

Conference on the Future of Europe

SUMMARY

After many debates and statements of principle in recent years, the time for a more structured discussion on the future of Europe's development has arrived. The Conference on the Future of Europe, announced by the Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen in her inaugural address, is set to start after a long period of standstill owing not only to changed priorities brought by the coronavirus pandemic, but also to lengthy negotiations among the institutions.

The aim of the conference is to debate how the EU should develop in the future, identify where it is rising to the challenges of current times, and enhance those areas that need reform or strengthening. A key aspect of this initiative is to bring the public closer to the EU institutions, listen to people's concerns, involve them directly in the process of the Conference and provide an adequate and meaningful response. In this respect, the ambition is to set up pan-European forums for discussion, for the first time ever, where citizens of all Member States can debate the EU's priorities and make recommendations, to be taken into account by the political-institutional powers that be and, ideally, translated into practical measures.

The pandemic hit as the preparation of the conference was just beginning and inevitably caused a delay. In March 2021, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission agreed on a joint declaration, laying down the common rules and principles governing the conference. It was agreed that the leadership of the conference would be shared by the three institutions, with the conference chaired jointly by their three presidents.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has all the prerequisites to be an excellent opportunity to engage in a more structured debate between institutions and citizens, and arrive at concrete proposals to improve the way the EU works, in terms not only of institutional dynamics, but also of policies. Some have cautioned however that the initiative must be conducted with the utmost care, in particular as regards the follow-up, so that it remains a meaningful endeavour.

This is an updated edition of a [Briefing from December 2019](#).



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Introduction

In 2019, aiming to revitalise EU democracy and bring the institutions closer to citizens and inspired by an [idea](#) first voiced by French President Emmanuel Macron, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen proposed a conference on the future of Europe. Parliament, Council and the Commission began fleshing out their views on what the conference should look like and on how to follow up on its conclusions. This preparatory process was unexpectedly lengthy however owing not only to the outbreak of the pandemic, which inevitably redirected the attention of Council, the Commission and Parliament to essential coronavirus-containment measures, but also to difficulties in finding common ground on certain key aspects, such as the governing bodies and chair of the conference. A joint declaration was [signed](#) on 10 March 2021 by the presidents of three institutions, marking the conclusion of the preparatory phase. The inauguration of the conference is expected to take place on 9 May 2021. Meanwhile, 19 April 2021 saw the launch of the conference's [multilingual platform](#), a hub that will give people and civil society organisations the opportunity to host and attend events and share ideas on the future of Europe. Although institutional contributions and debates on the topic of the future of Europe are not new in EU circles, it is the first time since the Lisbon Treaty reform that a structured discussion of this amplitude has taken place with the simultaneous presence of the three institutions – Commission, Parliament and Council, the participation of national parliaments and the substantial involvement of the general public.

The joint declaration

The [joint declaration](#) draws ideas from the positions expressed by the three institutions and represents a true compromise of wishes and positions. It stresses the need for the conference to address current challenges such as the green and digital transition, the social contract and the competitiveness of EU industry. The conference should also address inequalities and social fairness, face and respond to geopolitical challenges, and promote European values in an increasingly complex and turbulent world. The joint declaration considers the conference an opportunity for EU citizens to debate the Union's challenges and priorities in a new space and to have a say on the future of Europe.

Drawing on this ambitious objective, the joint declaration puts the spotlight on the **role of citizens** and solemnly commits the three presidents to follow up on the recommendations that the conference generates, fully respecting the principles of subsidiarity, proportionality and respective competences. The Conference is based on four pillars: the [multilingual platform](#), citizens' panels, the plenary and the executive board. The focus remains on **citizens and on a bottom-up approach** that should pervade the roll-out of the conference, by means of events and pan-EU debates, all facilitated by a [multilingual platform](#). European citizens' panels are envisaged to allow transnational forums and will be representative of the EU population in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background, geographical origin and level of education. The panels will hold debates that will feed into the conference plenary, with recommendations for the EU institutions to follow up. Additional events may be organised in the form of national citizen's panels. Common principles and criteria in the form of a [conference charter](#) should apply to any event organised within the conference. A lean **governance structure**, which should be gender balanced, should support the conference with an executive board representing the three institutions equally, each having three representatives and up to four observers. The presidential troika of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union ([COSAC](#)) would have observer status, together with the CoR, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and representatives of other EU bodies and social partners. The **executive board**, deciding by consensus, will be made up of representatives of Parliament, Council and the Commission and report to the joint presidency, with the task of organising the work of the conference, its processes and events, and preparing conference plenary sessions, including citizens' input and the follow up to it. The **conference plenary** will debate recommendations from national and EU-wide panels, meeting at least once

