

IS THE EMPEROR NAKED? PROCEDURES AND EXPECTED RESULTS OF THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

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Abstract:

The Conference on the Future of Europe is not the first attempt of the European institutions to bring a debate on the future of the EU to European societies. The last such approach was the European Commission's 2017 White Paper on the Future of Europe.

The conference's concept purports to take a bottom-up approach but does not really do so as the organizational details presented below show. The European institutions want to keep the discussion process under control and also hinder each other through the principle of unanimity.

At the time of writing, the results of the conference are not yet available, let alone a mapped-out way to implement them. However, scepticism is warranted that the conference results will change the structure and policies of the EU.

Keywords: Laeken Conference, White Paper on the Future of Europe, Conference on the Future of Europe, Participation, Decision Shaping

People think about health primarily when they are ill. It's the same with the future. It is discussed when you have the feeling that you don't have one, at least not in the dreamed way. Discussions about the future serve to grab the spokes of the present, to prevent the status quo, which one has identified as insufficient, from perpetuating itself. In other words, those who start a debate about the future have difficulties in the present.

This also applies to the European Union since a long time.

This became particularly clear after the Nice summit in 2000. This meeting of the then 15 heads of state and government in the French Mediterranean

city was unsatisfactory in terms of both procedure and outcome. The German historian Wilfried Loth speaks of a „devastating impression that this conclusion of the Intergovernmental Conference in Nice left not only on many participants, but also on the public and in the European Parliament“¹. As a result, some improvements were not noticed. The way had been cleared for the enlargement of the EU by 12 countries at that time, but it was clear to everyone that this way was too narrow.

The Treaty of Nice had not yet been ratified when it was already overtaken a year later at the Laeken Conference (Belgium). This conference was already announced in No. 23 of the numerous declarations on the Nice Treaty:

„Having thus opened the way to enlargement, the Conference calls for a deeper and wider debate about the future of the European Union.“²

The declaration adopted there formulated far-reaching goals („Challenges and Reforms in a Renewed Union“):

- A better division and definition of competence in the European Union
- Simplification of the Union’s instruments
- More democracy, transparency and efficiency in the European Union³

The new design was to be worked out by a convention, which was to include European and national parliamentarians, representatives of the governments and the European Commission, and was to be enshrined in a European constitution.

In fact, a draft constitution emerged from the Convention’s work by 2004, but it failed to accomplish the „simplification of the Union’s instruments.“ Above all, the authors packed the entire primary law of the EU into this draft constitution, so that the framework of a traditional constitution, which regulates the basic principles but leaves the rest to simple laws, was blown up.

The fate of the European Constitution is well known. France and the Netherlands rejected the draft in referendums, and other members such as Great Britain had not even begun the ratification process. The Constitution, solemnly and pompously signed in Rome in 2004, never saw the light of day in the political world.

The Lisbon Treaty of 2007, which came into force in 2009, then picked up the pieces. The draft for the future had failed, a few improvements and corrections were made, and the primary law was divided into the Treaty on European Union, which corresponded most closely to a constitution, and the

¹ Loth, W. (2014): *Europas Einigung. Eine unvollendete Geschichte*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York (E-Book) p. 903 von 1387

² Treaty of Nice, 2001/C80/01, 23. Declaration on the future of the Union, Pt. 3

³ Laeken Declaration on the Future of the European Union, Presidency Conclusions, European Council Meeting in Laeken 14 and 15 December 2001, SN 300/1/01 REV 1, Annex I, pp. 21 ff.

Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. A design for the future did not emerge in this way; only the most necessary repairs were made to the status quo.

In 2017, the European Commission, namely its President Jean-Claude Juncker, made a new attempt to initiate a discussion about the future. In a white paper on the future of Europe, he presented five scenarios:

„These five scenarios offer a glimpse into the potential future state of the Union, depending on the choices Europe will make:

- Carrying On: The EU27 focuses on delivering its positive reform agenda
- Nothing but the Single Market: The EU27 is gradually re-centred on the single market
- Those Who Want More Do More: The EU27 allows willing Member States to do more together in specific areas
- Doing Less More Efficiently: The EU27 focuses on delivering more and faster in selected policy areas, while doing less elsewhere
- Doing Much More Together: Member States decide to do much more together across all policy areas“⁴

Juncker's intention was to trigger a wide-ranging discussion so that he could then express his own ideas in his 2017 „State of the Union“ speech.

