

Conference on the Future of Europe

Announced by Ursula von der Leyen and supported by Parliament, the Conference on the Future of Europe was supposed to offer the opportunity for a thorough reflection on the direction of the EU and its institutional set-up. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has halted the preparation process, with the result that the three institutions have not yet agreed on the format, composition and structure of the Conference. Parliament is nevertheless fully engaged in resuming this initiative as soon as possible in the post-coronavirus context, and will debate the issue with the Council and Commission during the June plenary session.

Background

The President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced in her [inaugural address](#) in July 2019 and in her political guidelines, the intention to launch a Conference on the Future of Europe. She then entrusted responsibility to Vice-President [Dubravka Šuica](#) to work with Vice-President [Maroš Šefčovič](#) for the link with national parliaments, and with Vice-President Věra Jourová for issues on *Spitzenkandidaten*, transnational lists and European electoral law. The Conference should be an opportunity to engage in a more structured debate, with the aim of improving the functioning of the EU not only in terms of institutional dynamics, but also in terms of policies. At this stage, the outlook and governance of the Conference have not yet been agreed among the three institutions, and the start of the Conference, initially envisaged for 9 May 2020 in Dubrovnik, was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the [European Parliament](#) and the [Commission](#) have both set out their approaches formally, Council has not reached a final position, despite several rounds of discussion. It had been expected that a Joint Declaration of the three institutions would conclude this 'preliminary' phase, after which the Conference should have started.

European Parliament's position

Parliament has made very precise and ambitious suggestions on the purpose, scope and composition of the Conference in a [resolution](#) of 15 January 2020, inspired by an [opinion](#) of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO). Parliament strongly endorses the active participation of citizens, whom it envisages debating EU policy issues in thematic Agoras composed of 200-300 citizens, with representatives from each Member State based on degressive proportionality (with a minimum of three per country) and selected randomly by independent national authorities. Parliament identified seven policy or thematic areas, broadly reflecting the six policy priorities of Commission President von der Leyen. Parliament has also made detailed proposals as to the composition: a large 'delegation' from the European Parliament (135), members of Council (only at ministerial level, 27), national parliaments (between two and four per Member State), European Commission (three Commissioners), European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions (four members each), EU-level social partners (two per side). This adds up to approximately 227 members of the Conference (while the Convention on the Future of Europe in 2002 counted 105 full members without alternates). A Steering Committee would prepare the meetings, and an Executive Board would manage them. Citizens' Agoras would debate autonomously each thematic area and feed into the institutional discussion within the Conference with a bottom-up approach. Parliament wants a process that leads to concrete recommendations that can be turned into actions, and commits to a follow-up of the outcome of the Conference either with legislative initiatives or with Treaty change, and invites the other institutions to do the same.

European Commission's position

The Commission, in a [communication](#) adopted on 22 January 2020, made proposals of a somewhat less 'ambitious' nature, although in several aspects converging with Parliament. A bottom-up approach is endorsed to discuss issues around the six policy areas corresponding to President von der Leyen's priorities, also taking account of the Strategic Agenda adopted by the European Council. The Commission also stresses the inclusive character of the Conference, and its transparent and constructive approach. The composition is however less detailed, with EU institutions and bodies together with national and regional

representatives all mentioned. In terms of citizens' participation, however, the Commission suggests leveraging the existing Citizens' Dialogues, with an enhanced outreach. The Commission proposes to use existing networks or create specific events to gather citizens' opinion, enhancing existing technology and tools and proposing new forms of participation through a multilingual digital platform, 'hackathons' and Conference-related events. The focus should be, although not exclusively, on young people, and the Conference should exploit existing national or local networks and social media to widen the outreach. The Commission considers it crucial that the Conference is followed by real and tangible actions, and pledges to follow up on the Conference debates with the most appropriate action, either with legislative actions or proposals for Treaty changes. The Commission suggested that the Conference should last for two years, with two working strands, one on institutional issues and the other on specific policies, with outcomes and recommendations presented during the French Presidency of the Council during the first half of 2022.

Council's and Member States' position

The Council debated its approach at the General Affairs Council in [January 2020](#), in [February 2020](#) and recently on [26 May 2020](#), without reaching a definite position, but discussion covered several issues, including the need for the Conference to deliver concrete results and the opportunity of the Conference to represent a moment of democratic legitimacy for the European project. The guiding principles should be based on inclusiveness, whereby all Member States are equally involved and share ownership of the outcomes together with the EU institutions and national parliaments. The Conference should build on citizens' dialogues and various consultations held over the past two years, and should engage in a broad debate with citizens in the course of the process. The organisation of the Conference should be based on equality between institutions, respect for institutions' prerogatives and avoidance of unnecessary bureaucracy. Similar to the proposal of the other two institutions, the Council has also debated the possibility to involve, in addition to the three institutions, national parliaments, citizens and civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Debate on the leadership of the Conference has apparently been one of the factors that prevented Council from reaching agreement on a final position. Further to the EU institutions' contributions, in December 2019, France and Germany offered their guidelines for the Conference in a [non-paper](#). Salient elements thereof are the bottom-up approach, the aim to make the EU more structured and sovereign, and twofold working streams, with on the one hand, the institutional and democratic functioning of the EU, and on the other, the policy-oriented priorities.

Future perspectives

With the coronavirus pandemic, the preparatory work for the Conference has, inevitably, paused. Efforts to revive the discussions have, however, been made within the European Parliament in its [resolution](#) of 17 April calling for a resumption of the Conference as soon as possible. In a [letter](#) to President Sassoli, the Chair of the AFCO committee, Antonio Tajani, highlighted the important potential role of the Conference in the recovery from the pandemic crisis and invited him to call on the [Croatian Presidency](#) to resume work. The latter has expressed the intention of finalising discussion in the Council as soon as possible, in order to conclude the preparation phase of the Conference. A [working document](#) from AFCO on the [70th anniversary](#) of the Schuman Declaration underlined the importance of the Conference, whilst the Franco-German [initiative](#) of 18 May 2020 on recovery from the pandemic considers the Conference as an opportunity to open a broad democratic debate on the European project, its reforms and priorities. The next [trio](#) of EU Council Presidencies (Germany, Portugal and Slovenia), to run from 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2021, says that it intends to [maintain](#) the Conference high on the European political agenda. AFCO returned to the issue of the Conference in its meeting of [26 May](#), at which several members stressed the need to engage as soon as possible in the debate on the future of Europe, needed all the more in the current crisis. A further discussion came during the AFCO meeting of [8 June](#), when the Croatian Presidency was urged by many AFCO members to conclude the process within Council. Several AFCO members found it regrettable that Council could not conclude this preliminary phase and expressed the wish that a joint declaration among the three institutions be agreed before the summer, making it possible to start the Conference in the second half of 2020. Meanwhile, according to Vice-President [Maroš Šefčovič](#) the Commission is working on a multilingual digital platform open to all EU institutions and allowing the organisation of online debates, although a digital-only solution cannot reach everyone and cannot replace face-to-face debates.