every six months, and will be composed of representatives of Parliament, Council, the Commission and national parliaments on an equal footing, and citizens. The CoR, EESC, social partners and civil society organisations will be also represented, while the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) will be involved when the international role of the EU is discussed. The conference bodies will agree on a consensual basis on how to report on the outcomes of the conference. The joint declaration provides a non-exhaustive list of **topics for discussion**, reflecting also the strategic agenda and political guidelines of the European Commission. These include: health, climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality, intergenerational solidarity, digital transformation, EU values including the rule of law, migration challenges, democratic foundations, and how to strengthen the democratic process. Citizens may raise additional issues that matter to them. In addition, a number of cross-cutting issues will be discussed, such as better regulation, subsidiarity, proportionality, implementation and enforcement of the EU *acquis* and transparency. The **conclusions** will be presented to the joint presidency in a report. The joint declaration includes a commitment to inclusiveness, openness and transparency of the process, in full respect of privacy and data protection, with EU citizens' panels being broadcast and documentation available online. In view of the need for social distancing, digital participation is fully endorsed, although physical participation should also form an essential part of the conference. Finally, the joint declaration requires the conference to have a single identity, and establishes its **tripartite chair** of the presidents of Parliament, Council and the Commission, with **conclusions expected by spring 2022**.

The way ahead

While Parliament's President has [announced](#) that the conference will start on **9 May 2021**, [preparations](#) have been under way to define the working methods, composition and rules of the conference plenary, while the governing rules of the executive board had already been defined. As [announced on 19 March](#), Parliament will be represented on the board by Guy Verhofstadt – as co-chair – (Renew, Belgium), Iratxe García Pérez (S&D, Spain) and Manfred Weber (EPP, Germany); and its four observers on the board will be Gerolf Annemans (ID, Belgium), Daniel Freund (Greens/EFA, Germany), Zdzisław Krasnodębski (ECR, Poland) and Helmut Scholz (The Left, Germany). As far as the other [institutions](#) are concerned, the Commission will be represented by Věra Jourová (Values and Transparency), Maroš Šefčovič (Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight) and Dubravka Šuica (Democracy and Demography), and the Council by Clément Beaune (France), Ana Paula Zacarias (Portugal) and Gašper Dovžan (Slovenia). Members of the executive board with observer status for the Council will be: Sophie Wilmès (Belgium), Milena Hrdinková (Czechia), Juan González-Barba Pera (Spain) and Hans Dahlgren (Sweden), and observers for national parliaments (COSAC) will be Bojan Kekec (Slovenian National Council), Gunther Krichbaum (German Bundestag), Marko Pogačnik (Slovenian National Assembly), Luís Capoulas Santos (Portuguese Assembleia da República) and Guido Wolf (German Bundesrat). Other observers will be: Apostolos Tzitzikostas from the CoR, Christa Schweng from the EESC, Markus Beyrer from the employers' organisation [BusinessEurope](#) and Luca Visentini from the European Trade Union Confederation ([ETUC](#)).

The executive board will decide, by consensus, on the composition and selection of the other key bodies of the conference, such as the conference plenary and the European citizens' panel. A first decision has been reached on the composition of the citizens' panels (200 people, one third of them under 25 years of age) chosen randomly among citizens but respecting the EU's diversity, in terms of geographical origin, gender, age, socio-economic background and level of education. The first of the three or four panel meetings planned should take place in autumn 2021. At its first three meetings, the executive board endorsed the [multilingual platform](#), the visual identity of the conference and charter, and [agreed](#) on its own rules of procedure in addition to those of the citizens' panel. Other important issues have still however to be resolved, such as the composition of the conference plenary and public participation in the latter.

On 13 April 2021, Commissioner Dubravka Šuica explained during a meeting of Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) that multilingual teams of [moderators](#) would also

oversee the platform and prevent it from being hijacked by external intruders. The CoR, meanwhile, has set up a [high-level group](#), chaired by Herman van Rompuy, former President of the European Council, to provide the CoR with strategic and political analysis for the discussions within the conference. This high-level group will be made up of seven ['wise men and women'](#), academics and high-profile leaders.

Contribution of the AFCO committee

In preparation for the conference, the AFCO committee has discussed seven working documents on selected key topics. At the [February 2021](#) AFCO meeting [discussions](#) focused on working documents No 3 'Encouraging the dialogue between the European Parliament and the national and regional parliaments for strengthening democracy through the Conference on the Future of Europe' (from 10:38 a.m. in the video) and No 5 'The community method and inter-governmentalism' (from 11:24 a.m.). At the [March 2021](#) AFCO meeting, Members [discussed](#) working documents No 6 'Overcoming the deadlock of unanimity voting' (from 10:10 a.m.) and No 2 'Institutional reforms in the face of the Covid-19 crisis and other potential future crises: A health Union and new emerging social needs, crisis preparedness' (from 10:41 a.m.). The [April 2021](#) AFCO meeting debated document [No 1](#) on 'Democratisation of the European Union: improving the accountability, transparency, capacity and responsiveness of the Union's institutions' (from 15:46 p.m.).