Neither of those occurred. In fact, the White Paper on the Future of Europe had little impact and did not trigger any significant debates. The EU was too preoccupied with itself and the immediate present because of the refugee crisis to devote itself to such a discourse. Juncker, too, ultimately avoided committing himself. He favoured, he said in his speech⁵, a sixth scenario, which he backed up with a series of demands without drawing an overall framework. The impact of the White Paper on the future of Europe had fizzled out; the debate about the future did not take place, certainly not among the broad European public.

The 2019 European Parliament elections, which showed a clear upward trend in terms of voter turnout, led to a difficult situation with regard to filling the position of Commission President. The major party families had committed themselves in advance to the lead candidate principle. This meant that each party grouping nominated a top candidate who, if the party family did best, would then take over as head of the Commission. In 2014, this had come to

⁴ European Commission: White paper on the future of Europe: Five scenarios, https://ec.europa.eu/info/future-europe/white-paper-future-europe/white-paper-future-europe-five-scenarios_en; accessed: 18.08.2021; the whole paper can be found here: European Commission: White paper on the future of Europe. Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, Brussels 2017, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf; accessed: 18.08.2021

⁵ European Commission: President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017, Brussels 13 September 2017; https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_17_3165; accessed: 18.08.2021

pass - to the displeasure of some heads of state and government - but the treaties do not provide for such a junction. Instead, the procedure under Article 17 (7) assigns different responsibilities to the European Council and the Parliament:

„Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. ...“⁶

In 2014, Parliament had taken away the competence of nominating a candidate from the heads of state and government. The fact that with former Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, the top candidate of the European People's Party, ultimately received this office, had certainly calmed tempers. Now the top candidate principle was to apply again in 2019. However, the political groups then sabotaged their plan themselves by failing to win a majority in the European Parliament for one of the top candidates. The European Council took note of this - at least in large parts - with sympathy, as the way was now free to nominate its own candidate. The choice fell on German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen, who was ultimately confirmed by the European Parliament by a narrow majority. Her candidature was met with great scepticism.

Partly in response to the parliament's reluctance to appoint her, von der Leyen announced the idea of a future conference in her introductory speech before her election:

„First, I want European citizens to play a leading and active part in building the future of our Union. I want them to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years.“⁷

But again, the European Union did not find the peace to discuss its future. The Corona pandemic, which has held the world and thus also Europe hostage since the beginning of 2020, prevented both the focus on debates about the future and meetings and conferences. Thus, the start of the conference had to be postponed for a year. The official starting signal was given on May 8, 2021. Nevertheless, the conference is scheduled to come to an end in spring 2022. The discussion time has thus been cut by more than half. There is no factual reason for this, but there is a political one: In the first half of 2022, France will hold the Council presidency and the French president Emmanuel Macron will be fighting for his re-election against the party leader of the radical right-wing Rassemblement National, Marine Le Pen. Macron wants to and should adorn himself with the results of the Future Conference - at the risk of having none because of the shortness of time.

⁶ Treaty on the European Union, Official Journal of the European Union, C 326, Art. 17.6

⁷ European Commission: Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission, Strasbourg 16 July 2019; https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_4230; accessed: 18.08.2021

In fact, shortening the time frame hurts the cause. In 2021, Europe is still in the grip of the Corona pandemic and its consequences, and after the summer break in 2021 Germany, not the least important country in the EU, faces not only parliamentary elections but also the formation of a new government without the current chancellor Angela Merkel. This leaves little room for fundamental discussions on European policy and also little public interest.

A number of questions arise in connection with the Future Conference:

1. What will be discussed at the conference?

The ideas about the shape of such a conference differed.

In a communication of January 2020, the European Commission shows its interest in having conference discuss primarily along their guidelines:

„The Conference should be framed around the EU’s headline ambitions, as set out in the Commission’s six Political Priorities⁸ and the European Council’s Strategic Agenda⁹. These include the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness and equality, Europe’s digital transformation, promoting our European values, strengthening the EU’s voice in the world, as well as shoring up the Union’s democratic foundations...“

The second strand should focus on addressing topics specifically related to democratic processes and institutional matters, notably the lead candidate system for the election of the President of the European Commission and transnational lists for elections to the European Parliament.“¹⁰

Although there was also the indication in the communication:

„While these topics should frame the debate, they should not limit the scope of the Conference. Citizens should be free to focus on what they consider to be important.“¹¹

The Commission had clearly chosen the conference to accompany its own policy projects.

