

# CITIZENS' EUROPE

AN INSTITUTIONAL TURN FOR  
AN EVER-DEMOCRATIC UNION?

*Michele Fiorillo, Seamus Montgomery*

*Fabio di Nunno, Alvaro Oleart*



Policy Study published in March 2022 by

**FEPS**  
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



**THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE  
STUDIES (FEPS)**

European Political Foundation - N° 4 BE 896.230.213  
Avenue des Arts 46 1000 Brussels (Belgium)  
[www.feps-europe.eu](http://www.feps-europe.eu)  
@FEPS\_Europe



**KARL RENNER INSTITUT**

Karl-Popper-Straße 8, 1100 Vienna (Austria)  
<https://renner-institut.at/>  
@RennerInstitut



This Policy Study was produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.

This paper represents only the opinion of its authors and not necessarily the views of FEPS or the Renner Institute.

Copyright © 2022 by Foundation for European Progressive Studies.  
Front page photo: @shutterstock  
Copy editing: Helen Johnston

**ISBN: 978-2-930769-75-2 9782930769752**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	4
1. INTRODUCTION .....	6
2. THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EU AND NATIONAL POLITICS? .....	8
3. THE PREVIOUS CONFERENCES ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND TREATY REFORMS .....	11
4. IN 50 YEARS: EU ELITES GAZE INTO EUROPE’S DISTANT FUTURE .....	15
5. CITIZENS’ EUROPE? TRANSNATIONAL CIVIC ACTIVISM AND THE BUILDING OF A NEW TYPE OF EU INSTITUTIONS .....	19
6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY PROPOSALS .....	22
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY, AUTHORS, ABOUT FEPS &amp; PARTNERS</b> .....	25
7. BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	25
8. THE AUTHORS .....	28
9. ABOUT FEPS AND PARTNERS .....	30

## KEYWORDS

CoFoE, European identity, bridging EU-national politics, media, Deliberative Democracy, Participation, European Citizenship

---

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

---

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper outlines a vision of the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) from various perspectives and sets out proposals regarding how it should develop in order to contribute to making the EU more democratic. First, the paper discusses further steps the Conference should take towards bridging the gap between EU and national politics. Second, the paper analyses previous initiatives of treaty reforms which may be incorporated into the Conference on the Future of Europe. Third, the paper lays out the visions of Europe in a half-century's time among EU Commission officials. Last, the paper discusses citizens' involvement in shaping EU future through a broader process of European deliberative democracy, and how the CoFoE could advance such a perspective.

---

# INTRODUCTION

---

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) had undoubtedly a long, difficult start, and finally kicked off on the symbolic date of 9 May. The Conference's design includes: a single digital platform open to collect proposals from all members of European society<sup>1</sup>; the deliberative European citizens' panels; the plenary session and its working groups, composed by representatives from the citizens panels and from the different EU institutions, the national parliaments and civil society organizations. So far, the broader European society has expressed not much interest in the Conference and its platform. This is due to a lack of sufficient media coverage. Additionally, some citizens participating in the deliberative events and in the plenary shared their disappointment. Their dissatisfaction derived from a feeling that their demands are not being addressed and really taken into consideration in the plenary of the Conference. One central issue they raised was that a mere sequence of interventions, without serious interaction, was undermining the event's sense of a deliberative attitude.

However, looking into the first European citizens' panels meetings, it is our contention that there is latent potential in the CoFoE for a new type of democratic life – one which fosters serious and productive debate and deliberations involving transnationally and nationally public opinion and popular engagement as opposed to a distant Europe.

If successful, the lasting consequences of the CoFoE may very well be the consideration of a participatory and deliberative dimension as an integration to representative democracy, that will be strengthened by it.

---

1 [www.futureu.europa.eu](http://www.futureu.europa.eu)

---

# **THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE SHOULD BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN EU AND NATIONAL POLITICS?**

---



## 2. THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE SHOULD BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN EU AND NATIONAL POLITICS?

During the last decade, there has been a substantial increase in the politicisation of EU affairs, on issues such as trade, austerity, immigration, climate change or, recently, healthcare due to the COVID-19 crisis. The EU policy-making process has traditionally favoured institutionalised Brussels-based peak associations and umbrella groups that aggregate and represent diverse interests at EU level, which in turn has created tensions with grassroots groups based at the national level across EU member states.

The success of the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe will be measured on the extent to which EU and national politics are bridged. As already underlined before the start of the Conference: 'the EU won't fix its democratic deficit with another top-down "conference"' (Alemanno 2020). Among the many dangers of conceiving the Conference as a public relations exercise of the EU is the rise of further distrust towards EU institutions, already seen as distant from European citizens' needs. As the civil society coalition Citizens' Take Over Europe has argued in their letter to EU institutions, 'new mechanisms for citizens to participate in an ongoing way in the governance of the EU should be explored'.<sup>2</sup>

The key to setting up new participatory mechanisms to make the voice of European citizens heard is to bridge national with European politics in order to meet citizens where they are.

