



24 June 2021

Managed Expectations: EU Member States' Views on the Conference on the Future of Europe

Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza, Sophia Russack (eds)

Abstract

The EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament and Council) have diverging opinions on the aims and outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Council has been the EU institution with the most reservations about the format and aim of the exercise. This scepticism, however, is the lowest common denominator of a more diverse set of priorities and expectations.

This report reveals what individual member states want to achieve with the Conference and their expectations of the potential results. It brings together short contributions from a representative cross-section of EPIN members and distils the essential aspects. It investigates the respective governments' positions on institutional reform ideas, EU Treaty change, prioritised policy fields, plans for national citizen participation and media coverage, as well as the general current political environment regarding further EU integration.



EPIN Reports offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues raised by the debate on the political integration of Europe. The European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) is a network of think tanks and policy institutes based throughout Europe, which focuses on current EU political and policy debates. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed are attributable only to the author(s) in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which s/he is associated. Available for free downloading from the EPIN (<http://www.epin.org>) websites.

Contents

Introduction

by Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza and Sophia Russack 1

Conference on the Future of Europe: what do the institutions want?

by Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza and Ilke Toygür 8

Country reports 10

Austria: expectations of the Conference on the Future of Europe

by Johanna Edthofer and Paul Schmidt 10

Belgium: clearly pro-CoFoE, but unclear on the details

by Francesca Colli and Benjamin Bodson 12

Bulgaria: the Conference should be about policies not institutional issues

by Antoinette Primatarova 14

Czechia: the Conference passes by

by Jan Kovář 15

Denmark: don't rock the boat, do focus on tangible results for citizens

by Iben Tybjærg Schacke-Barfoed 16

Finland: gearing up for active engagement and citizen participation

by Juha Jokela 17

France: young people should be at the heart of the Conference

by Georgina Wright 18

Germany: on board but lacking vision

by Nicolai von Ondarza and Minna Ålander 20

Greece: counting on Europe for its future

by Filippa Chatzistavrou 21

Ireland: positive yet pragmatic

by Alexander Conway 22

Italy: a premise for a more integrated and democratic EU

by Eleonora Poli 23

Latvia: hoping to boost citizen engagement

by Aleksandra Palkova 24

Lithuania: focus on participation and policy results, support for institutional status quo

by Ramūnas Vilpišauskas 25

The Netherlands: broad support for the EU – avoid inward-looking debates

by Adriaan Schout 27

Poland: clear priorities and moderate expectations

by Melchior Szczepanik 28

Slovakia: focus on topics that will resonate

by Vladislava Gubalova 29

Spain: ready to turn results into action

by Ilke Toygür and Héctor Sánchez Margalef 30

Sweden: it's the conversation, Europe!

by Jakob Lewander 31

Contributors 32

Introduction

by Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza and Sophia Russack

Designed to give EU citizens the opportunity to discuss priorities for the European Union and policy fields of (potential) action, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) officially opened in May 2021, after a one-year delay. The main EU institutions (the Commission, Parliament and Council) each outlined their positions and have finally agreed on a compromise of shared leadership under their respective presidents.

Despite finding agreement on the operational aspects of the Conference and outlining its [overall aim](#), the institutions' positions still diverge when it comes to the specific aims and desired outcome of this exercise (see more on page 8). While the Parliament embraced the Conference from the start and is prepared to go as far as citizens want to take it (including treaty change), and the Commission has taken on the managerial tasks of facilitating citizen participation, the Council has been rather more reticent, albeit with significant variations among individual member states.

These national viewpoints have not only been unknown so far, but also underestimated. They are crucial, however, because member states remain in the driver's seat of European integration. As the 'masters of the treaties' and with the decisive role of the Council in EU legislation, the Conference will only be as effective as the member states allow it to be, and any change in policies, institutions or the EU treaties can only occur if approved and implemented by the EU-27. For this reason, the report takes a deeper look at national government positions and plans for the Conference.

To conduct this research, we consulted our network. The European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) brings together 18 national perspectives in this report. The think tanks contributing to this study represent the diversity of views across the EU-27 and a range of population sizes and geography.

We asked our EPIN partners: *What are your government's expectations for the Conference on the Future of Europe?* More specifically, we asked them to look into i) their government's position on institutional reform ideas; ii) the national view on EU Treaty change; iii) high-priority policy fields; iv) plans and ideas for national citizen participation; and v) how their national media portray the Conference. Further, we asked authors to describe their respective assessments of the general expectations and current political environment regarding further EU integration.

