

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: FACING CHALLENGES FROM CITIZEN'S PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

The article examines the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), discussing the process that combines bottom-up participatory features and top-down elite decision-making mechanisms and questioning whether the CoFoE has set a new model of citizens' participation in Europe. Starting with an analysis of the architecture of the Conference, this article will first highlight its participatory tools; in a second step, it will briefly present the proposals presented to the leaders of European politics. Hence it will focus on some critical remarks. In the conclusion, the article draws some critical conclusions regarding the actual outcomes.

Key words: Conference of the Future of Europe, European identity, Democracy, EU reform, integration process.

1. Introduction

On 9 May 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe (hereinafter also CoFoE), formally ended and the outcomes of the largest pan - European democratic consultation experiment were collected in a final report addressed to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission: 49 proposals and 326 detailed recommendations on very different topics to improve EU. The CoFoE has been an invitation to all citizens to 'make their voice(s) heard' for the development of the Union and it is by far the most comprehensive case of citizens' participation¹ the EU has ever undertaken.

¹ In accordance with article 16 of the Conference Rules of Procedure the transnational debate was open to European citizens as well as political actors (European, national, regional public authorities), social partners, civil society representatives and key stakeholders, (hereafter, briefly referred to as European citizens).

The Conference on the Future of Europe, which was scheduled to start in early 2020, was postponed due to the serious health situation caused by Covid 19²; in addition to the pandemic, an interinstitutional dispute over the leadership of the Conference has delayed its launch³. As a result, the Conference, which originally was aimed to run two years (from May 2020 until the first half of 2022), has been significantly shorter.

On 10 March 2021, European Parliament President, Prime Minister of Portugal, on behalf of the Council of the EU, and European Commission President signed the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe⁴. The purpose of this out-of-box-initiative was to relaunch the project of European integration in an unprecedented way: for the first time, the EU reform proposals were not discussed at government level, but were analysed and redefined ‘from the bottom’⁵. In this view, CoFoE constituted the first European experiment in transnational participatory democracy, going beyond prior models of technocratic or deliberative constitutional change⁶.

In compliance with the principle of democratic participation enshrined in Art. 11 TEU, Art. 1 of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference states that:

² It was originally put forward in spring 2019, originating in an idea of French President Emmanuel Macron inspired by the model of local committees channelled into the En Marche!. On 16 July 2019 the proposal was fully taken on board by the new European Commission President in her political guidelines for the 2019-2024 term before the EP. Moreover, the proposal for a Conference on the Future of Europe was also strongly backed by the EP, which quickly set up an *ad hoc* working group (WG), representing all political parties. The proposal in favour of a Conference on the Future of Europe was also endorsed by the European Council. About the historical rationale of the CoFoE see Fabbrini, F. (2019) and Von Ondarza, N. & Alander M., (2021).

³ At the end the three institutions agreed to act as co-guarantors of this initiative.

⁴ Joint Declaration of the three institutions on the Conference on the Future of Europe, „Engaging with Citizens for Democracy-Building a More Resilient Europe“, 10 March 2021 states: „to reflect on our Union, the challenges we are facing and the future we want to build together with the objective of strengthening European solidarity“. Available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sed/doc/news/flash>.

⁵ The CoFoE can be seen as an innovative experiment to renew the EU, yet the initiative also evokes two precedents: the Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe. See Fabbrini, F. (2021). Moreover, previous experiences of democratic consultations include the European Citizens’ Dialogues and the European Citizens’ Consultations. The former, set up as early as 2012 by the Barroso Commission, were re-proposed by the Juncker Commission, which had contributed to the debate on the future prospects of the Union with its 2017 White Paper. The Citizens’ Consultations were to be a bottom-up process of legitimisation of the Union’s future priorities, to be debated in the different Member States, albeit with the involvement of the institutions, and especially of the Commission.

⁶ Drawing on the experience of already existing participatory structures (such as the European Citizens’ Initiatives, the Petition Tool, citizen dialogues or the Commission’s public consultations), the CoFoE, for its institutional organization, attempted to achieve something unprecedented, namely to create a forum for participatory democracy on a transnational scale. See more details in Fabbrini, F. (2021).

„The Conference is a ‘bottom-up’, citizen-centered process that allows Europeans to express their views on what they expect from the European Union“⁷.

The need to undertake a deep reflection on the EU’s future in order to step forward a new integration process has been forced by the pressure of the most recent events, namely the 2020 pandemic crisis and the war in Ukraine: to the persisting problems, such as the asylum and migration policy or the banking union, or the central structural deficits in the Eurozone, new questions added specifically related to EU competence in health policy, common defence, EU role in the future international scenario⁸.