In other words, it is necessary to reach relevant national political actors that are often not involved in EU politics and involve them in transnational platforms that reach beyond EU institutions. The politicisation of EU policies beyond the 'Brussels bubble' into the national debates would be a symptom of the normalisation of the EU as a playing field (Bouza and Oleart 2018), where the dominant arguments are EU-critical, rather than anti-EU. The construction of a transnational political field in the EU will be built on the basis of contestation of what the EU does, connecting the national debates and expanding the EU debate beyond the usual Brussels-based suspects.

The quality of our democracies depends on the way power circulates between the institutionalised forms of decision-making and the informal flows of communication. A crisis of legitimacy will take place if citizens perceive either that there is a disconnect between the informal claims and institutional decisions, or that the political system is colonised by any of the subsystems. At the crossroads in which the EU is, it is necessary to envision democratic participation beyond the nation-state, while also taking into account the national political dynamics. If the gap between informal flows of communication (transnational media coverage or social movements) and institutionalised forms of decision-making is not closed in the context of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the logical outcome will be further distrust.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://citizenstakeover.eu/ro/blog/open-letter-to-the-eu-institutions-co-creating-a-citizens-centered-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>

More concretely, what we suggest is the construction of democratic processes in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe that are sensitive to the national political debates, while maintaining a pan-European logic. If the objective is to generate public deliberation – understood as an open, inclusive and reflective debate aiming to achieve the best decisions, taking into account the force of the arguments – we must conclude that there are no concrete mechanisms to produce it. Rather, such processes will be the result of the various debates taking place within institutions and outside them.

In addition to bridging national and European politics, the Conference on the Future of Europe should create a permanent space for citizens to set the agenda on important issues that go beyond nation-states. For instance, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of a co-ordinated approach to it, it is likely that many citizens would be in favour of providing more EU competencies on healthcare, which is currently a policy area legislated uniquely by national governments (this has been the case for Italy, see Basile et al 2021). The outcomes of the Conference should therefore not focus only on the institutional questions, but also be the space for citizens to set a broader agenda at the EU level. Citizens are more likely to participate in the process if they can touch upon the policy issues they care about most on the EU level, and if they can trust that EU institutions are gathering their input regarding their needs and desires.

In order to estimate the impact of the Conference on the Future of Europe, it is useful to explore the previous conferences established to foster the European integration mechanisms which led, or did not lead, to treaty reforms.

---

# **THE PREVIOUS CONFERENCES ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND TREATY REFORMS**

---

### 3. THE PREVIOUS CONFERENCES ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND TREATY REFORMS

The Conference on the Future of Europe evokes two precedents: the Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe (see Fabbrini 2019). Both initiatives were taken at a critical time in the history of European integration. Both were the results of original institutional design solutions, conceiving new methods to reform the EU not foreseen in the then applicable treaties. The Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe both proved valuable in relaunching the project of European integration, even if they had different fates.

The Conference of Messina (1-3 June 1955) is considered a turning point in the relaunch of the European integration process. Despite the successes of the 1951 Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the failure of the European Defence Community and of the European Political Community had paralysed the European integration process. However, at the initiative of Italy the ministers of foreign affairs of the six founding member states gathered in Messina to find a way to move the European integration process forward. This process can be considered successful as the governments agreed on the substantive objectives of 'the expansion of trade and the movement of persons,' with 'more and cheaper energy,' and 'the setting up of a common European market.'

Moreover, from a procedural point of view, they decided that 'a conference or conferences will be convened for the purpose of drafting the relevant treaties or arrangements' and that 'these conferences will be prepared by a committee of government delegates assisted by experts under the chairmanship of a leading political figure whose task

it will be to coordinate the work to be undertaken'. In meetings held in Brussels in summer 1955, the intergovernmental committee established by the Conference of Messina – the 'Spaak Committee', taken from the name of the Belgian minister of foreign affairs chairing it – worked out the details of a plan to set up a common market and an atomic energy community, which were presented in a report on 21 April 1956.