This report is the outcome of that exercise. The following will present our main findings on the aspects outlined above.

Institutional reform

On the question of institutional reform, the spectrum of positions among the national governments analysed is broader than expected. The original von der Leyen proposal for the Conference – regarding *Spitzenkandidaten* and transnational lists – receives very limited support from the capitals. Only two member states – Austria and Germany – are explicitly in favour of the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidaten*) principle, while only three (France and, more reluctantly, Germany and Spain) regard transnational lists as

an acceptable reform. All of the other member states are either opposed outright or do not view such institutional reforms as a priority. If not pushed for by the European Parliament or citizens' panels it is unlikely that the Conference will make much headway under the topic of 'democratic legitimacy in the EU'. Given the considerable scepticism about transnational lists and *Spitzenkandidaten* among national governments, the pendulum could even swing in the opposite direction ahead of the 2024 European elections, burying both proposals for the foreseeable future.

Surprisingly, the institutional reform with the most support is the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) as the standard decision-making procedure for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which was cited as an aim for 9 of the 18 national governments in this study. Only four (Bulgaria, Ireland, Lithuania and Poland) are explicitly cautious or against, while the other governments analysed do not view it as a priority. Supporters of more QMV in foreign policy even include the Netherlands and Finland, whose governments are otherwise opposed to most institutional reforms.

Other noteworthy mentions of potential avenues for institutional reform are the expansion of QMV to other matters such as taxation (France and Bulgaria), the strengthening of the role of national parliaments in EU decision making (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Poland and Sweden) and the reduction in the size of the Commission (Austria and France). As all institutional reforms require at least unanimous decisions or even treaty change, even the most popular proposals for more QMV will need to be part of a broader package in order to come to fruition. This is especially true where treaty change is concerned.

Treaty revision

Ever since the bruising experience of ratifying the Constitutional Treaty (unsuccessful) and then the Treaty of Lisbon (successful), most EU member states have been wary of changing EU primary law, even during the most difficult crises facing the Union. This reflects quite strongly in the analysis of the 18 member states, 10 of which, mostly from Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, reject treaty change outright. On the other side, eight member states are at least not completely opposed to treaty change. Of these, only two (Austria and Italy) are openly in favour, while six more (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Poland and Spain) are in principle open but do not see it as a priority. As treaty change requires not only unanimous support but also ratification by all 27 member states, judging by this survey it would need to be tied to very convincing and important reforms to gain the necessary support in the Conference. If there are to be institutional changes, therefore, this screening of member states' positions suggests that chances will be much higher in areas where *passarelle* clauses could be used, for instance to change voting rules from unanimity to QMV, rather than to embark on wholesale treaty change.

Table 1. Institutional reforms and treaty revision

Country	Treaty change	Spitzenkandidaten	Transnat. lists	QMV in CFSP	Strengthen national parliaments	Smaller Commission
Austria	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Belgium	?					
Bulgaria	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖		
Czechia	⊖					
Denmark	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	✓	
Finland	⊖	?	⊖	✓	✓	
France	?	⊖	✓	✓		✓
Germany	?	✓	✓	✓		
Greece	?	?		✓		
Ireland	⊖			?		
Italy	✓			✓		
Latvia	⊖			✓		
Lithuania	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖		
Netherlands	⊖	⊖	⊖	✓		
Poland	?	⊖	⊖	⊖	✓	
Slovakia	⊖	⊖	⊖	✓		
Spain	?	?	✓	✓		
Sweden	⊖	⊖	⊖	✓	✓	

Source: editors' compilation based on country reports in this volume. Where no definite position was articulated the entries are left blank. ✓ = in favour; ? = open, but no priority; ⊖ = against

Prioritised policy fields

Member states have greatly heterogeneous preferences when it comes to policy fields. Furthermore, many national governments have not yet defined their policy priorities for the Conference. An interesting feature is that a like-minded group of 12 member states (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden) have identified common interests for the Conference in a [non-paper](#). This group wants the Conference to “promote an effective and rules-based EU that delivers real, tangible solutions to the challenges that the EU is facing”, but on the basis of the [Strategic Agenda of the European Council](#) and without creating any legal obligations. As policy priorities, the non-paper lists rule of law, climate and a green economic recovery, internal market and the digital transition, migration and comprehensive security, and the EU as a strong global actor.

