

The Conference on the Future of Europe as a new framework of participatory democracy at the European Union level

DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE
OF EUROPE AS A NEW FRAMEWORK
OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AT
THE EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this research paper is twofold. First of all, it aims to assess how the digital and online communication instruments and platforms had an impact on the debates within the Conference on the future of Europe. In this sense, the first objective of this paper is to analyse the Conference on the future of Europe as a novel framework of participatory democracy in the European Union.

This first part of this research paper will be built on the scientific literature related to the issue of democratic deficit at the EU level and will argue that the Conference on the future of Europe's experience, especially in its significant utilization of online communication tools and platforms, can be described as an attempt to overcome this deficit, as well as the various Eurosceptic discourses, by including the European citizens more in EU debates.

Second of all, this research paper will propose, by extrapolating from the first part's conclusions, concrete policy recommendations on how to create a new participatory democratic framework at the EU level. These new frameworks could then increase citizens' participation in the EU democratic system, not only during European elections, but within a new system that is permanent, online based, and flexible.

Social Media summary

The Conference on the future of Europe, a pan-European citizen-oriented framework of debate, provided guidance on the future of the European Union and significantly increased the citizens' participation in shaping the democratic future of the EU. However, the Conference had to adapt to the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

#CoFE #participatorydemocracy #digitaldemocracy

Short bio

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INTRODUCTION

The Conference on the future of Europe, a pan-European citizen-oriented framework of debate, provided guidance on the future of the European Union and significantly increased the citizens' participation in shaping the democratic future of the EU. However, the Conference had to adapt to the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, most of the events and debates organised within the Conference on the future of Europe were moved online, a solution that, with its own limitations, had a significant advantage in increasing its reach and engaging the audience. On the other hand, the Ukrainian crisis, proved once again the importance and relevance of the Euro-Atlantic community and its values, such as democracy, rule of law, solidarity and respected for the rule-based international global order, and the Conference on the future of Europe became an important tool in asserting these European values.

The aim of this research paper is twofold. First of all, it aims to assess how the digital and online communication instruments and platforms had an impact on the debates within the Conference on the future of Europe. In this sense, the first objective of this paper is to analyse the Conference on the future of Europe as a novel framework of participatory democracy in the European Union. This first part of this research paper will be built on the scientific literature related to the issue of democratic deficit at the EU level and will argue that the Conference on the future of Europe's experience, especially in its significant utilization of online communication tools and platforms, can be described as an attempt to overcome this deficit, as well as the various Eurosceptic discourses, by including the European citizens more in EU debates. Second of all, this research paper will propose, by extrapolating from the first part's conclusions, concrete policy recommendations on how to create a new participatory democratic framework at the EU level. These new frameworks could then increase citizens' participation in the EU democratic system, not only during European elections, but within a new system that is permanent, online based, and flexible.

Methodologically, the approach employed by the present research paper will be, first of all, policy-oriented and, second of all, normative, as it will try to propose concrete reforms, frameworks, and institutional changes. Theoretically, the research will be broadly based on the theories and methodological frameworks developed by normative institutionalism, a theoretical framework that will be employed because

it explains how institutions and organisations accept and implement changes and reforms. The data will be collected from the Conference of the future of Europe [platform](#) official statistics and documents, as well as from political positions related to the Conference and its implementation, and will include the following categories: types and number of events for each EU Member State, level of citizen participation, proposed reforms, possible evolutions, etc.

The research paper will take into consideration trends at the global, European, and national level, including into its conclusions issues such as the global decline of democracy, authoritarian challenges against democratic regimes, the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on democratic societies and political structures, the short-, medium-, and long-term consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the European Union etc. The main risk related to this research proposal is that the recommendation for a novel framework of participatory democracy at the EU level can collide with several Member States' opposition. This risk will be mitigated by focusing on concrete policy recommendations that do not require Treaty changes, and will evaluate both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios, proposing policy reforms for both of them.

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE. A SHORT HISTORY

The idea of a Conference with the objective of debating, by putting the citizens in central position and listening to them, the future of the European project, came from the French President Emmanuel Macron. In a text from 4th of March 2020, he addressed the European citizens directly, pointing out the importance of the European project in a very complex and dynamic environment: „Never, since the Second World War, has Europe been as essential. Yet never has Europe been in so much danger” (Macron, 2019).