In May 1956 the ministers of foreign affairs of the ECSC member states embraced the Spaak Report and mandated an intergovernmental conference for the purpose of drafting a treaty. Notwithstanding the efforts to derail the initiative staged by the United Kingdom, which had been associated with the Messina process but had refused to fully engage in it, the diplomatic talks rapidly progressed toward the drafting of two new international agreements: the treaties establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), both of which were signed in Rome on 25 March 1957. The EEC and Euratom were instituted as separate organisations from the ECSC but had to share their powers with the European Court of Justice and the Common Assembly. As such, the Conference of Messina was able to initiate a process which, through a by that time innovative institutional set-up, centred on a committee of experts acting under a ministerial mandate. Though it was able to expand the purview of the ECSC and relaunch the project of European integration through new international treaties, it was still nevertheless connected to the Treaty of Paris functionally and institutionally.

More recently, the Convention on the Future of Europe took place at a critical juncture of the European integration process, given the imminent EU enlargement and the hostile geopolitical environment. Established by the European Council meeting in Laeken, on 14-15 December 2001, the European Convention was tasked to 'resolve three basic challenges: how to bring citizens, and primarily the young, closer to the European design and the European institutions, how to organise politics and the European political area in an enlarged Union and how to develop the Union into a stabilising factor and model in the new, multipolar world.' Given the difficulties in reforming the EU experienced earlier in 2001 in the intergovernmental conference concluding with the Treaty of Nice, however, the European Council 'decided to convene a Convention composed of the main parties involved in the debate on the future of the Union' and tasked it 'to consider the key issues arising for the Union's future development and try to identify the various possible responses.' To this end, the European Council established an original body: the Convention – modelled on the successful experiment of the Convention that had been set up two years previously, to draft a Charter of Fundamental Rights for the EU (2000) composed by delegates of heads of state and government together with representatives of national parliaments, the EP and the Commission. Moreover, it mandated this body to prepare a final document with recommendations that would provide a starting point for discussion in the intergovernmental conference, 'which will take ultimate decisions.'

Under the leadership of its Chairman Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, and its Vice-Chairmen, Giuliano Amato and Jean-Luc Dehaene, the Convention quickly re-interpreted its mandate, wearing the clothes of a constitution-making body engaged in a full-blown process of re-thinking the institutional organisation and policy competencies of the EU.

Following an extensive process of deliberation – which ran in Brussels for 18 months starting in March 2002, through plenary meetings and thematic working groups, steered by a praesidium – the Convention drafted a new treaty establishing a European Constitution to replace the previous EU treaties and codify the EU primary law into a single text with an explicit constitutional character. This draft treaty, agreed by consensus, was presented to the European Council on 18 July 2003 and served as the basis for the subsequent intergovernmental conference. Despite a number of adaptations which several member states required during the intergovernmental negotiations, the draft treaty prepared by the Convention was mostly embraced. The 25 member states signed the treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in Rome on 29 October 2004. However, with the failure of the constitutional referendums held in France and the Netherlands, the treaty encountered a ratification crisis leading ultimately to the abandonment of the document's constitutional language. Yet, its substance was eventually preserved via the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). As such the European Convention, through an innovative institutional set-up with a mixed composition of various actors and a given deliberative process, delivered a plan of EU reforms which in the end allowed the process of European integration to move forward on a stronger basis for another decade.

The Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe represented historical turning points in the process of European integration. Indeed, both were initiatives not conceived in the treaties, which were able to change the political dynamics of interstate bargaining through new institutional methods. The Conference of Messina identified a new path to advance the project of integration by establishing an ad hoc intergovernmental committee charged to prepare a 'general report' to be presented to an intergovernmental conference for the purpose of drafting a new treaty.

Similarly, the Laeken Declaration set up a new body, the Convention, gathering member states' representatives with delegates of the EU institutions and national parliaments, in order to deliberate on the reforms needed to renew the EU and prepare a document to be later considered by the intergovernmental conference. Moreover, in conceiving both the Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe, EU member states moved beyond the limitations of the treaties, since the Conference was an initiative outside the ECSC and the Convention model was not yet foreseen in the TEU.<sup>3</sup>

If these were the models used until now for the processes preparing new treaties or treaty revision and change, one should not forget that together with political deliberations and decisions, the core of the implementation – and often impulse – of these exercises were and are the EU 'elites' leading and working in the Brussels institutions. The failure of the Convention in its original form also had a negative symbolic impact on citizens and, indeed, the next reform was conceived only with a traditional treaty revision, with the Treaty of Lisbon. In the following paragraph we therefore present an 'ethnographic' empirical overview of elite visions on the future of Europe.

---

3 This paragraph is based on Fabbrini, F., *The Conference on the Future of Europe. A New Model to Reform the EU?*, Working Paper n. 12 / 2019, Brexit Institute, Dublin City University.

---

# **IN 50 YEARS: EU ELITES GAZE INTO EUROPE'S DISTANT FUTURE**

---



## 4. IN 50 YEARS: EU ELITES GAZE INTO EUROPE'S DISTANT FUTURE

For civil servants working in the European Commission, Europe signifies a meaningful cultural construction for a supranational community arising out of an original relation to internal conflict. This section analyses how EU administrative officials in civil service position themselves within current debates on the idea of Europe by articulating shared and contrasting visions of the future.

