the Panels one of the key features of the entire process.

National Citizens' Panels

The Joint Declaration clearly specified that the Conference Plenary was to debate both the Recommendations from the European Citizens' Panels and from the National Citizens' Panels. Therefore, several Member States decided to organise National Citizens' Panels as a contribution to the Conference.

Given their similar role in the Conference Plenary, National and European Citizens'

Panels were to follow similar methodological rules, i.e., inspired by best practices from the Member States and the OECD principles for good deliberation [8]. On this basis, the Co-Chairs prepared guidance [9] and the General Secretariat of the Council issued practical information [10] to assist Member States in this regard. In light of this guidance, six Member States – Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands – organised National Citizens' Panels, which gathered hundreds of citizens and constituted another key element of the Conference. The recommendations of those six panels were presented and debated in the Conference Plenaries and in the working groups, alongside the recommendations of the European Citizens' panels.

National Events

In the context of the Conference, and as provided for in the Joint Declaration, all Member States contributed to the Conference through the organisation of a wide range of events and initiatives that reached many thousands of citizens from across the EU. As in the Citizens' Panels, the main objective of these events and initiatives was to listen to citizens and to involve them in debates on the European Union.

These activities and events were organised at various levels by different institutions and stakeholders, including national, regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, social partners and citizen associations. A bottom-up approach was encouraged, and a number of cross-border events also took place. To give an overview of the main events organised or supported by Member States' authorities, a dedicated section on the multilingual digital platform was created to

[8] [Document 12960/21](#) available on the Council's register

[9] [Document 9159/21](#) available on the Council's register

[10] [Document 12960/21](#) available on the Council's register

outline the approach and activities in each country.

The outcome of all the events fed into the Conference process via the multilingual digital platform reports, which were presented both in the European Citizens' Panels and in the Conference Plenaries. In addition, the 27 Member States' representatives of national events and national citizens' panels were part of the citizens' component in the Plenary and therefore had the opportunity to present those events on various occasions in the Plenary meetings.

Conference Plenaries

The Conference Plenary was one of the major innovations of the Conference from a participatory democracy point of view, alongside the European Citizens' Panels. Indeed, this was the first occasion at EU level where citizens were invited to debate Citizens Panels' recommendations with representatives from the EU Institutions and other stakeholders, gathering in one same forum randomly selected citizens and politicians.

The Joint Declaration defined the role of the Plenary as a forum to debate the 'recommendations from the National and European Citizens' Panels, grouped by themes, without a predetermined outcome and without limiting the scope to pre-defined policy areas', but it did not provide details on the number of Plenary members. As already mentioned, as part of a compromise, the Executive Board decided to have a Plenary composed of 450 members. This ensured wide political representation, but also created some practical difficulties when trying to organise its functioning so that it could deliver on its mandate.

Firstly, the size implied a parliamentary style system, with fixed, short and pre-allocated speaking time. Citizens were surprised by the initial lack of spontaneous interaction: while in the Citizens' Panels they had been encouraged to have a conversation with one another, now, as Plenary Members, they were given speaking slots well in advance, leading to a succession of interventions without real discussions. The initial system, notably due to the fact that Plenary sessions took place in the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, was well known to the representatives of the European Parliament, but less so to the rest of the participants in the Plenary, and in particular to the citizens. Citizens actually voiced heavy criticism as to how the Plenary was organised after the first Plenary in October 2021, and notably about the lack of interaction. Consequently, changes were introduced as of the second Plenary in January 2022 to promote more genuine exchanges between Plenary Members, and in particular between the institutional representatives and the citizens. More time was allocated for so-called 'blue cards', allowing a Plenary Member to spontaneously ask a question to the previous speaker, as well as to allow for specific slots for feedback from citizens on the debates. This system was very much welcomed by the citizens.

A second issue derived from the size of the Plenary related to how a forum of 450 people could effectively come to conclusive debates. This led to the creation of thematic working groups to better organise and prepare the debates, and also to give more opportunities to Plenary Members to voice their views.