President Macron proposed three main directions for the further enhancement of the European project, all based on three fundamental values of the European Union:

1. Freedom („The European model is based on the freedom of man and the diversity of opinions and creation”)

2. Protection
3. Progress („Europe is not a second-rank power. Europe in its entirety is a vanguard: it has always defined the standards of progress”). (Macron, 2019).

Given all of the above, the French President proposed a Conference to address these challenges and to propose solutions: „a Conference for Europe in order to propose all the changes our political project needs” (Macron, 2019). The idea quickly gained traction and the Conference on the future of Europe was expected to take place between 2020 and 2022. In preparation, several EU Member States published various types of non-paper on the Conference’s objectives, institutional specificities, and limits. Italy argued that the Conference should have two main objectives:

1. A pragmatic, down-to-earth debate on the innovations that could foster a better functioning of the Union, more transparency, and citizens’ participation;
2. A discussion on key priorities, with a view to the policies, which proved to be of particular salience for domestic debates (Italy non-paper, 2020).

Regarding the institutional framework and its principles, Italy proposed five main key ideas: participation (all European citizens should be included), co-ownership (all EU institutions should be represented), representativeness, transparency, relevance, trans-nationality (Italy non-paper, 2020).

These ideas were reinforced in the Franco-German non-paper: „To ensure best possible ownership, the Conference needs to involve all three EU institutions on the basis of a common mandate, EU Member States and allow for broad consultation and participation of experts/civil society (academia, think tanks, professional unions and organisations etc.) and citizens” (Franco-German non-paper, 2020). The Franco-German proposition included two phases, as well as a strong bottom-up approach (Franco-German non-paper, 2020).

EU institutions had their own proposals and ideas regarding the Conference on the future of Europe. In its January 2020 text, the European Commission reiterated that the main aim of the Conference would be to give a greater platform for the voices of the European citizens: „The Conference should give Europeans a greater say on what the Union does and how it works for them” (European Commission, 2020).

In order to achieve this result, the European Commission proposed using an online interactive platform, an idea that would prove to be of the greatest importance during the COVID-19 pandemic and the multilevel crisis generated by it. In the same month, the European Parliament launched its position, reiterating that the Conference should start with a listening phase, in which the European citizens to express their unhinged ideas. The European Parliament proposed seven main topics to be tackled by the Conference:

1. European values, fundamental rights and liberties
2. Democracy and institutional aspects
3. Climate change
4. Social justice and equality
5. Economics and labour markets
6. Digital transformation
7. The role of the EU in the world (European Parliament, 2020)

However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly complicated all these preparations and the proposed timeframe (2020-2022) could not be respected. In June 2020, the Council of the European Union pointed out that the idea of a Conference on the future of Europe should not be abandoned and it should be organized as soon as it would be safe epidemiologically and possible technically, and it must include the experiences and lessons learnt during the firsts months of the COVID-19 pandemic:

„In its mandate, the Council takes the view that the conference should be launched as soon as the epidemiological conditions allow for it. It should focus on how to develop EU policies over the medium and long term in order to tackle more effectively the challenges facing Europe, including the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned from the crisis” (Council of the EU, 2020).

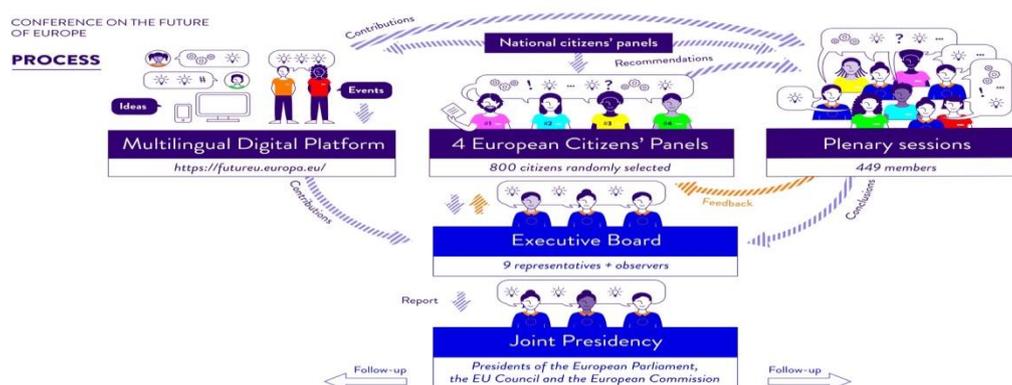
After several months of preparations, the Conference started in April 2021 (and ended in May 2022), after the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union signed in March a Joint Declaration regarding the aims of the Conference on the future of Europe:

„The Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union’s future policies and ambitions, improving its resilience. It will do so through a multitude of Conference-events and debates organised across the Union, as well as through an interactive multilingual digital platform” (Joint Declaration, 2021).

THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND NEW FRAMEWORK OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The scientific literature on the so-called democratic deficit¹ at the EU level (Neuhold, 2022; Ward, 2010; Malinov, 2021 etc.) is quite significant. This section will argue that the Conference on the future of Europe, organized in a very complicated pandemic environment, and employing modern tools of communication between European citizens, National institutions and EU representatives and institutions, is a new framework of participatory democracy at the EU level, and could provide important lessons for overcoming this democratic deficit.

Figure no. 1. Institutional framework of the Conference on the future of Europe

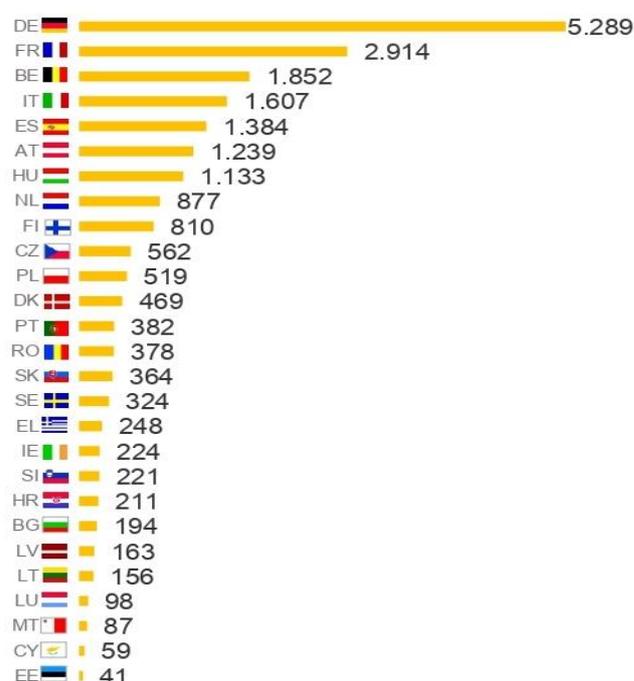


Source: Contributions per Member State on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021)

¹ For a definition see: *Democratic deficit*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/democratic-deficit.html>

While the Conference itself had a complex institutional framework (see **Figure no. 1**), what was of higher importance was the fact that it was actually quite easy for European citizens to take part. The Conference's [platform](#) had multilinguistic capabilities, was easy to use, and available for all those interested.

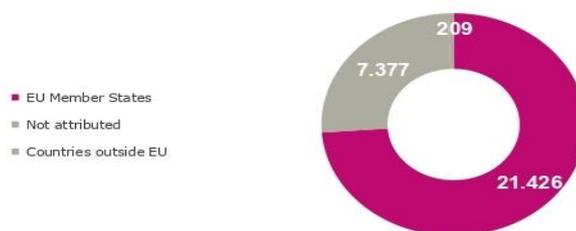
Figure no. 2 Number of contributions per country (as of 03.11.2021)



Source: Contributions per Member State on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021)

This easy-to-use approach had a positive impact on citizen-participation, as proven by **Figure no. 2**. The most contributions came from Germany (5.289), France (2.914), Belgium (1.852) or Italy (1.607), but what it is important to point out that citizens from all EU Members States did participate actively within the Conference's events and debates. But the Conference itself, as proven by **Figure no. 3**, was not strictly limited to European citizens.

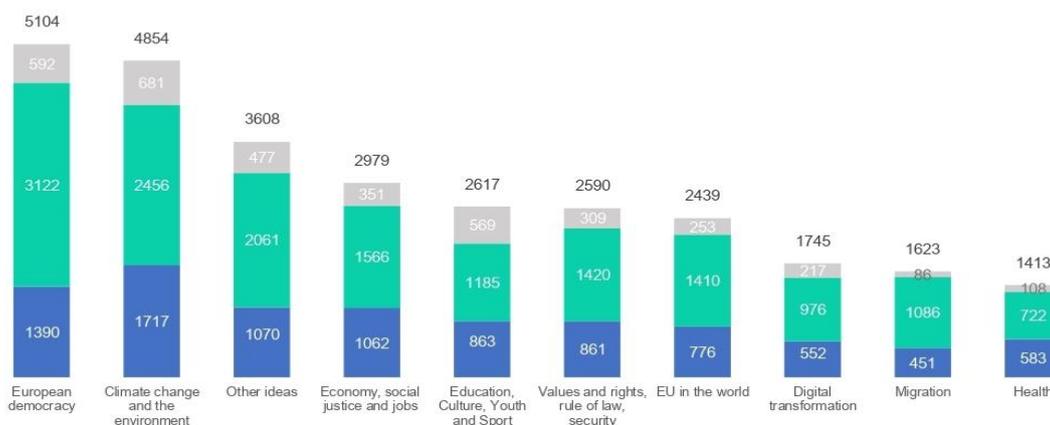
Figure no. 3 Geographical spread of contributions