In contrast to modes of 'nationness' that gaze back towards the pre-modern, the EU is paradigmatically and self-consciously futurist in orientation. Europe, like the Sartrean existentialist, 'projects itself into a future and is conscious of doing so' (Sartre 2007: 23). The so-called European 'project', as the name suggests, is consistently conceived by those who participate in the creation and implementation of European-level policies as a work in progress, a descriptive as opposed to a substantive. In the final pages of his memoirs, Jean Monnet (1978) remarked that the question of the specific political form which Europe will ultimately take was, at his late stage in life, still indeterminable. Europeanness seeks to negate the principle that 'the cult of ancestors is the most legitimate of all' (Renan 2018: 261). It aspires not to venerate the ghosts of yesterday, but rather exorcise them from the soul of Europe. Consequently, a few informants dismissed altogether the question of what Europe will look like in 50 years' time, explaining how they felt incapable of hazarding a guess. The notion that the Union will continue to exist in a recognisable form by the 2060s is not, they feel, a safe assumption that should be taken for granted. 'I'm not entirely sure we'll be here in ten years', one informant grimly put it. 'I hope so.' In a political landscape characterised by accelerated changes and enduring uncertainties, where the future no longer resembles the past, they are cautious in making firm predictions when in public.

Fatalistic prophecies which envision the European project unravelling in the approaching decades are made more daunting given how those who hold them also strongly believe its ultimate completion to be essential for continued peace and stability in the region.

A majority of respondents expressed relatively more optimistic attitudes regarding Europe's prospects in the next half-century. The successive crises developing over recent years gave them cause for deep concern. Most agreed with the view put forth by then-President Jean Claude Juncker (2015) that his was a 'last-chance Commission' steering the ship at a 'make-or-break moment' for the EU. Nevertheless, they see no reason to seriously doubt that the Union will survive to celebrate its centennial birthday. 'The solutions will not come out of passion,' declared one respondent, 'but they will have to come out of necessity.' Europe will be bigger by then, they imagine, having grown eastward to encompass most, if not all, of the Balkan states. As its economic and demographic growth rate becomes increasingly outpaced by that of its geopolitical competitors in a multipolar twenty-first century, it will constitute an ever-smaller percentage of the global population. This 'relatively shrinking Europe' will continue to grow as an economic market but make up a lower proportion of global wealth.

An enlarged Europe of the future will become more deeply integrated into a broader array of fields and sectors while growing more culturally heterogeneous. A desire to establish a common European military and foreign policy was a recurring theme expressed in conversations with officials. Realising this dream is seen as a feasible outcome on account of the institutional changes enacted by the Treaty of Lisbon.



This prospect has now been given renewed promise with the fresh absence of UK influence in these dialogues after 'Brexit'. Informants overwhelmingly favoured proposals for moving toward completion of the banking system to form a real economic and monetary union. Intensified levels of intra-EU mobility, they think, will give rise to increased transcultural contact between Europeans who move and feel at home across national borders. The acceleration of freedom of movement coupled with the global convergence of European media will, in turn, foster closer co-operation and cultural exchange at the European level. Many informants emphasised the significance of identity, emotion and a collective sense of shared Europeaness in creating 'not the Europe of institutions and rules, but the Europe of peoples', whose members self-identify with the European idea. Heightened levels of multicultural diversity will thus necessitate, they think, accelerated integration on a human level, if not quite at an institutional scale.

Ideals of federalism and federalisation played a salient role in Commission officials' view on the future. Some informants doubted that the EU will one day evolve into a truly federal European state, citing the persistence of national interests in retaining autonomy and growing public sentiment among citizens that 'building more Europe' requires relinquishing too much control over their lives to unelected bureaucratic elites abroad. One informant remarked how, compared to his peer group, members of his children's generation appear less trustful of governmental institutions in general and more willing to voice their opposition in public debate. However, a federalist spirit revealed itself even in the case of these sceptics. It is generally understood that the experience of future moves toward an 'ever closer union' will be more difficult for some member states than it will be for others. Some felt that the correct response to Eurosceptic challenges to EU authority leveraged by populist actors was to pause and reflect on what it means to build Europe in order to avoid suspicions of further over-reach from 'Brussels'. Others underlined the perceived importance of reaffirming the added value that local-level institutions provide in preserving and promoting national sovereignty and diversity.