Extending beyond this group of 12 member states, the policy area mentioned the most often as a priority is climate and the Green Deal (15), followed by economic recovery and internal market (13), digital transition (10), the EU's role in the world and security issues, migration and health policy (all 9) and rule of law (7). Somewhat surprisingly, given the pandemic context, health policy is not among the highest priorities and positions are widely diverse. For example, in Denmark, more EU cooperation in fighting pandemics is not a government priority, but would have public support. In contrast,

Lithuanian citizens oppose new EU competences in health policy.

Many national governments have been rather passive about their policy priorities so far and emphasise the role of citizens, even to the point of shifting responsibility for the content of the Conference onto citizens and 'hiding' behind citizen consultations (Czechia and Belgium are prime examples of this, in suggesting that citizens should define the priorities). However, many member states (especially those that signed the common position paper) represent the 'policy first' approach by arguing that policies rather than institutional reform should be at the core of the Conference. Content-wise, Spain is an interesting outlier with its ideas of more symbolic policies such as EU athletes, a 'new European Bauhaus' and exchanges between 'European schools'.

Table 2. Policy priorities

Country	Climate/ Green Deal	Economic recovery, internal market, competitiveness	Digitalisation & cyber	EU in the world/ defence & security	Migration	Health policy	Rule of law, fundamental values	Cohesion policy	Social policy	Taxation	Neighbourhood policy	Symbolic/ identity policies
Austria	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			
Belgium												
Bulgaria	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				
Czechia												
Denmark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					
Finland	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓					
France	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	?		?	✓	✓
Germany	✓		✓			✓						
Greece	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓				
Ireland		✓		⊖		✓	✓			⊖		
Italy	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Latvia	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	⊖	⊖		
Lithuania	✓	✓	✓	✓		⊖			⊖	⊖		
Netherlands	?				?							
Poland	✓	✓	✓					✓		✓	✓	
Slovakia	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			
Spain	✓	✓						✓	✓			✓
Sweden	✓	✓			✓	?	✓					

Source: editors' compilation based on country reports in this volume. Where no definite position was articulated the entries are left blank. ✓ = in favour; ? = open, but no priority; ⊖ = against

National citizen participation

As no joint national citizen participation framework was agreed, responsibility for fruitful engagement lies with the individual member states. One key finding of our exercise is the surprisingly high commitment of member states to consult their respective citizenry. Few states have no concrete plans yet or have so far only framed broad principles rather than a concrete concept (such as designing the process to be inclusive, multistakeholder, decentralised and representative). The majority of member states already have a remarkably clear idea of how they wish to conduct their national consultations. Latvia and Austria, for instance, even started their public debates with various stakeholder groups last year. While it indeed remains to be seen how other member states put their ideas into practice, most states – at this stage – seem committed to seizing the opportunity to gather their citizens' opinions on the EU and to use the Conference as an opportunity to promote the Union to their citizens, and also to manage their expectations.

The envisaged designs vary. Most member states are focusing on the usual town hall meeting and dialogues with members of government and officials; some (such as Finland) are organising roadshows across the country. Certainly, the most advanced countries in this regard are France (organising citizens' panels and events in every region of the country), Belgium and Spain (both replicating the Conference's model of citizens' panels).

Table 3. National citizen participation

Country	Concrete plans for citizen participation	Regional focus	Young citizen focus	Civil society focus	Transnational dialogues
Austria	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Belgium	✓	✓			
Bulgaria					
Czechia	⊖	✓			
Denmark	✓			✓	✓
Finland	✓		✓	✓	
France	✓	✓	✓		✓
Germany	✓	✓			✓
Greece	✓				
Ireland	✓	✓	✓		
Italy	✓				✓
Latvia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lithuania	✓		✓	✓	
Netherlands	⊖				
Poland	⊖				
Slovakia	✓	✓			
Spain	✓	✓	✓		✓
Sweden		✓	✓	✓	

Source: editors' compilation based on country reports in this volume. Where no definite position was articulated the entries are left blank. ✓ = in favour; ⊖ = no concrete plans

Member states are further divided on the question of how far they will allow citizens' feedback to be fed into the policy process. While some countries want their citizens to set the Conference priorities (such as Belgium) and see existing policies adjusted (Poland), others do not want citizens' preferences to interfere with the existing framework, such as the Strategic Agenda and ongoing legislative processes, or the Green Agenda (as voiced by Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany).