Working Groups

The Executive Board agreed to set up nine working groups corresponding to the nine

topics of the Platform. To ensure consistent working methods across the different working groups, the Co-Chairs decided to prepare terms of reference [11] as guidelines to the working groups' Chairs. Again, those Terms of reference reflected a compromise between different approaches by the Co-Chairs. For the Council Co-Chair, given that working groups were not provided for in the Joint Declaration, their task had to be limited to facilitate the Plenary discussions around citizens' input. The Parliament Co-Chair, on the other hand, wanted them to have an independent role in preparing the Conference Plenary proposals, similar to the European Parliament committees and to agree on proposals to be endorsed by the Plenary once the work had been completed. In the end, it was agreed that the working groups would give input to prepare the debates and the proposals of the Plenary.

Each of the nine thematic working groups had at least 40 members reflecting the proportions between the different Plenary components. Each of the four institutional Plenary components chaired two working groups, and the President of the European Youth Forum chaired the one on 'Education, culture, youth and sport'. For each working group, a spokesperson was selected amongst the citizens from the European Citizens' Panels.

In practice, the role of the working groups evolved during the process, given the need to effectively manage the Plenary discussions and to prepare the Plenary proposals in the context of a very large Plenary. To ensure consistency in the chairing of working groups and in discussing citizens' input, the Co-Chairs gave some additional guidelines to the Chairs. Although contributions of working

groups to the Plenary sometimes varied, almost all working groups followed those guidelines.

Citizens' Component

The Citizens' component of the Plenary was composed of 108 citizens, i.e. 20 representatives from each of the four European Citizens' Panels, as well as 27 representatives of national events/panels, and the President of the European Youth Forum.

At the start of the process, it was difficult for the citizens' component to act as a single component for different reasons, such as language barriers, despite interpretation provided in most meetings, and the prevalence of online and hybrid meetings due to Covid-19 restrictions. Efforts were therefore made to ensure the involvement of the entire component and to create a cohesive group. Progressively, citizens started to work and act together as a component, for instance by coordinating their interventions in Plenary.

For the Common Secretariat, it was essential to provide as much support as possible to the citizens' component, given their central role in the process and their lack of experience with these types of interactions with representatives of institutions. In addition, the citizens' component had less external support than the representatives of the Institutions and other Plenary members. In cooperation with a consortium of external service providers, the Common Secretariat thus endeavoured to make sure citizens were able to prepare as much as possible for the Plenary discussions and had enough support for their work in the Plenary and in the working groups.

[11] The terms of reference of the working groups are available on <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/>

Process Leading to the Conference Proposals

The Joint Declaration conceived the Plenary primarily as a forum for debating citizens' recommendations with representatives of the EU institutions, national parliaments as well as other stakeholders. Therefore, the Plenary played a significant role in the process, as it was the very place where all of the citizens' original input – i.e. the recommendations elaborated as part of the European and National Citizens' Panels as well as the input gathered from the multilingual digital platform – was adapted into Plenary proposals. Those proposals were then put forward by the Plenary to the Executive Board and integrated in the report on the final outcome of the Conference.

The consolidation of all this input was nonetheless not an easy process. The main question was: how? How to adapt 178 recommendations from European Citizens' Panels, together with an even higher number of recommendations from National Citizens' Panels, enriched by input from the Digital Platform and by debates of the Plenary, into Conference proposals? How to do this while also preserving citizens' recommendations as the main basis and avoid substantive changes, and at the same time taking into account the platform and Plenary/working group discussions?

To address those issues and to ensure consistent ways of working across working groups, the Co-Chairs prepared guidance for the Chairs and spokespersons of the working groups on the methodology to be followed when preparing the Conference proposals, using the recommendations of the Citizens' Panels as the main basis. In this process, it was very important for the Council Co-Chair

to ensure that European and National Citizens' Panels' recommendations were treated (i) on an equal footing and (ii) as the main basis of work. The agreed methodology reflected those principles, and, in practice, this guidance was followed to a large extent by almost all working groups.

