



Conference on
the Future of Europe

Citizens have spoken, can the EU answer?

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Introduction

Be careful what you wish for, the saying goes. The European Union's laudable drive to enable European citizens to have a say in what the bloc should do and play a greater role in shaping its future has culminated in a substantial wish list, some of which could prove very difficult to deliver.

To mark Europe Day on May 9, the EU unveiled the final Conference on the Future of Europe [report](#) at a glitzy event in Strasbourg attended by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and French President Emmanuel Macron. The 336-page document is the product of a year-long process of engagement to collect the views of people across the 28-nation bloc. It contains 49 so-called plenary proposals for the future of Europe spanning nine topics, ranging from the economy to climate change, and more than 300 concrete measures.

However, while the EU can reasonably claim that Europe has spoken—despite launching a year late due to Covid--this is only half the exercise. For the process to be worthwhile, the EU's institutions will need to act on the recommendations, some of which have already proven divisive and triggered resistance from European governments. If they fail to do that, the EU could face accusations that the Conference on the Future of Europe was simply a talking shop, or worse still, that the bloc is unable or unwilling to address people's concerns and satisfy their ambitions.

One of the most controversial recommendations in the report is a call for the EU to remove the principle of unanimity in its decision-making process so it can act more quickly in areas such as foreign and security policy, a move that would involve changing the EU's treaties. The Covid crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown the importance of speedy decision-making. Von der Leyen signaled her support in a [tweet](#) on the day the report was launched saying, "I have always argued that unanimity voting in some key areas no longer makes sense, if we want to move faster," adding that Europe should play a greater role in health or defense. However, 13 member states—including Sweden and Poland—have pushed back against launching a process towards treaty change.

The clock is ticking on the EU's institutions to follow-up on the Conference on the Future of Europe report ahead of a so-called feedback event to update European citizens on progress in the autumn. This Dods EU Political Intelligence report sets out the origins and process of the Conference on the Future of Europe, examines some of the key recommendations in the final report, and explores possible next steps.

Conference on the Future of Europe: origins and process

The Conference on the Future of Europe was designed to give EU citizens an opportunity to have a say on what they expect from the bloc and its institutions and play a greater role in shaping the future of the Union. This follows growing support for populist political groups in several European countries in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, many of which have argued that the EU is undemocratic and fails to address the concerns of European citizens, as well as Brexit--the first time a member state had withdrawn from the EU. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also provided added urgency by underlying the importance of upholding democratic values in the EU.

The origins of the Conference on the Future of Europe process can be traced back to a [Franco-German non-paper](#) from November 2019 that outlined the timetable, general governance principles and some content-related priorities. However, due to the Covid pandemic, the launch was delayed by a year to May 2021 (see full timeline [here](#)), resulting in a shorter process of engagement than the original plan to run from the German Council presidency in mid-2020 to the French presidency in 2022.

Institutional exercises to come up with proposals to reshape the EU are not a new concept and previous efforts have yielded mixed results. The most recent example, the [Convention on the Future of Europe](#), resulted in the [Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe](#) in 2003 which was not ratified. However, in a new departure, the Franco-German non-paper called for the Conference to be driven by a bottom-up citizens-led process involving various forums for direct and online engagement, including:

- [Multilingual digital platform](#) – to enable citizens to share ideas and send online submissions. They were consistently collected, analysed, monitored and published. By May 2022 the platform had registered over 5 million individual visits, with more than 50,00 active participants and 18,000 ideas debated.
- [Decentralised events](#) – online, in-person and hybrid events held by citizens and organisations as well as national, regional and local authorities across Europe.
- [European Citizens' Panels](#) – randomly and representatively selected citizens discuss different topics and put forward proposal
- [Conference Plenary](#) - ensures that the recommendations from the citizens' panels, grouped by themes, are debated without a predetermined outcome.

In terms of governance, the Conference was placed under the authority of the three main EU institutions, represented by the Presidents of the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission, acting as its Joint Presidency. The process was overseen and guided by an [Executive Board](#), co-chaired by senior Renew Europe Group MEP Guy Verhofstadt, Clément Beaune, the French Secretary of State for EU Affairs, and Croatian politician Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography.