The [AFCO committee](#) has also been spending time looking into public participation in the conference, on the basis of the [working document](#) on 'Citizens and civil society participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe' – Rapporteurs: Daniel Freund (Greens/EFA, Germany) and Helmut Scholz (The Left, Germany). This [working document](#) centres on how to involve the public in the conference, from the composition to the method and outcome of the deliberations. The document suggests involving young people by means of separate youth 'agoras' (assemblies) in parallel with the citizens' agoras. Particular attention is devoted to the outcome of the citizens' agoras; the suggestion is that recommendations should be discussed in the different institutions, establishing a strong connection between the work of the agoras and the conference, with members of the general public being given the power to make proposals, without replacing the elected members. The working document considers the public contribution essential for a meaningful discussion on topics that matter to them. It suggests that the citizens' agoras should work around sets of questions prepared by the governing bodies of the conference, with the possibility for citizens, civil society representatives and other stakeholders to complement those questions in order to bring the discussion closer to their needs. The citizens' agoras should then make recommendations to the conference plenary by consensus or, if that is not possible, by a qualified majority of two thirds. Recommendations should feed into the conference plenary and be presented by citizens' agora representatives. These would be translated into policy actions by the institutional participants in the conference plenary.

Challenges and expectations

The conference carries many expectations with it as well as challenges. A first, obvious, difficulty will possibly derive from the current pandemic situation, which will likely not allow fully operational in-person meetings, at least not immediately, and which could make it difficult for delegates to travel. In order to mitigate this difficulty, the Commission has worked on a [multilingual](#) online platform, [launched in April 2021](#). It is an innovative participatory tool that allows people to share ideas and comment on them, and then provide summaries of the discussions, which will be given as input to the citizens' panels. This online platform also guarantees access to the conference documents. The platform does not however preclude in-person meetings from being held where possible.

Further challenges and opportunities lie in the content, working methods and outcome of the conference. The breadth of topics proposed for discussion and the outreach sought after call for the governing body working methods to be carefully designed so as to ensure that the conference remains a meaningful exercise. [Commentators](#) have welcomed the initiative, considering it a sign of

the new Commission's reformist spirit. [Others](#) note that a relevant aspect of the conference should be not just the process of debating but also that of taking stock of the outcome in a meaningful way. Some [warn](#) of the risk of launching 'grandiloquent initiatives that fail to deliver meaningful and tangible change'. The conference is also likely to become an interesting and significant example of transnational deliberative democracy, although there are already some misgivings regarding aspects of the joint declaration. Potential issues [underlined](#) include: the risk that working methods and determination of outcomes based on consensus could translate into decisions at the lowest common denominator; the need to reduce the number of strategic priorities; the need to establish streamlined EU methods for national events, without leaving these exercises to national discretion; and the need to ensure that the conference results not only in a report but also in an action plan to execute the recommendations. Other [commentators](#) have highlighted other challenges, such as: the very short timeframe for the conference, putting great pressure on the executive board to agree on common rules; the dilemma of choosing a structure that creates political ownership by EU institutions, national governments and parliaments alike; the need to ensure that the conference has an impact on future EU policies; the question of how to choose the topics to debate in the conference meaningfully without pre-determined bias; and the need to provide for transparent communication regarding which recommendations the institutions should follow up and why.

Preparing for the Conference on the Future of Europe

The announcement and initial ideas

Aware of the divide that has grown between the EU and civil society in recent years, acting on an [idea of French President Emmanuel Macron](#) and encouraged by the rise in turnout in the May 2019 European elections, the new European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, in her [opening statement](#) ('A new push for European Democracy') delivered on 16 July 2019 before her election by Parliament, expressed the wish to involve EU citizens as a part of a broader renewed boost to EU democracy. This resolve was confirmed in the [political guidelines](#) for the next European Commission (pp. 19-20), in which von der Leyen pledged that citizens would 'have their say at a conference on the future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years'. Von der Leyen also indicated her openness to the conference being chaired by a Member of the European Parliament.