Eventually, the approach chosen allowed to factor in the above-mentioned input rigorously and in a granular way. This was achieved by grouping all citizens' recommendations and input which touched upon the same issue into different thematic 'clusters'. These clusters were then assigned to each of the nine thematic working groups of the Plenary. In practice, each working group was allocated around 6 clusters. Most importantly, each thematic cluster constituted the actual basis for the Chair and the citizen spokesperson of the working group to elaborate a corresponding draft proposal, with the assistance of the Common Secretariat. Each draft proposal would have to comprise a general objective and a series of concrete measures to implement it.

All this clustering and preliminary drafting work was undertaken swiftly, after the European and National Citizens' Panels concluded their work in February 2022 and ahead of the March Plenaries. The first draft proposals were subsequently debated by the respective competent working groups and in Plenary throughout March and early April 2022. Then, the draft proposals were gradually refined based on the new oral input provided by Plenary members. Overall, the elaboration of the draft Conference proposals culminated at the last Plenary session, on 29–30 April 2022. In short, the work in the Plenary allowed citizens' recommendations, while remaining the basis, to be enriched and to become draft Conference proposals.

[12] See Article 17 of the Rules of Procedure, footnote 7.

Last Plenary session with the formulation of the Conference proposals

Pursuant to the Conference Rules of Procedure, the Plenary's main role was to: 'on a consensual basis, put forward its proposals to the Executive Board'. This is what was at stake during the last Conference Plenaries in April 2022. Procedurally, this was meant to be straightforward: the draft proposals would be finalised after a last round of discussions at working group level, presented to all Plenary members and finally put forward consensually by the Plenary to the Executive Board.

The key here, however, was the above notion of consensus. Such consensus was defined in the Rules of Procedure [12], after negotiations between the Co-Chairs. In these negotiations, the Council's Co-Chair in particular had advocated for citizens to be part of the definition of consensus. In the end, as this was not a common position amongst the three Co-Chairs, the compromise found was that consensus was to be reached between four components, namely the representatives of the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the national Parliaments, acting separately and on an equal footing. Nevertheless, it was agreed that the Rules of Procedure would include the possibility that, if the citizens in the Plenary clearly disagreed with a proposal that gathered consensus from the four components, they could express a 'diverging position' which should be explicitly documented in the Conference final report.

Against this background, on 29 and 30 April, the Plenary examined the 49 draft proposals that had been tabled: all proposals gathered the necessary consensus between the four components. This was considered a great achievement: despite the huge amount of input which had fed into those proposals, the

complex process of their elaboration and the sometimes far-apart views on many topics, the Conference Plenary managed to deliver substantial and meaningful input for the three EU institutions to follow-up on. The Citizens' component supported the final result, except for one measure related to increasing the European Parliament's budgetary powers, for which citizens expressed a 'diverging position' [13] since they considered it originated neither from the European nor the National Citizens' Panels and was not sufficiently discussed in the working group.

Beyond the overall consensus achieved, there however were notable specificities in the components' respective approaches to this final deliberation. To start with, the Council component made clear that its consensus did not equate to a position on the substance of the proposals as, for the Council, the very purpose of the first part of the Conference was indeed to listen to citizens' views, while its position on the substance of the proposals could only be defined according to the normal EU decision-making procedures in the follow-up part of the Conference. Hence, during the last Conference Plenary, the representatives of the Council did not comment on the substance of the proposals, but instead supported and encouraged the activities of the citizens and took note of their recommendations. For their part, national parliaments' representatives raised some reservations on the substance of some of the proposals and clarified that their agreement was to put forward the proposals to the Executive Board, as they could not agree on the full list of proposals.