Final report and next steps

According to the non-paper which triggered the Conference, the aim of the process was to garner “[tangible and concrete](#)” proposals for reforming how the EU is run and what it does. It emphasised identifying key challenges and the changes required, and listed treaty change as a possible measure. The [final report published on Europe Day sets out](#) 49 headline proposals containing more than 300 specific recommendations for the future of Europe spanning the following nine topics:

- Climate change and the environment
- Health
- A stronger economy, social justice and jobs;
- EU in the world
- Values and rights, rule of law, security
- Digital transformation

- European democracy
- Migration
- Education, culture, youth and sport

Challenging the principle of unanimity

Perhaps the most radical measure in the report calls for the EU to remove the principle of unanimity in EU decisions in policy areas such as foreign and security policy, taxation, and social affairs. It calls for Common Foreign and Security Policy to instead be decided by a qualified majority—a lower threshold requiring approval of just 55 percent of member states or the support of member states representing at least 65 percent of the EU population—to enable the EU to make and implement decisions faster. The drive to rapidly push through measures, such as economic sanctions, in response to Russia's military assault on Ukraine has shown the importance of swift decision-making in crisis situations. However, implementing these proposals would represent a transfer of sovereignty to the EU from national governments and require treaty change, a move which itself needs unanimous support of member states and would also be subject to referendum in at least one nation, Ireland.

Some prominent EU heads of states and government, including [Macron](#) and Italian Prime Minister [Mario Draghi](#), have said they are in favour of treaty change to carry out reforms. On May 18, a letter signed by six member states—Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Benelux trio—called the Conference “[a special opportunity](#)” to reform the EU, including through treaty change and [largely in line with Macron's proposals](#). [Šuica has suggested treaty change is possible, but more of a last resort](#). And on 19 May, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told the Bundestag that his government was ready to discuss the possibility of treaty change. “That's no taboo. But it is important that we achieve the greatest possible consensus in the process, because if there is one thing we don't need at this time, it's controversial and time-consuming navel-gazing on institutional issues” he said.

However, smaller member states have long been wary of giving up the power to veto action in key policy areas and fear being side-lined by the larger member states like Germany and France with populations that are big enough to swing a qualified majority vote. On the day the Conference's final report was published, 13 member states—including Malta, Poland, and Lithuania—released a [joint statement](#) opposing any moves towards amending the bloc's treaties. “We recall that Treaty change has never been a purpose of the Conference,” they said in the statement, posted on Twitter by Sweden's permanent representative in the EU. “While we do not exclude any options at this stage, we do not support unconsidered and premature attempts to launch a process towards treaty change,” it said, adding that that would draw away political energy from finding solutions to the issues citizens had raised in the Conference process. It said the EU's response to the Covid pandemic and Russia's assault on Ukraine showed the bloc could find solutions quickly. “We already have a Europe that works. We do not need to rush into institutional reforms in order to deliver results.”

Parliament broadly supportive

On 4 May, the European Parliament had [passed a resolution](#) supporting the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe and for changing the EU's treaties to implement the citizens' proposals in the final report. It said it would ask the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) to [launch a procedure to reform the EU Treaties](#), which would happen through a

Convention in line with Article 48 TEU. This would see the EU shift towards a “sustainable, inclusive and resilient growth model, with special attention paid to SMEs,” as well as “climate change, protecting biodiversity and promoting sustainability globally,” the Parliament’s resolution said. In addition, MEPs highlighted that “deeper political integration and genuine democracy can be achieved through a right of legislative initiative for Parliament and by ending unanimity in Council.”

Not all political groups shared this view. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group [walked out of the Conference Plenary](#) in an act of protest, alleging that “the agenda of giving Brussels more powers was ruthlessly pushed through by the organisers by means of a biased selection of citizen representatives and experts”. The ECR has criticized the Conference process, with Polish MEP Zdzisław Krasnodębski—the ECR observer in the Executive Board of the Conference, [saying](#) it was “yet another attempt by some political families to create a false impression that there is a consensus on the future of Europe, with no valid alternative to more centralisation and further limitation of the role of the member states.”

Transnational lists for European Parliament elections are a priority for Verhofstadt. However, he has limited support for this among MEPs or indeed within Renew Europe. The other institutions appear even less keen on the idea.