The above discussion shows that Commission officials see Europe proceeding down two possible paths: either disintegration, with the EU becoming a looser and less coherent organisation, or else one of strengthened integration or 'strategic autonomy' in the policy areas of trade, defence and foreign affairs. Despite recent moves in the EU executive towards a 'more political' and 'geopolitical' Commission, Europe's relative decline as a political and economic power on the global stage will in their eyes most likely continue. The question remaining is whether the engineers of European integration – that is, the decision-makers at the head of EU institutions who claim to represent the interests of 500 million citizens – have either the functional capacity or political will to take on the risk of decline in an efficient and effective manner. Additionally, many officials remain sceptical that the confluence of historical conditions necessary to realise a truly federal Europe will ever arise. Nonetheless, most interviewees argue that the first half of the 21st century will inevitably give rise to strengthened integration on a social and cognitive level, whereby Europeans will 'naturally' come together even if their national governments are reluctant at first to follow suit.

In comparing Commission civil servants' imaginings of the EU in 50 years with their personal aspirations for its development, the distinction between real and ideal future visions is often blurred. Notwithstanding the anxieties wrought by present crises and the weariness felt regarding long-term decline, their realistic expectations for the future largely align with their idealised hopes and wishes. European imaginaries are constructed through future projections of a utopian Europe which contextualise and lend meaning to officials' lives and work in the present, challenging notions of the future of Europe as intangible and indeterminate. Happily, an ambient motif emerging from these conversations was that a stronger Europe ideally means a fairer one as well, one that abandons neoliberal socioeconomic policies exacerbating wealth disparities within and across member states.

The 'glass-half-empty' disposition encountered in the case of many self-styled pessimists working in the EU administration thus conceals an underlying optimism towards Europe's future, coupled with a steadfast (if implicit) conviction in the ultimate inevitability of a more perfect Union.

If this is the way EU elites are seeing the future of the continent, what about the efforts of civil society and NGOs to empower the citizens' voice,<sup>4</sup> allowing them to directly shape the EU horizon by putting them centre stage in the Conference on the Future of Europe, as a possible learning moment for new permanent democratic mechanisms?

---

4 Before the actual start of the Conference, in March 2021 a Eu wide poll was conducted by Eurobarometer to show Europeans' orientations and expectations towards Europe's Future and the Conference in itself: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2256>

---

# **CITIZENS' EUROPE? TRANSNATIONAL CIVIC ACTIVISM AND THE BUILDING OF A NEW TYPE OF EU INSTITUTIONS**

---

## 5. CITIZENS' EUROPE? TRANSNATIONAL CIVIC ACTIVISM AND THE BUILDING OF A NEW TYPE OF EU INSTITUTIONS

For months the situation could be described as such: the announcement of a Conference continually postponed mainly due to the coronavirus pandemic, a large debate about it inside the European bubble, an interest from NGOs and civil society to play a role, and a lot of waiting for the process to get underway.

Finally, a Joint Declaration on the Conference<sup>5</sup> was agreed by the presidents of the three EU institutions, making many civil society organisations very worried about the real will of the institutions – the Council, foremost – to involve citizens in a proper participatory and deliberative process.<sup>6</sup>

Expectations towards the Conference were in fact very high. Also high were the criteria to measures the Conference's success suggested by NGOs.<sup>7</sup> Key features for the success of the Conference were deemed the following: enabling citizens and civil society to take control throughout the process, from its definition, implementation and conclusions, right up to the implementation of the results. That implied that the Executive Board of the Conference would include social partners and representatives of civil society, media and European economic, social and cultural organisations, as well as local and regional authorities with the status of full members or observers.

Some of the NGOs also underlined that to consistently involve citizens in the debate and decision-making process about the future of the Union is necessary for the institutions to provide for 'the definition of a common methodology aimed at enabling this process in order to guarantee the level of transparency, integrity and rigour necessary for its credibility; the truly inclusive representation of European civil society and that of the candidate countries, selected by lot; the inclusion of the results of these deliberations in the Conference conclusions.'<sup>8</sup>

The push by NGOs and the EU parliamentarians to use innovative instruments of citizens' participation, supported by necessary structures and financial resources, to involve everyone in a transnational debate and deliberation to democratise and strengthen the Union, was finally successful with the introduction of the European Citizens' Panels (ECP). The ECP consist of 800 citizens randomly selected to represent the diversity of the broader European society.