Conference Proposals

The Conference proposals, as formulated by

[13] Proposal 38.4, third bullet. Citizens' diverging position is expressed on page 40 of the report on the final outcome of the Conference.

the Plenary, generally call for more EU action in a number of fields and for a stronger EU. In particular, the Conference called for the EU to be further developed based on its fundamental values, solidarity, social justice and equality. Most of the proposals relate to topics which matter to citizens' daily lives, covering the Conference nine topics:

- Under the topic of 'Stronger economy, social justice and jobs', the proposals notably ask for sustainable growth, stronger social policies, and inclusive labour markets.
- 'Education, youth, culture and sport' proposals call for equal access to quality education, for the EU to focus on the specific needs of young people, and to foster European identity.
- 'Digital transformation' proposals highlight the importance of equal access to digital infrastructure and literacy, and of enhancing cybersecurity.
- 'European Democracy' proposals call for more citizens participation in the EU policy-making process and highlight the importance to defend free, pluralist, and independent media. Switching from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the Council is also part of those proposals.
- 'Values and rights, rule of law, security' proposals call for systematically upholding the rule of law across all Member States, and for the EU to further tackle disinformation.
- 'Climate change and the environment' proposals urge the EU to lead the fight against climate change in many policy areas such as agriculture, biodiversity, economy, energy, transport.
- 'Health' proposals advocate, among other things, for strengthening the resilience and effectiveness of health systems, and for expanding the EU's competence in

health. The importance of addressing mental health was also highlighted in the proposals.

- 'EU in the world' proposals underline the need to reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy and for a stronger EU on the world scene, equipped with more efficient decision-making powers (notably by increasing the use of qualified majority voting in the Council).
- 'Migration' proposals notably advocate for a revision of the current EU migration and asylum system, with a balance between solidarity and responsibility.

Final Report

The report on the final outcome of the Conference [14] - usually referred to as 'final report' - was designed with two key objectives in mind. First, it aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of the Conference process, including its main building blocks and all the activities undertaken in its framework. This was important given the uniqueness of the Conference and its pioneering aspect. The final report would thus act as a form of repository and testimony. Secondly, and maybe most importantly, the final report would also be the document containing the Plenary proposals as the Conference's key output, prepared as a result of more than a year of deliberations by all involved actors.

As provided for in the Joint Declaration, the Executive Board endorsed the final report of the Conference, including the proposals put forward by the Conference Plenary at its meeting on 6 May 2022.

The report was handed over to Presidents Metsola, Macron and von der Leyen as the

[14] The final report of the Conference is available on <https://futureu.europa.eu/en/>

Joint Presidency, at the closing event of the Conference on 9 May 2022, Europe Day. This event marked the end of a year of deliberations, resulting, in addition to a unique and unprecedented democratic exercise, in 49 proposals and 326 measures for the future of Europe.

In their interventions at the closing event, citizens highlighted the unique and enriching experience they had had in discussing Europe's future with other citizens from across the EU, politicians and stakeholders. They urged the EU institutions to implement the Conference proposals and presented their main priorities, such as solidarity, social justice, equality, the fight against climate change, strategic autonomy, the promotion and safeguard of democracy and fundamental values, and the empowerment of young people. They also stressed the importance of civic education, communication and awareness raising about the EU and the need for continued dialogue between citizens and policymakers.

In their respective keynote speeches, each of the three Presidents elaborated on their key takeaways from the exercise, while underlining the commitment of the three institutions to follow up on the outcome of the Conference.

The closing event thus also marked the beginning of the next phase in the Conference process – follow-up by the three EU institutions.

The Council's approach and work

General Remarks

Throughout the Conference, the approach of the Council's Co-Chair and the

representatives of the Member States was guided by the Council position agreed by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper) on 3 February 2021 [15]. The Council position identified four guiding principles for the organisation of the Conference, namely: 1) equality between the institutions at all levels, 2) respect for each institution's prerogatives, 3) effectiveness and avoidance of unnecessary bureaucracy, 4) effective involvement of citizens. The last principle, i.e., the importance of citizens' active participation in framing our vision of Europe's future, in particular, comes forward several times in the Council position.

The Council position also clearly advocated a 'policy first' approach, arguing that citizens should discuss the issues that are directly relevant to them, as well as those included in the Strategic Agenda 2019–2024. For the Council, the Conference had to focus on topics that truly matter to citizens' daily lives, with long lasting impacts and wide outreach, such as sustainability including green and just transition, societal challenges, and fundamental values, rights, and freedoms.