Thus the Conference is seen as an opportunity, on the one hand, to strengthen input legitimacy through citizen participation and, on the other, to deepen integration, including an expansion of EU competences and greater powers for the EP.

2. Architecture and work of the Conference

Not only the mission, but also the governance structure of the CoFoE was outlined in the Joint Declaration adopted in March 2021. The debate has been structured on different levels designed to channel and filter from the bottom up the output of the democratic deliberations⁹.

Three tools were keys for the citizen’s participation: 1) a Multilingual Digital Platform (MDP) where all Europeans had the opportunity to share ideas for the future of the EU; 2) European Citizens’ Panels (ECPs) and 3) decentralized national citizens’ panels (NCPs).

On the basis of the input is the MDP, a collector of ideas and proposals clustered in 9 macro-themes: climate change and environment; health; a stronger economy, social justice and employment; the EU in the world; values and rights, rule of law, security; digital transformation; European democracy; education, culture, youth and sport; other ideas. It was the main hub for citizens’ contributions and information on the different parts of the Conference and an interactive tool to share and debate ideas and input from the multitude of

⁷ On 9 May 2021, the Executive Board endorsed the Rules of Procedure of the Conference, established in accordance with the Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe and laid down the foundations and principles of the Conference. The Rules of Procedure provided the framework for the work of the different Conference structures and their interaction. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/conference-future-europe_en#about-the-conference

⁸ „The Conference on the Future of Europe represents an important opportunity to reflect on the integration process in the aftermath of a devastating pandemic and in the midst of the „deepest economic recession in [the EU’s] history“. European Commission, *Remarks by Commissioner Gentiloni at the Press Conference on the Spring 2020 Economic Forecast*, Brussels, 6 May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_822.

⁹ The pivotal ingredient to enabling a genuine interaction among participants and to reaching a constructive dialogue is the deliberative process.

events organized at national level by citizens and national, regional or local authorities under the umbrella of the Conference.

The ECPs are the key element of the Conference: they were meant to facilitate open, inclusive, transparent and structured debate; they were the filters for translating proposals into recommendations to be presented to the Plenary of the Conference and to the Executive Committee. The topics set out in the Platform were divided and discussed in four panels, each consisting of 200 citizens from the 27 Member States¹⁰. In addition to those Member States were encouraged to also establish national citizens' panels¹¹.

The CoFoE is an hybrid political process where randomly selected representatives of European citizens coexisted with representatives of the institutions of the Union, national parliaments, the governments of the Member States seated in the Conference Plenary.

The Plenary was composed of 449 individuals, representatives of the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, the social partners (representatives of trade unions), civil society, representatives of regional and local authorities, representatives of the national parliaments, of the Council (two per Member State), of the Commission and of the European Parliament¹².

Following the discussions on the recommendations of the ECPs at national and European level and the contributions gathered by the MDP, the Plenary Session addressed its proposals, deliberated by consensus, to the Executive Committee¹³.

¹⁰ CoFoE's five criteria for inclusive panels are nationality, urban/rural, socio-economic background, gender and age. The ECPs were thematically divided along four cross-cutting clusters - focusing on (I) a stronger economy, social justice, jobs; education, youth, culture and sport; digital transformation; (II) European democracy; values and rights, rule of law, security; (III) climate change, environment; health; (IV) EU in the world; migration. In this framework, European citizens convened for three panel sessions, both in person and online, over a span of six months between September 2021 and March 2022, and - also with the support of experts invited to speak as witnesses - deliberated on the topics at hand and advanced a number of orientations for future debate.

¹¹ Only six Member States - including five of the six founding members of the EU, and the three largest EU countries (Germany, France and Italy) - effectively hosted national citizens' assemblies, while the others limited themselves to organizing more traditional engagement and dissemination events.

¹² In its composition it fulfill not only the principle of participatory democracy, but also the principle of representative democracy. To facilitate its deliberation, the Plenary structured its work in nine working groups - corresponding to the nine topics addressed by the Conference. Representatives from the European citizens' panels were selected as chairs and spokespersons of the working groups, and with the support of the Common Secretariat (a technical body with staff from the Commission, EP and Council) they prepared elaborated proposals.

¹³ This body is co-chaired by three members each of the three EU institutions, assisted by four institutional observers. It included representatives from the national parliaments of Member States holding the EU Council Presidency (the so-called Presidential Troika of COSAC - Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union); delegates from the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and the social partners, were invited as permanent observers. Its task was to steer the work of the Conference and to draw and publish the conclusion of the Conference Plenary.