5 <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6796-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

6 See for instance the statement by the Citizens Take Over Europe coalition: <https://citizenstakeover.eu/news/statement-on-the-joint-declaration-on-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/2021/>

7 See for instance Citizens Take Over Europe, '10 principles for a citizen-centered Conference on the Future of Europe' <https://citizenstakeover.eu/ten-principles/>. Or the open letter to the Presidents of the European Union Institutions by CIVICO Europa: <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/politique/opinion/lettre-ouverte-aux-presidents-de-la-commission-europeenne-du-conseil-europeen-du-parlement-europeen-et-de-la-presidence-portugaise-du-conseil-de-lunion-europeenne/>

8 CIVICO Europa, 'For an open, transparent and long-term conference' <https://voxeurop.eu/en/for-an-open-transparent-and-long-term-conference/?fbclid=IwAR1hwaXJMjfWrtppsPE6e1r5b0bflVaAlGk-JXodnG0CWcyYkrLbYwJCrgfM>

The one-year period for the Conference – initially expected to last two years – risks, however, harming the credibility of the whole process, which seems doomed to be rushed. Yet recently a prolongation of the exercise came under discussion and must be welcomed.

In fact, the failure of the Conference in properly involving citizens is a big, concrete risk for precipitating greater popular disillusionment towards European institutions. This would have the very likely consequence of strengthening nationalistic-populist forces on the way to the 2024 European elections.

On the contrary, a prolonged Conference can play a role as an accelerator of transnational civic activism and the building of new types of EU institution. For example, a permanent European Citizens' Assembly<sup>9</sup> as terrain of experimentation with new forms of citizens' participation, initiating a process towards a full European deliberative democracy. This process would be also functional in boosting the representative institutions. Moreover, it could pave the way for a Constitutional Assembly that could be the mandate of the new European Parliament to be elected in spring 2024, complementing the Convention for Treaty changes that some governments are seeing as the possible outcome of the Conference. Particularly, the new German government coalition deems that the Conference 'should lead to a constitutional convention and the further development of a federal European state', as written in the three-parties coalition deal.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, such a process would prove that the approval of the Recovery Fund by the Council (December 2020) was really the start of the 'hamiltonian moment' of the EU. That is to say, the outcomes of the Conference could and should transform the measures approved as permanent and not provisional ones, integrating them in a de facto federal and fully democratic new institutional framework.

---

9 Manifeste pour une assemblée citoyenne européenne: <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/tribune-pour-une-assemblee-citoyenne-europeenne-4031235>

10 <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-elections-government-europe-olaf-scholz-angela-merkel-sdp-fdp-greens-brussels/>

---

# **CONCLUSION AND POLICY PROPOSALS**

---

## 6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY PROPOSALS

We are entering a new phase of the European project. In a context where at a global level Europe will be limited very soon to 5 percent of the world population, there is a need for stronger European sovereignty. However, this process needs to be deeply democratic to avoid people's discontent and a new raising up of the nationalist discourse: at that scope, an institutional turn must be taken, putting citizens at the core of EU decision-making.

In this paper, we have explored the background against which the Conference of Europe can or cannot contribute to such profound reforms. We have shown its potential in bridging the national and European arenas. We have also elaborated on predecessor formats of significant treaty change and have shown how they have tried to become more inclusive, involving more and more stakeholders. We have provided a glimpse of how EU officials and citizens see the future of the EU. Finally, we gave a brief overview of the current state of affairs of the Conference, pointing out its participatory and transformative potential, but also the risk that it might yet remain another top-down exercise that few Europeans will have heard about.

In our opinion, the importance of the success of the Conference lies in the fact that reforming the EU political system is a burning issue, the need to adopt qualified majority voting as the ordinary procedure being first and foremost on the agenda. Furthermore, we think that the European Parliament should be granted more powers, specifically in its budgetary and taxation capacities and in the power of initiating legislation. Finally, the Spitzenkandidaten method, which gives a role to the EU citizens in choosing the executive power, should be adopted and implemented, together with transnational lists.

In addition to institutional change, the Conference on the Future of Europe can be an important process and learning experiment to start to involve citizens in permanent mechanisms of deliberative and participatory democracy at the continental scale.

Europe can reinvent democracy for the 21st century also by capitalising on the pluralistic possibilities of the digital age. It is imperative, however, to combat aspects of the dark side of online life, such as organised misinformation campaigns and other modes of manipulation which undermine the European public sphere. Deliberative democracy can help with that, raising the level of popular consciousness of the complexity of the reality and of the governance of it.

Participatory and deliberative democracy is not to be considered as a replacement for representative democracy, but as an integration of it: institutions cannot really be renewed without the involvement of citizens. The participatory and deliberative format of the conference also pays respect to the fact that the negative effects of Neoliberalism cannot be addressed through technocratic discourse: fostering transnational activism and bridging EU and national politics is a precondition to bringing progressive ideals into the EU. The democratic future of our continent lies also here: bridge national with EU politics, moving from 'policy without politics' to 'policy with politics'. A good start is to make the Conference on the Future of Europe a space for citizens to really set the agenda of the continent, addressing not only EU institutional questions but also concrete policies which citizens care about.