In terms of follow-up, the Council position indicated that the EU institutions would commit to examine swiftly how to follow up effectively on the final outcome of the Conference, each within their own sphere of competence and in accordance with the Treaties, as subsequently included in the Joint Declaration. This meant that the Council would only take a position on the outcomes of the Conference in the implementation phase rather than trying to shape them ex-ante. Indeed, for the Council, such a position could only be defined through the normal working procedures of the Council and in the usual institutional set-up, whereas the focus of the Conference itself should be on citizens' input.

[15] [Document 5911/21](#) available on the Council's public register.

This is indeed what was subsequently included in the Joint Declaration and what guided the approach of the Council representatives throughout the Conference, including the last Conference Plenary.

Furthermore, the Council position clearly indicated that the Conference did not fall within the scope of Article 48 TEU (provisions on Treaty revision). This was also reflected in the Joint Declaration, where the three Institutions agreed to follow up to the final report 'in accordance with the Treaties'.

Before 9 May 2022

During the Conference, work within the Council was organised in a multi-layered approach. Even before the conclusion of the Joint Declaration, the General Affairs configuration of the Council had clearly taken the lead for the Conference in discussing the Council's draft mandate on a number of occasions. This continued to be the case after the official launch of the Conference, with Ministers for European Affairs remaining closely involved in the process.

The General Affairs Council held discussions on the Conference at all of its meetings for the duration of the Conference. The ministerial discussions were prepared by the Permanent Representatives Committee (Coreper II). The General Affairs Group also regularly followed the work of the Conference. In addition to the work of these official Council bodies, coordination meetings of the 'Council component' of the Plenary were organised in Strasbourg on the eve of each Plenary session. Finally, the Presidencies organised preparatory meetings of the Council representatives in the Executive Board ahead of each such meeting.

The aim of these different meetings was to coordinate logistics and discuss the process without addressing the substance of citizens' recommendations and draft Plenary proposals since, as indicated above, the Council considered that this could only be addressed in the follow-up phase in the framework of the EU decision-making procedures.

After 9 May 2022

In line with the commitment made in the Joint Declaration to examine swiftly how to follow up effectively to the Conference final report – within its own sphere of competences and in accordance with the Treaties – the Council started, right after 9 May 2022, to work in earnest with a view to ensuring the best possible follow-up to the Conference.

Follow-up to the Final Report of the Conference

Since May 2022, the focus of the three EU institutions has been on the follow-up to the Conference. In the Council, this work started on the basis of a preliminary assessment carried out in June 2022 by the Council General Secretariat, identifying for each proposal and measure:

- to what extent the EU institutions are already working on the measures addressed in the proposals ('what is being done'), and
- how could the proposal/measure be implemented, if at all ('assessment of feasibility').

[16] [Document 10033/22 ADD 1](#) available on the Council's public register

This assessment [16] showed that nearly 95% of the Conference proposals and related measures can be implemented under the current Treaties. Moreover, a significant number of proposals and related measures were in the process of being addressed or were already addressed by the EU institutions. Therefore, the follow-up work in the Council during the Czech Presidency (second semester of 2022) focused on the proposals and related specific measures still to be addressed by the EU Institutions, within the current Treaty framework, at legislative and non-legislative level. Work on some of these proposals is still ongoing.

Regarding legislative work, in its 2023 work programme, the Commission identified 43 new policy initiatives (out of the 51), which directly or indirectly follow up on a proposal of the Conference. Against this background, in their Joint Declaration on the EU Legislative Priorities for 2023 and 2024, the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council acknowledged that many Conference proposals have been reflected in the Commission's work programme for 2023 and jointly committed to giving them close attention.

In addition to the legislative work based on the Commission's proposals, the Council has also initiated work on some measures that do not require a proposal from the Commission to be implemented. The Council is notably addressing citizens' recommendations concerning the possibility to switch from unanimity voting to qualified majority voting in the Council through the possible use of 'bridging clauses' provided for in the Treaties, that allow the European Council or the Council to decide to switch from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the Council in some policy areas without Treaty change. The Council is also working on some other

specific measures for which the follow-up does not require a Commission proposal.