As mentioned above, on 9th of May 2022 the final outcome of the discussions, debates and events was presented in a report addressed to the three Presidents of the EU institutions, who, according to Article 23 of the CoFoE regulation, undertook - each within the scope of their competences and in accordance with the Treaties - to rapidly examine how to effectively follow up the 326 measures including concrete objectives¹⁴.

A feedback event to keep the momentum of the conference alive and to fully inform citizens about the progress on the follow up has been scheduled for 2 December 2022.

3. The proposals

What are the preferences of European citizens and their expectations towards the EU? An analysis of the recommendations is revealing.

Surprisingly, no significant proposals aimed at reducing or containing the competences of the EU institutions emerged on the platform: on the contrary all in all, the substantive input from the Plenary plead for a more sovereign federal EU. From the 49 proposals¹⁵, some 10% of citizens' panel recommendations clearly require Treaties' change for their implementation. This includes, for example, the request for qualified majority voting instead of unanimity in several areas, a right of initiative for the European Parliament, introducing a new EU citizenship statute, EU-wide referenda, transnational electoral lists, creating a European Health Union, the harmonisation of fiscal policy within the EU, the

¹⁴ After the closing ceremony in Strasbourg, the European Commission on 17 June 2022 adopted a Communication setting out how it can follow up on the outcome of the Conference (Communication on the Conference on the Future of Europe 17 June 2022 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/IP_22_3750) and more recently on 14 September 2022, in her State of the Union address, President Ursula von der Leyen outlined flagship initiatives which the Commission plans to undertake, in the coming year, in response to citizen's recommendations (https://state-of-the-union.ec.europa.eu/index_en); in early June, the **European Parliament** adopted a Resolution proposing amendments to the Treaties under the ordinary revision procedure (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220603IPR32122/parliament-activates-process-to-change-eu-treaties>). At the **European Council** meeting on 23-24 June, leaders stated that the EU institutions should ensure that there is an effective follow-up to the final report (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10033-2022-INIT/it/pdf>) and also in the General Affairs Council of the 20 September, Ministers exchanged views on the follow-up to the CoFoE (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/meetings/gac/2022/09/20>).

¹⁵ In details within the 9 macro-areas selected, 'Climate Change and the Environment' includes 6 proposals (1-6), which divided into 57 specific measures; 'Health', includes 4 proposals (7-10) and 24 measures; „Stronger economy, social justice and employment“ suggests 60 measures, divided into 6 general proposals (11-16); there are 8 proposals on 'EU in the World' (17-24), divided into 45 specific measures. 'Values and rights, rule of law, security' presented 6 proposals (25-30) corresponding to 24 measures; „Digital Transformation“ 5 proposals (31-35) broken down into 40 measures. 'European Democracy' is the most ambitious in terms of innovative demands: there are 5 proposals (36-40) and 33 measures; finally 'Migration' includes 5 proposals, (41-45) and 16 measures and 'Education, Culture, Youth and Sport' 4 proposals, (46-49) and 24 measures.

EU taxes on large corporations, the changing the names of EU institutions, European minimum wages, strengthening the Parliament's right of inquiry. Moreover, citizens are ahead of governments in seeing the need for a stronger EU foreign and security policy.

By contrast, the vast majority of Conference proposals and initiatives can be implemented using all the possibilities offered by the current Treaties framework.

Citizens want the EU to use its regulatory powers to prepare Europe for the future by advancing the energy transformation, creating incentives for more sustainable agriculture, strengthening labour protections, improving data protection, promoting convergence in Europe, and introducing stricter and more sustainable import standards.

All the citizens' panels also expressed the wish for the Union to improve its public communication on policies and legislative projects, and to communicate general information about its work in a more comprehensible form¹⁶. The wish for greater participation in the EU's political processes was also explicitly expressed, and it was suggested that the innovations introduced for the Conference be continued as a permanent citizens' forum¹⁷. On the one hand, the citizens' recommendations clearly imply that the EU's existing major projects, such as the Green Deal, the digital agenda and the European Health Union, enjoy legitimacy¹⁸.

4. Critical remarks

Does the CoFoE represent a new push for European democracy? Has it set a new model of citizens' participation in Europe?

Certainly, the Conference was conducted with transparency, discussions were open to all and disseminated via streaming; yet, as the EU project grows in complexity, simple transparency initiatives are insufficient.