The European Parliament took a more far-reaching approach:

„[The European Parliament] proposes that the Conference Plenary should enable an open forum for discussions among the different participants without a predetermined outcome, while including input from Citizens’ agoras and without

⁸ A Union that strives for more - My agenda for Europe, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

⁹ A new strategic agenda for the EU 2019-2024: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

¹⁰ European Commission: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe, COM (2020) 27 final

¹¹ Ibid.

limiting the scope to pre-defined policy fields or methods of integration; suggests that as a maximum, pre-defined but non-exhaustive policy priorities could be identified, such as:

- *European values, fundamental rights and freedoms,*
- *Democratic and institutional aspects of the EU,*
- *Environmental challenges and the climate crisis,*
- *Social justice and equality,*
- *Economic and employment issues including taxation,*
- *Digital transformation,*
- *Security and the role of the EU in the world*“¹²

The Parliament thus only submits very general proposals for topics but is open to further suggestions developed from the conference.

This in turn conflicts with the considerations of the Council of the European Union, which would like to focus the conference on the priorities of its Strategic Agenda:

„In order to make the discussions relevant to citizens, the content of the Conference should be centred around several key topics, including those from the EU Strategic Agenda, which are wide enough to provide sufficient space for all participants to express their views and the relevance of which has been further highlighted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges of the economic recovery, such as:

- *sustainability, including green and just transition and climate neutrality by 2050 (...)*
- *innovation, competitiveness and digital transformation (...);*
- *fundamental values, rights and freedoms (...);*
- *international role of the EU (...).*“¹³

The basic question is whether new ideas for shaping the future of the EU should and can be drawn on the conference, or whether the conference should help to better achieve the priorities set (by the Commission or the Council).

Finally, there was a Joint Declaration of the three institutions which states:

„We, the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission, aim to give citizens a say on what matters to them.

Reflecting the Strategic Agenda of the European Council, the 2019-2024 Political Guidelines of the European Commission and the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions will cover, amongst others:

¹² European Parliament: European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe, 15 January 2020, P9_TA (2020)0010

¹³ Council of the European Union: Conference on the Future of Europe, 24 June 2020, Doc 9102/20

*Building a healthy continent, the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality and intergenerational solidarity, Europe's digital transformation, European rights and values including the Rule of Law, migration challenges, security, the EU's role in the world, the Union's democratic foundations, and how to strengthen democratic processes governing the European Union. Discussions can also cover cross-cutting issues related to the EU's ability to deliver on policy priorities, such as better regulation, application of subsidiarity and proportionality, implementation and enforcement of the *acquis* and transparency.*

The scope of the Conference should reflect the areas where the European Union has the competence to act or where European Union action would have been to the benefit of European citizens.

*Citizens remain free to raise additional issues that matter to them.*¹⁴

Here, the European Parliament has asserted itself insofar as the range of topics to be discussed is broad. On the other hand, the question arises as to whether the wide range does not lead to arbitrariness, which ultimately prevents the conference from producing results. However, it will only be possible to assess this after the conference.

The Conference on the Future of Europe website now presents 10 topics:

- Climate Change and the environment
- Health
- A stronger economy, social justice and jobs
- EU in the world
- Values and rights, rule of law, security
- Digital transformation
- European democracy
- Migration
- Education, culture, youth and sport
- Other ideas¹⁵

On all these topics (and on „other ideas“), EU citizens can now make suggestions, network, organise and participate in events.

2. Who can take part in The Conference on the Future of Europe?

The conference is explicitly aimed at the citizens of the European Union. To make it easier for them to contribute ideas and to network transnationally,

¹⁴ Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the Conference on the Future of Europe, Official Journal of the European Union, 18.3.2021, C 91 I

¹⁵ Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en>; accessed: 4.9.2021

not only is the website available in the 24 official languages of the EU, but the contributions are also translated into other languages by means of a translation programme.

The interest of the citizens could not really be aroused, at least in the first months. Four months after the official start of the conference and the launch of the website, it registered around 36,000 participants. With a population approaching 450 million, that's not an impressive number. Twice as many people show up to a national league soccer game in a single day.

The low turnout also has to do with the fact that politicians are staying out of this process, either deliberately or out of disinterest. In Germany and, as far as can be seen, in other EU countries, the Conference on the Future of Europe is not an issue in parliament, in the political parties or in the major associations. As a result, it is also of no interest to the media. Public attention is focused on other things such as the Corona pandemic and its consequences and, not the least, natural disasters such as floods and forest fires, which are attributed to climate change. While these are also European issues, they are not, or very little, placed in the EU context.