Proposals that could help to bridge the gap between citizens and EU institutions, through the Conference and beyond, are the following:

- Bring national parliaments closer to the European Parliament and have them play a role in EU accountability; not for binding ratification (eg CETA) but to bring EU issues into the national political debate.
- Foster transnational political participation: transnational lists; less expert-oriented EU interest group representation; encourage activism related to EU policies.
- Reinforce and democratise the Spitzenkandidaten process: currently, the lead candidates are chosen by national parties, but there are ways to imagine a more democratic process in which candidates have to appeal to national and European constituencies.
- Give more weight to the European Parliament – with power to initiate the legislative process – and national parliaments, at the expense of the Council.
- Extend qualified majority voting in the Council to all areas of policy.
- Build on the experience of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) by increasing the policy impact of citizen mobilisation: participation has to have a meaningful policy follow-up.
- Consider introducing a permanent European Citizens' Assembly as an EU institution that is part of the EU law-making: such body could be modelled after the accumulated experience of the ongoing European Citizens' Panels experimentation.
- Prolong the Conference on the Future of Europe until the 2024 European elections.

- Open a constitutional Convention towards the end of the Conference. This Convention could give a constitutional mandate to the new Parliament to be elected in 2024.





---

# **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

---

## 7. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abélès M. (2000) 'Virtual Europe'. In: Bellier I. and Wilson T. M. (eds) *An anthropology of the European Union: building, imagining and experiencing the new Europe*. Oxford: Berg.

Alemanno A. (2020) 'The EU won't fix its democratic deficit with another top-down "conference"'. *The Guardian*, 21 January 2020. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/21/eu-democratic-deficit-top-down-conference-verhofstadt>

Basile L., Cilento M. and Conti, N. (2021) 'The coronavirus crisis as catalyst for EU legitimacy? Italian public opinion and the EU during the pandemic'. *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 14 (1), 202-220.

Blokker P. (2021) *Narratives of integration. A holistic approach to European legitimacy*. Reconnect Europe. Available at: <https://reconnect-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/D14.2.pdf>

Blokker P. et al (2021) *The democracy and rule of law crises in the European Union and its Member States*. Reconnect Europe. Available at: <https://reconnect-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/D14.1.pdf>

Bouza L. and Oleart A. (2018) 'From 2005's "Permissive Consensus" to TTIP's "Empowering Dissensus": The EU as a Playing Field for Spanish Civil Society'. *Crossroads Europe*, 20 July 2018. Available at: <https://crossroads.ideasoneurope.eu/2018/07/20/from-2005s-permissive-consensus-to-ttips-empowering-dissensus-the-eu-as-a-playing-field-for-spanish-civil-society/>

Citizens Take Over Europe (2020) *10 principles for a citizen-centered Conference on the Future of Europe*. Available at <https://citizenstakeover.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ten-principles-CTOE-1.pdf>

Citizens Take Over Europe (2021) *10 + 1 Guidelines for EU Citizens' Assemblies*. Available at <https://citizenstakeover.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/10-1-GUIDELINES-FOR-EU-CITIZENS-ASSEMBLIES.pdf>

Cohn-Bendit Daniel, Fiorillo Michele, Klossa Guillaume, Ratti Francesca, Verhofstadt Guy et al (2021) 'Lettre ouverte pour la Conférence sur le Futur de l'Europe'. *Euractiv*, 11 February 2021.

Dâmaso M., Davies L. J., Jablonowski K., and Montgomery S. (2019) *Acting European: Identity, Belonging and the EU of Tomorrow*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

Fabbrini, F. (2019) *The Conference on the Future of Europe. A New Model to Reform the EU?*. Working Paper n. 12 / 2019, Brexit Institute, Dublin City University.

Fiorillo M., Moskovic J., Sintomer Y., Van Reybrouck D., Dobler C. et al (2021). 'Pour une Assemblée citoyenne européenne'. *Le Journal de Dimanche*, 13 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/tribune-pour-une-assemblee-citoyenne-europeenne-4031235>

Fiorillo M. (2020) 'Creating the European Citizens' Assembly: a new institution for the future of Europe'. *The Federalist Debate*, year XXXIII, no. 2, July 2020.

Fiorillo M., Gregor A., Moreno Cabanillas G., Rydlinski B. (2016) *Renewable democracy: towards full participation through representation and deliberation*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

Juncker J-C. (2015) 'State of the Union 2015: Time for honesty, unity and solidarity'. European Commission. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/state\\_of\\_the\\_union\\_2015\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/state_of_the_union_2015_en.pdf)

Landemore H. (2013) *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Monnet J. (1978) *Memoirs*. London: Collins.