The results of democratic participation, emphatically presented by the EU media as triumphant, are not in the numbers¹⁹: reality is that throughout the

¹⁶ For example, the citizens' panels proposed in various contexts establishing an online tool operated by the EU and offering: general information about EU institutions and policies; verified political information and counter-disinformation; fact checks; online referendums; and discussion with politicians.

¹⁷ In those terms the President of the Commission announced her will to translate this experience into a permanent consultation forum, allocating resources for the 'institutionalisation' both of the citizens' panels (which should be able to submit recommendations to the Commission, before the latter formulates legislative proposals) and of the online platform (which could flank the Convention convened by the European Council for the reform of the founding treaties pursuant to Article 48 TEU).

¹⁸ Ondarza, N.v. & Elander, M. (2022)

¹⁹ Referring to the specific efforts to gain public visibility through media, see Michailidou, A. & Trenz, H. (2022).

Conference, only a very small fraction of citizens was aware of what happened, and even fewer have actively engaged with it²⁰.

Looking at the CoFoE's structure, the most innovative element, aimed at effective transnational participation and lively community debate, is the MDP. Although an innovative tool, which broken down the linguistic barriers, just some 53000 Europeans contributed within the one year of its existence. This number is too small to name the platform a success. The national events have been very heterogeneous as it was left to the Member States how to organize them. The ECPs were far from perfect: the broad topics, a lack of time, ambiguities about their intended purpose as well as a weak interlinkage with the national panels were clear obstacles²¹.

Limited visibility, low degree of digital participation, complex procedures and uncertainty about the CoFoE's ability to produce tangible political results were clear hindrances which affected a broad participation.

Beyond those technical reasons the CoFoE remained largely invisible in the broader public sphere, overshadowed by pandemic and war. Unnoticed and conceived as yet another EU bureaucratic exercise.

Nevertheless, the Conference represents a successful sociological experiment of participatory democracy which can and should be repeated in different formats in the future: the participatory toolbox of the EU is set to be expanded.

More effective avenues are still needed to develop a stronger common European identity.

For the future it would be better, to focus on more concrete and capillary instruments²², that directly and constantly involve a citizens and civil society such as for example EU citizen forums that include political parties' representatives; network of democracy facilitator hubs across Europe to help and encourage local initiatives feed into the European level of decisions, consultations and opinions to be formulated in 'Have your say' platform²³.

In other words, the efforts in the future should foster horizontal connections between democratic forums across borders, not only vertical connections through Brussels.

²⁰ In fact, out of a population of about 447.7 million inhabitants, the sum of those who participated in the debate (both through the platform and through participation in the events) is less than 780,000, a small number in absolute terms and even more modest when one considers that it would not even be enough to propose a popular legislative initiative under art. 11(4) TEU and 24 TFEU. Considering that the results of these citizen participation formats have hardly been incorporated into the EU's decision-making processes, it is hard to believe that the level of citizen involvement in CoFoE will have game-changing significance and will lead to a genuine reform.

²¹ Hierlemann, D., Zabel, M. (2022).

²² Young, R. (2022), Raspadori, F. (2022).

²³ Through which the Commission already questions, on specific issues, variously qualified categories of citizens (entrepreneurs, students, environmentalists, trade unionists, etc.)

5. Conclusion

The CoFoE was organized as a citizen-focused, bottom-up exercise designed to gain input from citizens on the key questions facing the EU. As already noted, the combination of random and institutional representation is a key feature of the Conference: the hybrid process lies in the involvement of the institutions of the EU and the Member States in informal consultative democratic processes with the participation of (a limited number of) European citizens who are aware that they belong to a community with a common destiny. Due to its institutional organization, the Conference does not cover the so-called democratic deficit of the Union since it does not change the Union's institutional framework and the rules governing its operation and its relations with the Member States.

However, the Conference should not be underestimated as a process of political democratic participation because it showed that a dialogue between Europeans is possible, even if it often remains latent and needs strong political initiatives to emerge.

Whilst it should definitely serve as an inspiration for future experiments in bringing citizens' participation deeper into the EU policymaking process, there is still room for improvement regarding the organization of the process itself²⁴.

In the end, the Conference have created a watershed moment for European democracy even when many did not expect so at its conception²⁵. It has been a useful tool for raising public awareness, however it has been a too ambitious project²⁶ that is unlikely to lead to changes in the Union's architecture within a reasonable time.

The risk is that the failure to translate the demands coming from the grassroots into concrete action will have a boomerang effect: promising an elaborate mechanism for citizens' involvement, and then not taking their proposals seriously could keep them away from sharing in the EU project and would ultimately only demonstrate how great the distance is between the EU citizens and Brussels.

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