Andrew Duff, an EU expert and former British MEP, noted in a recent commentary for the European Policy Centre that while the Conference on the Future of Europe debated the abolition of the veto to make decision-making more effective, it did not provide any clear instruction on how to proceed. He said the European Parliament could put forward a revision of the rules on so-called passarelle clauses, which allow legal competences to be shifted from the member states to the EU-level on the condition of unanimity in the European Council and no objections from national parliaments. Duff suggested that “the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Parliament should now propose to suppress the third subparagraph of Article 48(7) [TEU] which would eliminate the power of a truculent or nationalistic parliament in any single member state to block the passerelle.” This could be a useful supplementary strategy to be pursued in parallel to the Convention.

The Parliament has already [initiated the procedure](#) for the convention to begin. However, for it to happen, there has to be a simple majority in favour of it in the Council, which appears unlikely if the 13 member states that signed the anti-treaty-change non-paper vote against. However, a single change of heart in that camp after the recent “special opportunity for reform” letter would suffice to overcome this first hurdle. Setting aside the “nuclear” option of treaty change, the final report of the Conference on the Future of Europe includes a range of less controversial recommendations for speeding up work the EU is already doing in areas such as the green and digital transitions, improving the EU’s crisis response capabilities, particularly in the health and defence sectors, and improving energy security. The report also calls for “changing the names of EU institutions to clarify their functions. For example, the Council of the European Union could be called the Senate of the European Union. The European Commission could be called the Executive Commission of the European Union”.

Commission on board

The European Commission has expressed general support for the citizens’ recommendations included in the final Conference report. The Commission implicitly supports competence transfers to the EU level and education reform with a view to fostering a European identity.

Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President for Institutional Relations and Foresight, will be in charge of Conference follow-up for the Commission. Von der Leyen has pledged that the Commission will “set out what is needed to bring your proposals to life and respond as best we can.”

Council reluctant

The Council of the EU is seen as the most rigid institution, likely to harbour the most resistance to reform, especially to treaty change. In March 2021, a dozen member states—including Austria, the Czech Republic, and Sweden--[published a non-paper](#), stating they would like the Conference to “focus on real policies and specific results” on the basis of the priorities already agreed to in the Strategic Agenda of the European Council. The Conference’s structure should be “lean, streamlined and avoid any unnecessary bureaucracy. It should not create legal obligations, nor should it duplicate or unduly interfere with the established legislative processes,” they said.

Early feedback on the process

EU institutional leaders have emphasized that the Conference project has helped enhance participatory democracy in the bloc, particularly mid-term when citizens’ interest in the workings of the Union is usually lower. Verhofstadt’s Renew Europe has [called for the EU to permanently institutionalise](#) direct citizen participation. However, [there been some disappointment](#) among panel participants about the lack of media coverage, especially within member states. Criticism was also pointed at the “crammed” discussion, with too many topics and not enough time. Finally, reports suggest [some Council diplomats believe](#) that the ambitious priorities of the European Parliament have received outsize coverage, entailing the risk of inflating public expectations.

Next steps

In terms of next steps, the original timeline envisaged a follow-up to the Conference within the current mandate of the von der Leyen Commission ahead of the next European Parliament elections in 2024. In the near term, the European Commission is intending to publish a Communication on the follow-up to the Conference on June 15. In addition, the Conference is on the [draft agenda of the next European Council](#), scheduled for [June 23-24](#). A debate on establishing a Convention has reportedly been suggested by Macron.

A [feedback event is scheduled to take place in autumn 2022](#) to update citizens on the progress of the follow-up. Despite the rather unclear and differing institutional views on how the follow-up should take place, the momentum created by the Conference process and the pressure to deliver on the recommendations is seen as considerable.

[Věra Jourová](#), Commissioner for Values and Transparency, said on 2 May “*The citizens showed the direction they want the EU to travel. They want more ambitious, decisive and assertive EU, more focused on people’s problems and less on its processes...Now, we have to ensure that we can make these demands a reality. All EU institutions and the member states have to take these seriously. We cannot afford to waste the trust citizens put in shaping the future of Europe*”.

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