

The Conference on the Future of Europe: Sparking Hope for EU Democracy?

Article by Edouard Gaudot

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For the past 15 years, the engine driving the constitutional development of the European Union has stalled. However today, the discussion on reforming the Stability and Growth Pact, the aftermath of Brexit, and the opening of the Conference on the Future of Europe could kickstart it once more. The conference has so far got off to a lacklustre start. Despite high expectations and much fanfare, it risks being another missed opportunity unless it lives up to its promise to heed the voices of citizens. But if used wisely, this exercise has the potential to deepen the accountability and representation at the heart of the EU's constitutional order. For the road to European democracy is long and winding.

This article is the first in a series on the future of Europe. Read part 2 [here](#).

With the first rays of the spring sun, the European Council finally delivered its conclusions on the long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe, delayed due to the pandemic. Announced in late 2019, this joint proposal of the European Commission, Council, and Parliament is intended to reflect on the medium- and long-term future of the EU through an ambitious, inclusive process in which European citizens will also be involved.

Unfortunately, reading the five pages presenting the principles, aims, and governance that will structure the EU's next big democratic moment, it is hard not to feel a sense of disbelief and depression.

The first thing that stands out is the impoverished and exhausted narrative of the EU as a project of "peace and prosperity". Even the usual repetitive building blocks of European values, from freedom to solidarity, are toned down. The fundamental challenges to democracy, whether at the national or European level, meanwhile, are barely hinted at. The new and already irritating buzzword of "resilience" fails to mask the sense of déjà-vu that oozes from the pages. "Fair, sustainable, innovative, competitive economy" – it sounds like an old José Manuel Barroso speech.

To say that the [document](#) was met with scepticism and disappointment by European politicians would be an understatement. Equating the much needed "democracy" and "democratisation" with the nature and depth of our economic ties does not bode well for the future of the conference. It is hard not to compare this with the spirit and gravitas of the 2001 [Laeken declaration](#), which in its time led to the Convention on the Future of Europe.

Playing it safe

Perhaps the ill-fated European Constitution, signed in Rome with elated enthusiasm in 2004 only to be binned by French and Dutch voters a year later, after two nerve-racking and impassioned referendum campaigns, has taught European leaders to keep a low profile. Or maybe it was the burden of the inescapable fingerprints of French President Emmanuel Macron, whose flamboyant style constantly reminds his European partners how much French “republican kings” still identify with Napoleon. At a more basic level, the reality of lockdown measures could have steered everyone away from overly ambitious projects. Or perhaps it was simply not such a great idea to entrust to the European institutions, and particularly the Commission, an exercise for which they have very little liking or skill.

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Whatever the reasons, in its current form, the projected conference lacks both momentum and spirit. The discrepancy between the result and the lofty vision of rebooting the European project laid out in Macron’s bold speeches of Athens, Aachen, and La Sorbonne is stark. Although the checklist of contemporary challenges, from green and digital transitions to tackling inequalities and boosting industrial competitiveness, ticks all the boxes, it fails to give a sense of purpose to the exercise.

The higher turnout at the 2019 European elections suggested renewed interest on behalf of citizens in the EU and its stakes. Of course, there are many reasons for this surge. Europe’s domestic and foreign villains, from Warsaw and Washington to Budapest and Moscow, certainly played their part. Yet persistent calls for more participation and democracy have rarely translated into citizens flocking to the streets of Brussels, or their own capitals, to demand a stronger voice in the EU process. As the half-failure of the French “Grand Débat National” in the aftermath of the Gilets Jaunes crisis demonstrated, whether European citizens will respond to, and engage in, an institution-driven process remains to be seen.

Rebooting Europe’s constitutional development

Despite all its flaws, the conference is nevertheless excellent news for both Europe and democracy, for two intertwined reasons. First, although the conference does not commit to treaty change, it will restart Europe’s constitutional process, stalled for 15 years after the disastrous consecutive episodes of the Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty. Historically, since the 1986 Single European Act, the European Community then Union have roughly had a five-year cycle of treaty revisions. Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, Rome, Lisbon; this European map of summits tells the history of a gradual constitutional process. When active and driving forward its own construction, the European institutional order would grow and develop to complete, correct, and consolidate itself.

