

Policy Position

Time to be honest

The future will not be decided by the Conference on the Future of Europe

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#CoFoE
#FutureOfEurope
#Democracy

The Conference on the Future of Europe will not be the place where the future of the EU will be decided. For that, there are too many obstacles standing in its way: First, it comes at the wrong time. Secondly, it is too short and its governance structures are too heavy. And lastly, it lacks the necessary support at member state level to bring about concrete policy changes. But it also does not have to. The future of EU democracy will be decided in national and European parliamentary elections. Instead of overpromising on the Conference, EU institutions and national governments should ensure that their results are translated into concrete action at EU level.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was [announced](#) in summer 2019 with much fanfare by then Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, after the idea had been [floated](#) a few months earlier by French President Emmanuel Macron. It was supposed to be a great new pan-European two-year democratic exercise through which Union citizens would finally have their direct say on the future of Europe. Even Treaty changes were said to be on the menu. Little is now left of those high ambitions. A year-long delay and months of inter-institutional wrangling make it hard to imagine that concrete policy changes for Europe's future can come out of it. There are four reasons for that:

First, there is too little time. The once envisaged two-year process – a time frame necessary for any serious debate about the future of Europe – has now been shortened to a mere 12 months because of the pandemic. Despite this delay, the Conference is still due to be concluded under the French Council presidency as planned – arguably to accommodate the wishes of Macron who happens to be running for re-election then. It is doubtful that tangible results can be hammered out within such a short time frame when virtual formats are likely to remain the rule.

Second, the governance structure is top-heavy. Under the [Joint Declaration](#) of the three institutions, the Conference is now being steered by an almost absurd number of persons and bodies: the three-pronged Joint Presidency, composed of the presidents of the Commission and Parliament and rotating Council presidency, works alongside a nine-member strong Executive Board, which in turn is joined by an undetermined number of observers. The Joint Declaration also foresees decision-making by consensus among the nine Executive Board members – a MO almost guaranteed to either slow things down or reduce outcomes to the lowest common denominator.

Third, any follow-up is still unclear. According to the Joint Declaration, the results are to be presented in a report to the Joint Presidency. The three institutions will then “examine swiftly how to follow up effectively on this report”. Gone are the mentions of concrete recommendations to lead to legislative action or initiation of Treaty amendments. The lack of clarity on the follow-up is partly due to member state reluctance. The most recent illustration thereof was a [position paper](#) by 12 smaller member states¹ published in late March. They stated that the Conference should be based on the Strategic Agenda of the European Council and rejected any legal obligations or duplication of the EU’s legislative process. What happens if a citizens-led Conference runs into government(s) unwilling to implement their proposals could be witnessed recently with France’s citizen climate assembly. The [fallout](#) between the assembly’s members and the French president was on a grand scale when, despite promises not to filter them, its proposals were substantially watered down in the bill eventually introduced in parliament. As a result, even Macron seemed to [have lost enthusiasm](#) for his own democratic experiment.

This brings me to the **fourth** point and one of the Conference’s biggest weaknesses: Changes to the EU’s future course and priorities cannot be made outside the existing institutional structures and against the will of the member states. The promise of bringing European democracy closer to the people by giving them a direct say in concrete future policy choices is laudable from a participatory democratic point of view. However, it was from the start unrealistic from an institutional point of view, in particular as there was no clear backing from national governments.

The 2019 *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure illustrates the dangers of overpromising on the democratic front. Ahead of that year’s European Parliament elections, voters were promised that the choice of Commission president would be determined by the results. But, instead of nominating a presidential candidate from the ranks of the political parties’ *Spitzenkandidaten*, the European Council decided, via a number of backroom talks behind closed doors, on Ursula von der Leyen. Choosing a Commission president who never ran for office in the first place unleashed [considerable criticism](#) throughout the EU.

Democratic delusions and decisions

The Conference on the Future of Europe risks repeating the same mistake: A promise of a more democratic EU, raising high expectations, which cannot be fulfilled, and one dashed by institutional fights and national power grabs.

Against this backdrop, it would be wise to stop treating the Conference like the door to a brave new democratic world. The Conference will not be the place where the future of the EU is decided. For that, there are too many obstacles standing in its way. EU citizens must of course have a say in the direction in which Europe is headed. The Conference can play a positive role as an additional channel for listening to them. We should thus make the best of it.

¹ Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden

However, it cannot, and should, not replace the ordinary democratic decision-making structures of the EU. The good news is that it does not have to. The EU already has the institutional structures to enable the democratic say of its citizens: national and European parliamentary elections. So, instead of overpromising on the possibilities of the Conference and its outcomes, the European institutions and national governments should do two things: On the national level, they should ensure the inclusion of European politics in domestic electoral campaigns. This will most notably be important in the upcoming elections in Germany and France. It is not lastly through national elections that voters express their views on the EU's long-term agenda. On the European level, they should start preparing for the 2024 European Parliament elections and ensure that the results are translated into concrete actions.

In this regard, committing to a proper *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and sticking to it will be quintessential. EU citizens should have a political choice on who will head the European Commission, and who will, as a consequence, determine many of the policies that will affect them for the following five years. The role of the current Commission president in tackling the Covid pandemic has only reinforced this point.

But also, a genuine continuation of the discussion on how to ensure a pan-European dimension in the elections, and in particular on the question of transnational lists (coincidentally also strongly supported by Macron), should be put on the political agenda well ahead of 2024. This would ensure that a timely reform of EU electoral laws would still be possible. While transnational lists are not without controversy – the last time the idea was floated in 2018 after the United Kingdom's vote to leave the EU it was rejected by the European Parliament itself – they are well worth a revisit as a step towards the emergence of a pan-European party democracy ahead of the next elections.

In conclusion, there is no need to invent the democratic wheel new. The Conference on the Future of Europe might be a nice democratic experiment. But, at the end of the day, it is in the voting booth, both at national and European level, where European democracy will be decided – and with it also the future of Europe.

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