In her [mission letter](#) to the then-Vice-President-designate for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica, von der Leyen fleshed out the idea of the conference in more detail. Ideally it should run for two years, 'bring together citizens of all ages from across our Union, as well as civil society and European institutions'; and provide for a 'wide debate, clear objectives and a tangible follow-up on what is agreed'. To that end, Šuica would work in conjunction with the Vice-President for [Interinstitutional relations and Foresight](#) (Maroš Šefčovič) and the Vice-President for [Values and Transparency](#) (Věra Jourová).

In her [written answers](#) submitted to Parliament ahead of her [hearing](#) on 3 October 2019 before the Committees on Constitutional Affairs and Employment and Social Affairs, Dubravka Šuica emphasised the inclusive nature of the conference, which should ensure that all citizens are heard. She also stressed her intention that [local and regional authorities](#) should take part in the conference. Šuica suggested that the issues of the [Spitzenkandidaten](#) (lead candidates) and transnational lists should fall within the conference's remit within a separate working strand, with the conference working on them as a matter of priority in order to produce a proposal by summer 2020. This approach and timeline was confirmed by [Věra Jourová](#), Vice-President for Values and Transparency, who in her [written answers](#) to the European Parliament stated that dealing early with these two issues would enable new measures to be put in place for the 2024 elections. Jourová and Šuica were to coordinate their work, with Šuica responsible for the overall process and Jourová focusing on the issue of the *Spitzenkandidaten* and transnational lists, on behalf of the Commission. Jourová would also support Parliament in amending the [European electoral law](#). Šuica, along the lines of von der Leyen's declarations, stated that she was prepared to follow up on the conclusions through legislative initiatives in the second half of the Commission's mandate. However, exploiting the

potential of the existing Treaties remained the preferred option before resorting to Treaty change, as also indicated by von der Leyen in her political guidelines.

Parliament's vision

Even before Parliament's vote to confirm the Commission in [plenary](#) on 27 November 2019, high-level preparations for the Conference on the Future of Europe had already started. A [working group](#) was set up to define Parliament's position on the structure and organisation of the conference. The [AFCO committee](#) debated the structure and scope of the conference, in particular the involvement of the public and representatives of civil society and national parliaments, and adopted an [opinion](#) on 9 December 2019. In addition to the topics tackled during the last legislative term, the AFCO committee considered other topics of particular interest to Parliament as potential material for the conference, such as Parliament's right of [legislative initiative](#), Council as a second chamber, the [rule of law](#), qualified majority voting in Council, *Spitzenkandidaten*, transnational lists, economic governance, social policies, the transparency register, and an independent ethics body.

With its [resolution](#) of 15 January 2020, Parliament was the first institution to deliver its vision for the conference. In line with the idea that the conference should revive the European project and bring the EU closer to its citizens, Parliament laid down a rather ambitious and detailed proposal characterised by: ample space for grassroots public involvement in the conference; arguments in favour of an open and transparent process that is also inclusive and well balanced in terms of public representation; the recommendation that Members of Parliament be strongly involved in governance of the conference and suggestion of a genuinely bottom-up approach in terms of input into the discussion. Parliament believed that the conference should provide an opportunity to identify areas where the EU does well, where it needs to improve, where it needs to act and where it needs to become more democratic.

Parliament proposed a number of **governing bodies**, notably: the conference plenary, citizens' agoras, youth agoras, a steering committee, an executive coordination board and a secretariat, all to be gender-balanced at all levels. One innovative proposal was to set up thematic **citizens' agoras**, i.e. transnational forums where citizens can discuss policy priorities of the conference in an open way. Those forums should be representative of the EU public in terms of gender, age, socio-economic background, level of education and geography. Parliament proposed rather large-scale citizens' agoras: 200-300 participants with a minimum of three per Member State, allocated using degressive proportionality and random selection. The citizens' agoras would then meet with different participants in different locations but would maintain the same participants for each thematic meeting in order to maintain consistency. A youth agora (for young people aged 16 to 25) would also be formed applying the same criteria as for the citizens' agora and meeting twice during the conference (at the beginning and at the end). Parliament also envisaged the possibility that a permanent public consultation mechanism could be introduced in the future. A detailed conference plenary was also proposed: with a maximum of 135 Members of the European Parliament; one member per Member State for the Council; 2 or 4 members per national parliament; 3 members for the Commission, 4 members each for the 2 consultative bodies (the EESC and the CoR); 2 members for each of the two EU-level social partners. A steering committee would be responsible for the preparation of meetings of the plenary, with all political groups represented, representatives of the AFCO committee and Parliament's Bureau and representatives of Council (EU presidency) and the Commission (three Commissioners responsible). An executive board (composed by the three main institutions, under Parliament's leadership) would meanwhile be responsible for the daily and practical management of the conference. Finally, a secretariat assisting the conference would be made up of members of the three institutions.