Obviously, events tend to intrude and cast doubt upon the conclusions established in the treaties. 2008 inaugurated a decade of cumulative crises, from terrorism to natural catastrophes, that overwhelmed the Commission’s *modus operandi* and forced the European Council to the forefront of European politics. In Luuk van Middelaar’s famous turn of phrase, “rules politics” – the classic technocratic approach to making decisions by

patiently weaving socio-economic interests together in negotiations between stakeholders and member states – is no good in an emergency. Drafting and establishing common rules take time; international border crises and humanitarian emergencies do not wait. Hence the advent of “events politics”, where improvisation and ad-hoc solutions become the new normal.

During this period, many limitations and weaknesses of the treaties, and the policies they enable, became evident – from the Dublin asylum system fiasco to the inadequacies of the Stability and Growth Pact and the rigidities of the Common Foreign Policy. Most recently, history once again intruded with the Covid-19 health crisis and the worst recession of the post-war period, calling into question the future of the EU budget as well as the architecture of the European monetary order.

An opportunity for a democratic breakthrough

After a decade of improvisation, the EU is in dire need of a constitutional reshuffle. However, in an atmosphere of aversion to any treaty change, the only tweak ventured so far was a limited revision related to the European Stability Mechanism. Instead, new developments have mostly taken place outside the community method and the EU constitutional order: from the European Stability Mechanism in 2012 to the Faustian refugee-return pact made with Turkish President Erdoğan in 2016. In this way, the European Council has engineered a sort of a parallel legal universe, bypassing the European Parliament and subordinating the Commission, tantamount to a coup d'état.

This is why the Conference is important. It is a precious spark that could restart the engine of Europe's constitutional process. Even with its limited impetus and byzantine governance, the conference might offer the conditions to collectively address the issues raised in the past decade. Here, the focus should not be on devising a completely renewed institutional organisation. These sophisticated discussions are only interesting for specialists and activists. Moreover, it would be foolish to expect a successful re-enactment of the convention that gave us the defunct constitutional treaty.

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Instead of emulating that federalist moment and trying to re-design the EU according to the old Spinelli blueprint, we should pick our institutional fights carefully and focus on two precious cornerstones of any democratic order: accountability and representation. In practice, this means: first, striving to find a way to hold the European Council accountable at the European level – and not just to the respective national parliaments, who carry out this responsibility very unevenly, and in a manner far too rooted in the national perspective

Second, establishing a viable path for a proportion of the next European Parliament to be elected by the whole of the European citizenry as one electoral constituency – namely,

through transnational lists.

There is a second reason the conference ought to be taken seriously. With its ambition to directly involve the citizens at every level of governance, it could potentially lead the way to a common public sphere of continental dimensions. Language, platform, social network, moderation, and filtering – indeed, the technicalities of how and where the European citizens will be invited to take the floor and express their wishes, aspirations, and suggestions for the Union will matter. But like special effects in a movie, their role is to serve the story and spectacular stunts cannot make up for a poor plot.

Europe's citizens must have their say

In sum, the conference offers another opportunity to connect with the missing link of the European project – the Europeans. For decades, the EU has built itself on the consent of its nation-state members. For decades, every step of European construction has been taken in the name of the citizens. But for various reasons, the rare moments when these citizens took the floor turned out to be conflictual and disappointing. Because democracy, whether local, national, or continental, is not just about institutions and elections. It is a cultural and sociological process.. It requires a common sense of community and interdependence. It needs people to acknowledge what connects them: shared threats, shared aspirations, shared beliefs, sometimes shared language. And it requires a shared public sphere where these connections come to life. Despite, and sometimes thanks to, the EU's and its member states' failings, the cumulative crises of this early 21st century have heightened a sense of shared destiny – perhaps culminating with the pandemic. This sense needs to be nurtured and fuelled.

Its organisers have promised that the conference will be a “citizen-focused, bottom-up exercise.” This promise should be taken at face value and the exercise should be carried out accordingly. Particular attention should then be given to those Europeans who are essential to the social fabric: teachers, social workers, journalists, community leaders, trade unionists, social and environmental economy players, and small business owners. It is their participation and engagement that will make all the difference in bringing a shared political perspective to life. They are the ones whose hearts and minds must be won because their experience is rooted in reality – not in the Brussels bubble or the world of politics. Progressive political forces, regardless of what they think of the conference's evident flaws, regardless of their legitimate criticisms of the European institutional order, must make the most of this moment.

At stake lies the flesh and blood of democracy: the will of the Europeans to face the challenges of our times together. Whether the conference delivers new institutional arrangements, or not, matters. But far more significant is the process it has the potential foster. A generation of neo-federalists could emerge from this shared experience; a generation less concerned by the state of European institutions and more focused on the reality of European democracy. The “real Europe”.



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