Finally, concerning the very limited number of specific measures that would require Treaty change to be implemented (around 5% of Conference measures), the European Parliament adopted in June 2022 a Resolution tasking the European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) to prepare the relevant proposals for Treaty amendments, to give a follow up to the Conference proposals that so require. At the time of writing this article, this work is still ongoing, with the Co-Rapporteurs preparing a draft report due to be discussed in the AFCO Committee in the next months. After the AFCO Committee's proposals will have been adopted by the Plenary of the European Parliament and submitted to the Council, the procedure provided for in Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union will apply.

Feedback event

As provided for in the calendar of the Conference, on 2 December 2022 the three EU institutions also organised a feedback event to the citizens who participated in the European Citizens' Panels and to the representatives of National Citizens' Panels and national events. The aim of this event was to inform citizens about the follow up to the final report of the Conference since 9 May 2022. During the event, the political representatives of the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission each presented the work carried out by their respective Institution. Citizens were invited to share their views about this follow-up work and to ask questions to those political representatives, who answered to all their questions.

In this event, the Council was represented by

the Czech Minister for European Affairs Mikuláš Bek, as President of the General Affairs Council during the Czech Presidency, who gave an overview of the intensive work carried out by the Council since 9 May 2022. During his intervention, Minister Bek underlined the priority given by the Council to the overwhelming majority of the Conference proposals which can be implemented within the current Treaty framework, in order to provide effective and concrete answers to citizens' immediate challenges as soon as possible. Answering citizens' request to receive more detailed feedback on each Conference proposal, Minister Bek notably invited citizens to consult the Council's updated detailed assessment of November 2022 on the follow-up to all Conference proposals and related measures, publicly available on the Council website [17]. This document provides a comprehensive analysis of the proposals/measures that have already been implemented, are being implemented, or still require follow-up, and will be further updated by the end of 2023.

Conclusions

When looking back at the process of the Conference on the Future of Europe, we can say that the process has been successful, in particular for the following three reasons:

Firstly, for the commitment and motivation of the European citizens who have participated in the Conference and in particular in one of its main features, the European Citizens' Panels. As privileged observers in these panels, we witnessed the very positive answer given by citizens to the invitation by the Presidents of the three Institutions. They seized the unique opportunity – offered to them by the Institutions in charge of the

Conference – to contribute their reflections and ideas to the future of Europe. The same commitment and enthusiasm also came from the citizens who participated in the National Citizens' Panels and in the national events organised during the Conference.

Secondly, the Conference has shown that a process of participatory democracy at European Union level can work and can directly bring citizens' ideas to the European Institutions. After a year of intensive work, 49 proposals and 326 related measures have been put on the table of the EU Institutions, reflecting the priorities of citizens for the years to come.

Finally, with the work carried out on the follow-up since 9 May 2022, the EU institutions have confirmed the commitment made in the Joint Declaration to give an effective follow-up to the final report, thus demonstrating their readiness to seriously take this process forward. This work on the follow-up is still ongoing. At present, a majority of the Conference measures have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

For these reasons in particular, the Conference can be positively assessed as the first exercise of participative democracy of this scale at European level. Of course, this positive overall assessment does not mean that improvements should not be considered. Indeed, and in case another similar exercise were to be launched in the future, lessons should be drawn from the Conference on the Future of Europe. At the same time, it is also important to preserve the positive aspects of the Conference, notably those that allowed citizens to present, through collective deliberations, an important number of

[17] [Documents 10033 2022 REV 1 and ADD 1](#) available on the [Council's webpage dedicated to the Conference](#) and on [the Council's public register](#).

meaningful recommendations to the Institutions.

Moreover, beyond those possible improvements, the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe also invites us to reflect on the ways to pursue the dialogue between EU Institutions and the European citizens on a more long-term basis, to better engage them in the political processes at the EU level. level. This was a clear call from citizens throughout the Conference, who very much appreciated the efforts to engage them in the broad debates on the EU's future.

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the authors, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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