On the **process and decision making** Parliament suggested a genuinely bottom-up approach, with a listening phase preceding the conference debates and where citizens could make suggestions and propose their visions for Europe. The conference plenary should be able to discuss the topics without a predetermined outcome and should receive feedback from the citizens' and youth agoras,

to be taken into account in the plenary discussion. The conference plenary should decide by consensus on the recommendations or, at very least, the recommendations should reflect the views of the majority of representatives of each of the three institutions and of national parliaments. Similarly, the citizens' agoras would seek agreement by consensus with the possibility to express a minority opinion. Parliament also acknowledged the importance of the involvement of civil society, universities, non-governmental organisations, research centres and think-tanks, and invited them to provide support all along the process.

The **topics for discussion** proposed by Parliament comprised a number of broad and non-exhaustive policy areas (EU values, democratic and institutional aspects, environment and climate change, social justice, economy, employment and taxation; digital transformation; security and the EU's role in the world) with discussions on electoral matters (transnational lists and the lead candidate system) to be debated early on in order to prepare properly for the next European elections. As to the **outcome**, the conference should produce recommendations that would need to be translated into concrete actions in order to meet citizens' expectations. The follow-up could take the form of legislative proposals or Treaty change or any other action required. Parliament originally proposed that the conference begin on 9 May 2020 (Europe Day) and last for two years, after the three institutions had agreed on a memorandum of understanding on the concept, scope, structure and timing of the conference.

The Commission's vision

A few days after Parliament's resolution was adopted, on 22 January 2020 the Commission made known its own approach to the conference in a [communication](#). The [Commission's position](#) coincided with Parliament's on several points, but on some others was somewhat less ambitious. Like Parliament, the Commission saw the conference as an opportunity for a **pan-European democratic exercise**, where citizens could come to the centre of the integration process and contribute to a more vibrant, relevant and interactive democratic system. In this respect, the Commission focused on the topics for debate, public involvement, and practical aspects of the conference and its outreach, rather than on who should take part or how the decision-making process should work. Notwithstanding the aim of involving citizens in shaping the future of Europe, the Commission considered the conference a way to complement representative democracy rather than replace it. Openness, transparency and inclusiveness were crucial elements of Commission's vision for the conference as a bottom-up approach where citizens from all walks of life could have a say.

The Commission proposed two different but parallel strands **of topics for debate** for the conference. A first strand would focus, but not exclusively, on von der Leyen's six political priorities and the European Council's strategic agenda (climate change, environment, an economy that works for people, social fairness and equality, digital transformation, promoting EU values, strengthening the EU's voice in the world, and shoring up the Union's democratic foundations). A second working strand would focus on democratic process and institutional aspects, including the lead candidate process and transnational lists. On changes to the electoral law, where the Commission has no competences, the Commission proposed to act as an honest broker, offering the advice and expertise necessary. The Commission acknowledged that electoral matters needed to be dealt with by the conference in time to allow any change to be implemented before the 2024 elections.

Concerning **public involvement**, the Commission suggested leaning on existing experience of consultations to ensure that the conference reaches the largest number of Europeans possible. Examples include the 'citizens' dialogue', the 'European citizens' panels on the future of Europe' and other experiences gained at regional or local level. The Commission also proposed to draw on existing forms of participatory democracy such as the citizens' assemblies organised in Member States or other outreach activities organised by the EESC or the CoR. The European Citizens' Initiative, the ['Have your say'](#) consultation, the Erasmus programme or the DiscoverEU initiative could help to promote the conference. The Commission envisaged deliberative panels organised by

the EU institutions, operating within the conference gathering citizens and experts and formulating the appropriate recommendations for action. The Commission suggested a multilingual platform to allow an interactive discussion within the conference. Aiming to promote the participation of young people, the Commission also suggested sports events, 'hackathons' and festivals, without neglecting more traditional types of events for the older generations.

The Commission also suggested a **feedback mechanism** to ensure that ideas expressed in the conference were translated into recommendations. This could be achieved by means of Commission representations reporting back, opinion polls from the conference, and quarterly reports by Commission Vice-President Dubravka Suiča to the College. The discussion or conclusions of the conference should be followed up with appropriate action, either through secondary legislation or Treaty change. The Commission also tackled **practical aspects of the conference**, such as the need to create an interinstitutional budget to conduct the conference, allocation of responsibilities among Commissioners, a common visual identity and a comprehensive communication approach, with the European Parliament liaison offices playing an important role in the field in raising awareness, together with other EU networks such as the Europe Direct networks for instance. Like Parliament, the Commission proposed that the conference start on Europe Day, i.e. 9 May 2020, with a kick-off event in Dubrovnik, and present its outcomes under the French Presidency in 2022, after the three institutions had agreed on a joint declaration.