Besides the format, member states place importance on different aspects of citizen participation. Many stress their intention to organise debates as subnationally and regionally as possible, in particular (but not only) those states with strong regions such as Germany, Belgium and Spain. The governments in Austria, Finland, France, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain and Sweden are targeting young citizens especially. Some governments envisage participatory activities through civil society, with social partners and NGOs (such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden). Denmark, France, Germany, Latvia and Spain are planning transnational events with EU neighbours in border regions; Italy even with the Western Balkans region. Countries that are more advanced in citizen engagement (such as Ireland and France) are the frontrunners here, presenting more sophisticated means to reach out to their citizens.

Media coverage

Media coverage of the Conference is entirely driven by events, mainly the inauguration in May. Outlets in most member states reported on the launch, albeit in a very descriptive manner and the tone of coverage tended to be somewhat neutral or reserved. Apart from that, very little attention has been paid to the substance recently. Public debate on the Conference has been largely absent in all of the member states analysed. Even countries like Spain, which usually cover EU topics rather well, have focused more attention on the recovery fund than on the Conference. National events, such as the elections in Bulgaria, have certainly distracted from media coverage of the Conference. It remains to be seen if national media will intensify reporting once citizens get involved in their first panels in September. Besides the media, it will be the responsibility of MEPs to advertise the Conference in their respective countries and make it known among EU citizens.

Outlook

In the difficult run-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Council has been the EU institution with the most reservations about the format and aim of the exercise. This deeper look into 18 of the 27 member states' national positions points to this scepticism as being the lowest common denominator of a more diverse set of priorities and expectations. Overall, member states can be divided into three groups – France, together with possibly Austria, Italy and to some extent Greece, want to be drivers of the Conference and use it for fundamental steps towards European integration. The majority of member states, including the 12 mostly Nordic, Central and Eastern EU member states, prefer a policy-focused conference, more intended to support the EU in implementing its current policy agenda than addressing institutional questions. This overlaps with a third group, including Czechia and Latvia, who see the Conference mostly as an exercise in citizen participation, to better involve the people and raise awareness of how the EU works.

In summary, we should assume neither outright scepticism on the part of the member states towards the Conference, nor a uniform set of priorities. Rather, our comparison shows that while getting the Conference and subsequently the EU institutions to support institutional reform – even up to treaty change – will face significant opposition, all of the member states analysed here display a willingness to engage with citizens. Hence, there is room for ambition in terms of policy recommendations for the final report summarising the results of the Conference, which will be handed over to the Joint Presidency of the European Parliament, Council and Commission. Each of these institutions have committed to “examine swiftly how to follow up effectively to this report, each within their own sphere of competences and in accordance with the Treaties” ([Joint Declaration](#)).

That said, the emergence of 12 like-minded member states, strongly in favour of institutional status quo and existing policy initiatives, suggests that the Conference is unlikely to produce any revolutionary outcome. For this reason, expectation management, while engaging seriously with citizens, seems to be the most likely scenario. But the challenge remains, how to reach a representative sample of citizens, beyond the ‘usual suspects’.

Conference on the Future of Europe: what do the institutions want?

by Minna Ålander, Nicolai von Ondarza and Ilke Toygür

The differences in the EU institutions' expectations of and intentions for the Conference on the Future of Europe became evident at an early stage. It was French President Emmanuel Macron who originally proposed the Conference, then European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen officially brought it forward as an [election pledge](#) to the European Parliament (EP). Von der Leyen promised the EP a new momentum for democracy in Europe, a conference that would deal primarily with the reform of the so-called [Spitzenkandidaten process](#), the right of initiative for the EP, and transnational lists for EP elections. This was intended to compensate the EP and persuade Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to accept the fact that, with von der Leyen's election, the European Council had prevailed over the EP on the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

The pandemic meant that the original Conference launch in May 2020 had to be postponed. Squabbles between the three main EU institutions (the EP, Council and Commission), in particular about the [leadership of the Conference](#), also contributed to the delay into 2021. While the EP embraced the idea of the Conference with enthusiasm, the Council remains the most sceptical institution. The Commission's interest appeared to wane in the wake of the pandemic, but its commitment returned towards the start of the Conference.

