

Statement of the Committee on Foreign Affairs 2019/20:UU5

Communication on the Conference on the future of Europe – position of the Committee on Foreign Affairs

The Committee notes that discussions on the future of the EU have been in progress as a result of various initiatives during the last few years. The Committee has, as described above, been following the discussions on the future of the EU continuously through both consideration of parliamentary business and presentations. On 23 January 2020, the Committee had consultations with the Government on the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Committee agreed with the Government's positions with some additions.

The Committee considers that although it is important to discuss forms for improving democratic legitimacy in the EU, this can be done in different ways and with different points of departure. In the opinion of the Committee, the Government should work towards providing an objective and realistic conference on the future based on the needs and points of view of citizens, while not creating unrealistic expectations. One point of departure should be that the EU exists to serve its citizens so that confidence in EU cooperation can be strengthened, where, for example, it should be made clear that there is added value to be gained from cooperation at the EU level in the areas in which there is cooperation and by showing that the EU makes a difference in specific issues that are important for its citizens. In this context, the Committee would also like to stress the treaty-based role of the national parliaments, including the principle of subsidiarity and how important it is that this is respected.

The Committee is in agreement with the Government that the conclusions that were adopted by the European Council in December 2019 should serve as a guide for continued work on the conference. They state that priority should be given to implementing the strategic agenda for 2019–2024 and achieving concrete results for the benefit of citizens. The areas highlighted in the strategic agenda also need to be prioritised and dealt with in the future, and it is the Commission's task to take these priorities further by means of concrete proposals.

The Committee notes that the strategic agenda contains four prioritised areas:

1. Protecting citizens and freedoms
2. Developing a strong and vibrant economic base
3. Building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe
4. Promoting European interests and values on the global stage

The Committee notes that strengthening the EU's competitiveness is included in the strategic agenda.

The Committee takes a positive view of various initiatives designed to increase information and knowledge about the EU and to enable citizens, civil society and the business sector to channel their points of view in the right way. Democratic broad support for the EU is important as is broad support at the parliamentary level. The Committee considers that the conference can serve as an opportunity to capture some thoughts and ideas via dialogues with citizens and develop ways in which the strategic agenda can be conveyed further and it expresses its support for the Commission's ambition to encourage all citizens to become involved by means of an open and inclusive approach. The European Council's conclusions from 12 December 2019 state that the conference should be based on the dialogues with citizens that have been carried out during the last two years. The regional and local level should also be included in the debate on Europe's future.

National parliaments need to be closely involved with work on the conference. The Committee wishes to stress that national parliaments, political parties and elected representatives at both the local and regional level can carry on a dialogue based on representativeness that needs to be made good use of within the framework of the conference. The Committee considers that parliaments elected by the people in general elections are the way of channelling the will of the people which has the highest legitimacy in European democracy. It is the parliaments and elected party representatives who ultimately represent the citizens in political decision-making. The Conference on the Future of Europe should not change this basic order and the conference should thus be seen as a complement to representative democracy.

Like the Government, the Committee considers that part of the conference should consider how the EU and the member states should take their joint responsibility to guarantee the fundamental principles and values of the Union under article 2 of the Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. This is in line with the strategic agenda and is important for confidence in the whole Union. A gender equality perspective should permeate the whole conference, also in the choice of people who are leading the conference.

One starting point for the Committee is that it is important that the EU27 are kept together as a foundation that constitutes EU cooperation. However, the Committee considers that in certain areas there may be a need for more in-

depth cooperation which may in the long term include all member states. The conference should avoid tug-of-war between the various institutions and discussions on division of competence. It is fundamental that institutional balance should be preserved in the treaties, also when this applies to the role of the Commission. The Committee considers that the work of the conference should be carried on within the framework of current treaties and that some changes to the treaties are not appropriate at the moment. The Commission's communication and the resolution of the European Parliament mention the "Spitzenkandidaten" system of "lead candidates" for the election of the President of the European Commission and transnational lists in connection with elections to the European Parliament. Like the Committee on the Constitution, the Committee objects to these proposals and recalls that in 2018 the Council rejected the European Parliament's proposal concerning a more institutionalised process of "lead candidates" combined with transnational lists of eligible candidates. The Committee expresses its support for this view and thus does not share the Commission's ambition to once again discuss these matters within the framework of the conference.

The Committee considers that focus should lie on participation and broad support from citizens at the national level. It should be possible for the conference to be used to promote a stronger undertaking from member states and the political parties to discuss the development of the EU at home and involve citizens, particularly the younger generation, in public debate. Such an undertaking would help strengthen the EU's democratic legitimacy. Dialogues at the national level should be designed in accordance with national circumstances and relevant actors at the national level. Work on this should also be permeated with transparency.

Like the Government, the Committee considers that the funding of the formulation and implementation of the conference should be dealt with within the framework of the budgets of the relevant EU institutions.