Council and Member States' vision

Ahead of the European Council meeting on 12-13 December, in December 2019 France and Germany offered a few guidelines for the conference in a [non-paper](#) whose salient elements were the bottom-up approach, the aim to make the EU more structured and sovereign, and the twofold work stream: the EU's institutional and democratic functioning, and policy-oriented priorities.

Although the European Council had already discussed the idea of a conference on the future of Europe at its meeting on [12 December 2019](#), the Council was the last of the three institutions to make its vision for the conference public.

After some initial non-conclusive debates at the General Affairs Council in January 2020, in February 2020 and on 26 May 2020, the pandemic meant that the project was not a priority on Council's agenda for some time. Efforts to revive the discussions were made however by Parliament with its [resolution](#) of 17 April 2020 calling for the resumption of the conference as soon as possible. Further [calls](#) from Parliament on Council to adopt a position were expressed in a [resolution](#) of 18 June 2020. Council reached an agreed [position](#) on 24 June 2020 only.

[Council's position](#) converged with those of Parliament and the Commission on some points, in particular on public participation. However on other aspects it diverged from the other two institutions. On the **opportunity to hold a conference**, Council recognised that the pandemic had added reasons to reflect on the future of Europe and strengthen EU solidarity. However, Council believed that implementation of the strategic agenda and a 'policy first' approach should take precedence when deciding **topics for discussion**. Council identified five main policy clusters (sustainability including just transition; societal challenges; innovation, competitiveness and digital transformation; fundamental values and the EU's international role) and few cross-cutting horizontal issues that could assist with the delivery of these policies (better regulation, subsidiarity and proportionality, and transparency).

Council considered that all the institutions should share ownership of the conference, including national parliaments. The conference should be guided by the principle of **equality between institutions** and of respect for each other's prerogatives, it should guarantee inclusiveness of all institutions, stakeholders and citizens, and ensure effectiveness of the process by avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy. The organisation of the conference should be lean, institutions should participate on an equal footing, and conference structures should be gender-balanced throughout. The conference should also be chaired by an eminent European personality. Concerning

organisation, assistance should come from a steering group composed of representatives of each institution – with the Council represented by its rotating presidency – and the rotating presidency of [COSAC](#), while a small secretariat could also be formed. As to **methods**, debates should take place at national and regional level and by means of multilingual platforms, with the possibility to hold discussions in citizens' panels in Member States and at European level. How to report the results of the various debates was a matter left for the structures of the conference to decide. In terms of **outcome**, Council underlined that the conference would not constitute a means to achieve Treaty change as the Conference would not fall under Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union.

After Council expressed its position, the preparatory process involved months of negotiation between the three institutions up until the end of 2020, with a failure to agree on several key points concerning governance, leadership and organisation. On 3 February 2021, the [Portuguese Presidency](#) of the Council bridged the gap on those contentious points and the Council agreed on a revised [position](#) that proposed a **joint chair** of the conference shared between the three institutions: Council, Commission and Parliament. It replaced the steering board with an **executive board** made up of three representatives of the three institutions each in charge of the organisational issues of the conference, and envisaged its launch on 9 May 2021.

Finalisation of the preparation

The preparatory phase of the Conference took rather a long time not only due to practical difficulties connected with the Covid-19 pandemic and due to a rather temporary shift in priorities, but also due to the difficulties of the three institutions in finding a common understanding on some crucial aspects of the Conference. Efforts to resume the project were made by the [German Presidency](#), and the importance of the Conference was reiterated by the [EESC](#), while in November 2020, the [President of the European Parliament](#), David Sassoli, underlined that the Conference remains a priority for the current parliamentary term.

With the last contentious issues sorted out and Council revising its position, the joint declaration was approved first by Parliament's [Conference of Presidents](#) on 4 March 2021 and then by [Council](#) on 5 March 2021, paving the way for its [solemn signature](#) on 10 March 2021 by the three presidents who will co-chair the conference. This marked the end of the long preparation phase.

Looking back: The 2002 Convention on the Future of Europe

In view of the large number of countries expected to join the EU in the 2000s, and although some of the unfinished reforms of the Amsterdam Treaty (the 'Amsterdam leftovers') had been tackled by the Nice Treaty (2001), the need for reform was clear from the European Council's ['Nice Declaration'](#) ([December 2000](#)) (Declaration No 23 annexed to the Nice Treaty). It called for a deeper and wider debate on some crucial aspects of EU governance, such as the delimitation of the powers of the EU, the status of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the simplification of the Treaties and the role of national parliaments. A year later, in the [Laeken Declaration](#), EU leaders expressed the need for major institutional reforms spanning, inter alia, from the rationalisation of legislative instruments, to the preservation of the institutional balance and clarification of the competences between the Member States and the Union. The [Laeken Declaration](#) established a [Convention on the Future of Europe](#) – drawing on the successful [convention](#) that had drafted the Charter of Fundamental Rights – and tasked it with considering 'the key issues arising for the Union's future development' and trying to identify 'the various possible responses'. Ultimately the convention was tasked with drawing up a final document, meant to contain either options or recommendations for future reforms. This document would ideally serve as a basis for discussion within a subsequent intergovernmental conference intended to reform the Treaties.