Anyone who wants to participate in the conference via an Internet platform must register. This can be done via social media, for example Facebook, but also by registering directly via the EU login (previously: ECAS, European Commission Authentication Service). In the process, some social data is collected, such as gender, age group or professional status. It will be interesting to see who actually participated in the debates of The Conference on the Future of Europe.

3. How should be the conference structured?

The original idea of the conference was to have it chaired by a renowned personality. This was the case with the two Conventions, the Fundamental Rights Convention in 1999/2000 chaired by former German President Roman Herzog and the Constitutional Convention in 2002/2003 chaired by former French President Giscard d'Estaing. However, the Council, the Commission and the Parliament could not agree on one person, so that there is now a joint presidency of the three presidents. This should not be seen as a sign of good cooperation but rather as an expression of the institutions' distrust of each other.

Apart from the fact that it is questionable how much time these top personalities are able to devote to the discussion process, the organisers have thus deprived themselves of the opportunity to give the conference its own face. In addition, the presidency of the Council changes every six months, and at the end of 2021 there will also be a new election for the president of Parliament, which, according to the agreements of the party families, would have to lead to the replacement of the current incumbent.

One gets the impression that the focus of this concept was not on the efficiency and effectiveness of The Conference on the Future of Europe, but on the absolute equality of the three institutions.

The core of the whole project are plenary sessions of the conference, which are supposed to be served by four European Citizens' Panels:

„There will be four European Citizens' Panels, each of them comprising 200 citizens and ensuring that at least one female and one male citizen per Member State is included. Citizens will be chosen randomly to ensure that they are representative of the EU's diversity, in terms of geographic origin, gender, age, socio-economic background and level of education. Young people between 16 and 25 will make up one-third of each panel.“¹⁶

The representative selection of the total of 800 participants and a reserve list of a further 200 participants was entrusted to an agency in Brussels. It is hoped that this will also attract people who have not previously been involved with the EU. However, since participation in such a panel (2 days plus travel to and from the event) requires considerable efforts, it can be assumed that those from the European population as a whole who have a positive attitude toward the EU are more likely to participate.

Each of these panels is focused on one topic area:

- Values, rights, rule of law, democracy, security;
- Climate change, environment/health;
- Stronger economy, social justice, jobs/education, youth, culture, sport/digital transformation; and
- EU in the world/migration.¹⁷

The panels should then incorporate their findings into the conference plenaries:

„Representatives from each European Citizens' Panel, of which at least one third shall be younger than 25, shall take part in the Plenary, present the outcome of their discussions and debate them with other participants. The panels shall take on board contributions gathered in the framework of the Conference through the digital platform, providing input to the Conference Plenary by formulating a set of recommendations for the Union to follow-up on.“¹⁸

The conferences themselves are scheduled to take place at least every six months, though with the project running from May 2020 to spring 2021 that's not much. The conferences are, in a sense, the heart of the project:

¹⁶ Conference on the Future of Europe: About the conference, <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about?locale=en>, accessed: 6.9.2021

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

„The Conference Plenary will be composed of 108 representatives from the European Parliament, 54 from the Council (two per Member State) and 3 from the European Commission, as well as 108 representatives from all national Parliaments on an equal footing, and citizens. 108 citizens will participate to discuss citizens’ ideas stemming from the Citizens’ Panels and the Multilingual Digital Platform: 80 representatives from the European Citizens’ Panels, of which at least one-third will be younger than 25, and 27 from national Citizens’ Panels or Conference events (one per Member State), as well as the President of the European Youth Forum.

Some 18 representatives from both the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, and another eight from both social partners and civil society will also take part, while the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will be invited when the international role of the EU is discussed. Representatives of key stakeholders may also be invited. The Conference Plenary will be gender-balanced.“¹⁹

So: 108 MEPs + 54 representatives of the Council + 3 representatives of the European Commission + 108 representatives of national parliaments + 108 citizens + 18 representatives of the Regional and the Economic and Social Committee, + 8 representatives of the social partners and the civil society, this results in a conference of 407 people, without the others who might still be invited. More than 400 people are to reach valid results within two days in each case.

„Their exchanges will be structured thematically around recommendations from the Citizens’ Panels and input gathered from the Multilingual Digital Platform. The Platform is the single place where input from all Conference-related events will be collected, analysed and published.“²⁰

One does not have to be a pessimist to harbor a certain skepticism that serious discussions with common results can really take place. The first conference took place for half a day in Strasbourg in June 2021 but was only intended as a kick-off and did not deliver any results.