Montgomery S. (2020) 'Miscommunicating across Borders: Ethnographic Reflections on EU Techniques of "Better Communication" from Brussels'. *Journal of Dialogue Studies*: 32.

Montgomery S. (2021) 'Building Bridges over Troubled Waters: EU Civil Servants and the Transcendence of Distance and Difference'. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 30: 114-122.

OECD (2020) *Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: catching the deliberative wave*, 10 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

Oleart A. (2021) *Framing TTIP in the European public spheres: Towards an empowering dissensus for EU integration*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Oleart A. and Haapala T. (eds) (2022) *Tracing the Politicisation of the EU. The Future of Europe Debates Before and After the 2019 Elections*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Renan E. (2018) *What Is a Nation? and Other Political Writings*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Rodrigues M. J. (ed.) (2021) *Our European Future. Charting a Progressive Course in the World*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

Sartre J-P. (2007) *Existentialism is a humanism (L'Existentialisme est un humanisme)*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### FABIO DI NUNNO

Fabio is currently teaching assistant in History and Policies of the European Union, at the University of International Studies of Rome (UNINT), journalist at Città Nuova and contributor to the 'Annali' of the Italian Institute for Historical Studies. He holds a PhD in History of International Relations at 'Sapienza' University of Rome, after a masters in European Political and Administrative Studies at College of Europe of Bruges and a degree in International Relations and

Michele is a political philosopher. He studied at the Scuola Normale Superiore and at the College of Europe. His research focuses on history of ideas, theories of democracy and European integration. He is co-initiator of CIVICO Europa - an organisation for transnational deliberative democracy- and of Citizens Take Over Europe, a European coalition of over 50 NGOs. Currently he is leading the European Citizens' Assembly project and is a research fellow at the Center for United Nations Constitutional Research.

### MICHELE FIORILLO





### SEAMUS MONTGOMERY

Seamus is a political anthropologist based in the UK whose primary research has been with and about European Union civil servants. He is currently a DPhil student and teaching assistant in anthropology at the University of Oxford. He holds an MA in Social Sciences from the University of Chicago and BAs in English, Anthropology and Intellectual History from the University of Washington.

Alvaro is a postdoctoral researcher at Maastricht University-Studio Europa Maastricht, a scientific collaborator at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and a member of the Jean Monnet Network 'OpenEUDebate'. He is the author of the book *Framing TTIP in the European Public Spheres: Towards an Empowering Dissensus for EU Integration* (2021).

### ALVARO OLEART



## ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) is the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Its mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.

FEPS works in close partnership with its 68 members and other partners -including renowned universities, scholars, policymakers and activists-, forging connections among stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.



Avenue des Arts 46, B-1000 Brussels, Belgium +32 2 234 69 00  
info@feeps-europe.eu  
[www.feeps-europe.eu](http://www.feeps-europe.eu)  
@FEPS\_Europe

## ABOUT KARL RENNER INSTITUT

The Karl Renner Institute is the political academy of the Austrian Social Democratic movement. It is a forum for political discourse, a centre for education and training, and a think tank on the future of social democracy.

In this capacity, it aims at

- establishing a discourse between experts from various fields and the Austrian Social Democratic Party in order to develop and realize new political positions;
- generating a forum for political discussion and thus helping to introduce social democratic positions into the public discussion;
- training representatives of the Austrian Social Democratic Party so that they are optimally prepared for their present and future tasks;
- fostering the organizational development of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in order to open up and modernize party structures.

To this end, the Karl Renner Institute and its nine regional offices (one in each of Austria's federal provinces) organise a broad range of activities: Publications, debate evenings, seminars and lectures, appealing at a politically interested public; special conventions and seminars, targeted at experts, teachers and educators; workshops and consultations for officers, parliamentary representatives and employees of the Austrian Social Democratic Party.



Karl-Popper-Straße 8, 1100 Vienna (Austria)  
<https://renner-institut.at/>  
@RennerInstitut

## **ABOUT FEPS YAN**

The FEPS Young Academics Network was established in March 2010 with an aim to gather promising progressive PhD candidates and young PhD researchers ready to use their academic experience in a debate about the Next, Progressive Europe. Realised with the support of Renner Institut in the framework of the FEPS “Next Left” Research Programme, the project has gathered throughout the years more than 250 members – many of whom are today Professors of Renown Universities, Prominent Experts in their respective fields and Front Bench Politicians. Their exchanges and interdisciplinary research at the time of their involvement have resulted in a number of stimulating studies, providing a relevant contribution to the European progressive movement.

POLICY STUDY PUBLISHED IN MARCH 2022 BY:



**FEPS**  
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



Copyright © 2022 by FEPS

ISBN: 978-2-930769-75-2 9782930769752