The [convention](#) began work on 28 February 2002. In addition to the chair (Valéry Giscard D'Estaing) and two vice-chairs (Giuliano Amato and Jean-Luc Dehaene), it comprised the following participants:

- 15 representatives of the Heads of State or Government of the Member States (one from each Member State);
- 13 representatives of the Heads of State or Government of the candidate countries (1 per candidate country), but their participation was not to prevent consensus that might emerge among Member States;
- 30 representatives of the national parliaments of the Member States (two from each Member State);
- 26 representatives of the national parliaments of the candidate countries (two from each candidate country);
- 16 members of the European Parliament; and
- 2 representatives of the European Commission.

In addition, a number of participants had observer status:

- 3 representatives of the Economic and Social Committee;
- 6 representatives of the Committee of the Regions;
- 3 representatives of the social partners; and
- the European Ombudsman.

The convention therefore numbered a total of 105 members (excluding alternate members). It established a praesidium to provide impetus and an initial working framework. The praesidium worked behind closed doors and was composed of the chair and vice-chairs and nine members drawn from the convention (the representatives of the three governments holding the Council presidency during the convention, two national parliament representatives, two European Parliament representatives and two Commission representatives). A secretariat assisted both the convention and the praesidium. The Laeken Declaration also provided for a forum for organisations representing civil society (the social partners, the business world, non-governmental organisations and academia). This forum would take the form of a structured network of organisations receiving regular information on the convention's proceedings. Such organisations would be heard or consulted on specific topics in accordance with arrangements to be established by the praesidium. The convention also featured a youth convention, meant to present its own [conclusions](#).

The [work](#) of the convention was relatively condensed into a timespan of one and a half years. After a first phase of 'listening' which lasted six to seven months, and where the various positions could be expressed in public debates, the convention presented an outline of topics that were soon to be labelled a 'constitutional treaty'. In a subsequent phase, draft provisions and amendments were worked upon until a 'final draft' was delivered to the European Council meeting in Thessaloniki on 20 June 2003. At its last plenary on 10 July 2003, the convention adopted the [draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe](#) which was transmitted to the President of the European Council on 18 July 2003.

The draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe built on the convention's work and on the additional negotiations within the [intergovernmental conference](#) between October 2003 and June 2004. It was signed by representatives of the Member States, and adopted by the [European Parliament](#). However, during the ratification process in the Member States, referendums were held in several countries, with the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe rejected in France (by [54.7 %](#)) and the Netherlands (by [61.6 %](#)) thus preventing the Treaty from entering into force. Later, in 2007, the Lisbon Treaty was adopted and entered into force on 1 December 2009.

Past experiences of consulting the public

Under Jean-Claude Juncker's presidency, the Commission conducted several initiatives involving public consultations, giving new impetus to the broader debate with the March 2017 [white paper](#) on the future of Europe. An online consultation of citizens on the future of Europe was launched in May 2018, with a [questionnaire](#) of 12 questions, designed by a panel of 96 members of the public, offering citizens an opportunity to express their expectations, concerns and hopes. In addition,

Juncker's Commission also held '[Citizens' Dialogue](#)' conferences, involving the Commission President, the Commissioners and other Commission staff members and covering a wide range of policy areas. These were town-hall style debates carried out in line with Juncker's invitation to members of the College of Commissioners to be politically active in communicating the common agenda to the public and listening to common concerns coming from them. The 2019 [report](#) on citizens' dialogue and citizens' consultation was delivered to the EU-27 leaders as material for reflection for the Sibiu meeting of 9 May 2019. One [analysis](#) criticised however certain aspects of these consultations, in particular the uncoordinated approach, which had an impact on the credibility, visibility and effectiveness of the process.

On the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron, European citizens' consultations took place between April and October 2018. These consisted mainly of debates at national level carried out under a high-level [EU framework](#), with great [freedom](#) left to Member States as to how the debates should take place.

Debates with citizens had also been carried out during José Manuel Barroso's presidency, with [51 citizens' dialogues](#) taking place in every EU country, while a final pan-European debate took place in Brussels, with participants from all the cities that had organised debates, and with the [participation](#) of the President of the Commission, the Commissioners and representatives of the European Parliament and national and local politicians.