Source: Contributions per Member State on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021)

In what regards the distribution of contributions on both topics of interests and specific types of contributions (ideas, comments, events), there are several relevant conclusions. As proven by **Figure no. 4**, the most important topic for European citizens during the Conference on the future of Europe was the state of European democracy. This topic generated 5104 contributions (1390 ideas, 3122 comments, and 592 events) as of November 2021. This can be used to extrapolate two ideas.

Figure no. 4 Contributions per topic and type (blue for idea, green for comment, and grey for event)



Source: Contributions per Member State on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021)

First of all, European citizens are very attached to the European project and want its further enhancement. In a very complex international environment, as well as during the COVID-19 crisis, Europeans understand that their peace and security is dependent on the European project. This was, of course, again proven by the Ukrainian crisis and its complicated evolution.

Second of all, the high engagement of European citizens during the Conference on the future of Europe (as proven by all the data from above), demonstrates that this type of technology-assisted democratic assistance does work. In this sense, it can be argued that the Conference on the future of Europe could become a lesson for a new framework of citizen's involvement in EU affairs and democratic debates.

CONCLUSIONS

Even before the start of the Conference on the future of Europe, Federico Fabbrini argued that it could be a very good opportunity for a new democratic momentum at the EU level (Fabbrini, 2020a; Fabbrini, 2020b; see for a slightly different perspective Kotanidis, 2020). Debates on reforming the EU institutional framework were, of course, not new (Just, 2005), but rather old and complicated for many reasons. However, normative institutionalism (Bolfíková, Hrehová, Frenová, 2012; Diermeier, 2015; Thomas, 2011), dealing with how institutions adapt to constraints and opportunities regarding normative changes, can explain why the Conference on the Future of Europe could be a very valuable opportunity for the further enhancement of the European project.

First of all, the high level of participation from European citizens should put pressure on the national and European institutions and leaders to improve the European project, within the limits set in the Treaties. Second of all, the high level of complexity of the challenges faced by EU institutions and Member States could create the necessary incentives for new solutions to old problems.

One of the countries very active in the debates within the Conference on the future of Europe was Romania. As the final report published by the European Institute of Romania shows, Romanian citizens were actively involved in debates regarding: „digitalisation and digital transformation, climate change and

environment, sustainable mobility, economic recovery, agriculture and sustainable development, social justice and jobs, education, health, European democracy and citizen participation, disinformation, polarisation and populism, the EU in the world and the transatlantic relationship, the EU 's engagement for the continuation of its enlargement policy neighbourhood, resilience and the future of the EU, Romania ' and towards its contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe" (EIR Report, 2022).

Regarding the concrete legislative impact of the Conference on the future of Europe, time will most certainly prove that its impact will be important, within the limit established by the Treaties. As proven by the high-level propositions on this topic from the representatives of European institutions, the ideas expressed by the European citizens will be taken into account and will be translated into legislative reforms and measures.

In many ways, the Conference on the future of Europe was indeed a novel framework of participatory democracy. An experiment like no other, done during a pandemic, it was well received by European citizens, and should become a lesson for future framework of citizen involvement in European affairs and debates.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Conference on the Future of Europe should become a model for new frameworks and instruments of participatory democracy at the European Union level.
2. The results and recommendations of the Conference on the future of Europe should be taken into accounts. European citizens' recommendations should be implemented, within the limits set by the Treaties.
3. The European institutions should develop technical instruments for citizen involvement in European affairs, as the Conference on the future of Europe proved that they are interested in the future of the European project and have ideas to express.
4. EU institutions should organise further debates and conferences, using both on-site presence and online interactions, with European citizens, from a bottom-up approach, on EU affairs.
5. The positive experience of the Conference on the future of Europe should become a lesson in how to find novel frameworks on debating European issues and finding innovative solutions.

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