4. Who would structure the results?

When 800 people from 27 countries discuss different topics in two-day European Citizens’ Panels and bring them to a two-day conference with over 400 people, again from 27 countries, it is obvious that the decisive task lies in filtering and structuring the ideas and contributions to the discussion.

Structuring the results is the responsibility of the Executive Board, which thus has a key role to play.

¹⁹ Conference on the Future of Europe: About the conference, *ibid.*

²⁰ Conference on the Future of Europe: About the conference, *ibid.*

„In due course, the Plenary will submit its proposals to the Executive Board, who will draw up a report in full collaboration and full transparency with the Plenary and which will be published on the Multilingual Digital Platform.“²¹

The Executive Committee is again composed of equal numbers of representatives from the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, and is also jointly chaired by them.

„The Executive Board will be responsible for taking decisions by consensus, regarding the works of the Conference, its processes and events, overseeing the Conference as it progresses, and preparing the meetings of the Conference Plenary, including citizens’ input and their follow up.“²²

„Decisions by consensus“ means that each of the three institutions has a veto, which ensures that only that which hurts none of the three institutions reaches the actual conference at all.

5. What happens to the results?

The Conference on the Future of Europe has no democratic legitimacy that would make it obligatory to implement proposals from the conference - even if they are adopted unanimously. At best, it is a contribution to decision shaping, not to decision making. The latter is the responsibility of the European and national institutions, which are legitimized by democratic processes. It is important to point this out so as not to create any illusions among the participants in this conference.

The goal of the entire conference is a report to be presented to the European Council in 2022. The Council will then discuss it and adopt conclusions that the EU institutions can further evaluate.:

„In light of the conclusions of the European Council, the EU institutions would commit to examine swiftly how to follow up effectively to this report, each within their own sphere of competence and in accordance with the Treaties.“²³

To make sure it has no negative effects, a „fuse“ is also implemented here once again:

„The Conference does not fall within the scope of Article 48 TEU.“²⁴

Art. 48 of the EU Treaty regulates treaty amendments which are thus excluded - as a proposal, that's all it's about anyways.

²¹ Conference on the Future of Europe: About the conference, *ibid.*

²² Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the Conference on the Future of Europe, Official Journal of the European Union, 2021/C 91 I/01

²³ Council of the European Union: Conference on the Future of Europe, 24 June 2020, Annex, 9102/20, p. 5

²⁴ *ibid.*

So, what happens to the results of the conference? Probably nothing. Like the European Commission's White Paper on the future development of the EU, they will fill the libraries of European studies seminars. They might not even be useful for the election campaign for the European elections in 2024, because by then they might have slipped into obscurity.

6. How can the future conference be assessed as a participatory instrument?

The Conference on the Future of Europe is said to be a bottom-up process, but it is in fact a top-down process designed for affirmation. The topic areas are predetermined, albeit very broad and open to interpretation; the European institutions are careful not to include anything in the recommendations that runs counter to their policies, for which they can use their veto power; the timetable is tailored to the needs of the French president, which is why the conference started a year later but still has to come to an end in spring 2022.

Most importantly, despite all the efforts of the European Parliament and the European Commission, the spark in society has not been ignited. Even though the outcomes are not yet available at the time this article was completed, one can venture a prediction that they will show little result.

The unfortunate part of this observation is that the EU is in dire need of a broad societal-led discussion of the future because consensus among and within member states is crumbling, leading to ever-increasing EU paralysis. But such an approach has to start from below, the discourse has to be conducted in parties and associations, among trade unions and employers, in social clubs and the (social) media. Politicians must also get involved. After all, the fact that politicians are holding back in the debate is not due to respect for the participants, but to disinterest in the entire process.

On the positive side, the lack of interest prevents the great disappointment that would inevitably occur if demands widely discussed in society subsequently disappeared in the thicket of the institutions, especially the Council of the European Union, which is unwilling to change.

In the necessary discourse the approach must also be different: the starting point is not how we want to change the EU, but how we and our children want to live in the 21-st century. From this, conditions and demands can be developed that cannot be met by the individual. The next step is then to consider which issues extend beyond the nation state and what demands it places on the European Union. „Form follows function“ is the word of architecture saying - and this also applies to the architecture of the future Europe.

The Conference on the Future of Europe does not meet this requirement. At best, it is well-intentioned and certainly contributes to European policy education for some who engage with the conference via its website. It has less the character of a think tank than of a company suggestion box, where employees

are allowed to come up with ideas on how to make the given processes work better. This is not nothing, but it is not what has been formulated as a claim.

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