The [Eurobarometer](#) survey on the future of Europe tests public opinion regularly. At national level, a number of innovative forms of [participatory democracy](#) have also been tested, such as the Irish [citizens' assemblies](#), the Parisian [participatory budget](#) and the Belgian [Ostbelgien Citizens' Council](#).

The broader debate on the future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe that is now beginning represents in a way a more formalised and structured continuation of the recent initiatives outlined above. The issue of 'reforming Europe' has in fact been widely discussed in recent years, and refers to both the institutional setting and sectoral policies. Contributions to that debate have been numerous, not only from scholars and think-tanks but also from institutional actors, as well as Member States, individually or in groups.

The **European Parliament** was the first to offer a substantial contribution, in the form of two resolutions adopted on 16 February 2017, with ideas ranging from less difficult initiatives to more far-reaching proposals for reform. In its first [resolution](#), Parliament intended to build on the 'unused potential' of the Lisbon Treaty by, for instance: limiting the intergovernmental approach; proposing a shift from unanimity to qualified majority voting through the use of [passerelle clauses](#) by the European Council; making more frequent use of its own right of legislative initiative; strengthening its political scrutiny over the Commission; reducing the number of Council configurations and transforming the Council into a true legislative chamber. In the second [resolution](#), Parliament's proposals were more far-reaching since most of them would require Treaty changes. These included: making fiscal and economic policy a shared competence; increasing Parliament's involvement in economic and monetary union; creating an 'EU foreign minister', transforming the office of the HR/VP; empowering the Commission to bring infringement proceedings for the violation of Union values; making more frequent use of qualified majority voting in the Council; and granting the power to actors other than the Commission, such as Council, Parliament and national parliaments, to submit legislative proposals.

The **Commission** contributed to the debate with its March 2017 [white paper](#) presenting five 'working methods' for the future i.e. five different scenarios in which EU integration could be developed with the intention of stimulating debate but without offering a definitive solution. Those scenarios were: i) 'Carrying on'; ii) 'Nothing but the single market'; iii) 'Those who want more do more'; iv) 'Doing less more efficiently'; and v) 'Doing much more together'. A sixth scenario was added in the Juncker's 2017 State of the Union address in September 2017, based on strengthening

a Europe of values represented by freedom, equality and respect for the rule of law. The Commission communication also offered support on specific institutional aspects, such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* process, a revised composition of Parliament, the possible introduction of transnational lists, the reform of the institutional leadership of the European Council and the Commission at the highest level, with the proposal for a 'double-hatted' President to encompass both functions.

Although the European Council did not officially react to the Commission's white paper, some Member States or groups of Member States the opportunity to express their positions. The [southern European Union countries](#) set out their visions on specific policy areas, while other groups of countries, such as Italy, France and Spain at the [Versailles Summit](#), took explicit positions in favour of a multi-speed Europe. The [Visegrad States](#) however expressed their scepticism regarding that approach. The evolution of European integration is historically, although not exclusively, linked to the evolution of the Franco-German relationship. The June 2018 [Meseberg Declaration](#) set out points of convergence between the visions of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for instance on the migration agenda, the strengthening of the asylum system, the establishment of a genuine border police, and the establishment of a euro-area budget. The Meseberg Declaration was followed by the [Aachen Treaty](#), signed on 22 January 2019, sealing this convergence in various areas.

During the course of 2018 and up to April 2019, the European Parliament, on the invitation of its President, organised [debates](#) on the [future of the EU-27](#) during its plenary sessions. The aim was for the leaders of the EU countries to set out their visions on the future of the EU and engage in an open and constructive debate with Members of Parliament. The invitation was taken up by 20 EU leaders, who took the opportunity to set out their ideas and proposals. While the debates revealed a great number of common points among the leaders, not least the recognition of EU's added value and the need for unity, there were naturally also divergences.

Finally, on 13 February 2019, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution on the state of the debate on the future of Europe](#), touching upon several aspects, ranging from EMU and economic governance to institutional issues. This resolution recognised the need to make EU decision-making processes more democratic and transparent; reaffirmed the importance of the Community method, as opposed to the intergovernmental one, and called for more agile decision-making through the increased use of qualified majority voting, including through recourse to the *passerelle* clauses. Parliament also expressed the need to respect the balance between differentiated integration and the equality of Member States; called for a more active role for national parliaments, especially in controlling the action of their governments in the European institutions; and reiterated its suggestion to transform the Council into a genuine legislative chamber. It also stressed the need for more intense political integration, encompassing respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and democratic principles.

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