With Ursula von der Leyen in the driving seat, the Commission has taken on more of a broker and organiser role than a political driver of the Conference. It is now focused on securing the highest possible participation of citizens in the platform. In order to achieve this, it wants to promote the Conference to the 'not so usual suspects' in all member states. Some countries (regions and cities) will be more active, while others may need a little push. To this end, the Commission is running a [multilingual website](#) for participation in the Conference with the label "the future is in your hands". In the Commission's view, member states' support for broader outreach to citizens is vital. Members of European citizens' panels will be selected randomly, taking into consideration certain criteria aiming, once again, to go beyond the usual crowd. After losing interest in the Conference in the latter half of 2020, however, the Commission still needs to prove the sincerity of its commitment.

When it comes to the EP, there are four important issues. First, the majority of MEPs are keen to pave the way for necessary changes before the next EP elections in 2024, in particular to discuss transnational lists and the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. The second aim is to involve regional and national parliaments in the debate, and to create ownership in the national political arena. Third, the EP wants to engage young people. This has been an important focus since the last EP elections in 2019, where the younger generations were very much involved in election campaigns in order to increase participation. The Conference will provide another opportunity to strengthen and unify these groups of young pro-European citizens. Finally, some MEPs want to use the Conference as an integration moment, paving the way for further deepening of the EU and treaty change. In addition to the institutional position, the party families in the EP will also go for ideological caucuses to define their priorities.

The majority view of the Council is to try to avoid any destabilising reform proposals. With the exception of President Macron, who would like to have ambitious reform conclusions agreed at the Conference ready for the French presidential election in April 2022, most other national governments do not necessarily want to glorify the exercise. This EPIN report will take a deeper look at the preferences of the individual member states. As an institution, the Council's aim has been to lower expectations of the Conference and keep treaty change off its agenda, but it has not managed to formally exclude the option. The widest gap is between the EP and the Council on the issue of treaty change, the former being very supportive and the latter rejecting it definitively (although, as our report shows, not all member states are categorically opposed).

The different ambitions for the Conference of the three main EU institutions have been addressed by giving the Conference itself a complex institutional setup. Instead of one president (as in the Convention on the Future of Europe) it is headed by the presidents of the Commission, Council and EP, who are supported by an Executive Board with equal representation from the three institutions. The Conference plenary, into which the citizens' panels will feed their recommendations, will also have a complex institutional architecture. More than half of its participants will come from the EP and national parliaments (108 representatives each), while each national government will have only two representatives (54 in total) and the Commission will send three. In addition to these, the citizens' panels (27) themselves, civil society (8) and EU advisory bodies (36) will also be represented.

The Conference will thus be both an exercise in participatory democracy and an interinstitutional negotiation on whether and how far-reaching reforms should be attempted. The member states, as masters of the treaties, will maintain a central role in any follow-up, but in the Conference plenary themselves they are in a minority. The complex institutional structure of the Conference was a compromise solution to the impasse, reached in order to finally get it started after a year's delay. Hence, the original conflict over who should lead the exercise remains unresolved and may lead to tensions between the institutions over the course of the Conference, and where its final outcome is concerned. Ultimately, the Conference is a true reflection of the institutional tensions that already exist in the European Union.

Country reports

Austria: expectations of the Conference on the Future of Europe

by Johanna Edthofer and Paul Schmidt

The Austrian government started its national discussions on the future of Europe back in June 2020 with the slogan "Our future – rethinking the EU". Austrian citizens were formally invited to submit their ideas and wishes with regard to the further development of the EU.

The Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, was one of the advocates of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure ahead of the elections to the European Parliament in 2019. He made the point that EU citizens should not only be able to elect the EP, but also the President of the European Commission – at least indirectly. Furthermore – and in line with the [programme](#) of the current Austrian coalition government – he argued for a scaled-down European Commission and for one main EP seat in Brussels, rather than two (the other being in Strasbourg). The EP should also be granted the right to initiate legislation (a position shared by Austrian opposition) and the ordinary legislative procedure should be expanded. In addition, the government wants to expand qualified majority voting to other policy areas, such as CFSP, and would like the EU to become the frontrunner in the fight against climate change.

Strengthening the single market, digitalisation and climate policies are crucial topics for the government. The Austrian government also joined 11 other EU member states to emphasise the following priorities for the Conference: protecting and promoting the rule of law and the EU's other fundamental values; making the EU a world leader on climate issues; a just and green economic recovery, including reforms that increase the EU's competitiveness, resilience and stability; ensuring an effective and sustainable internal market and facilitating the digital transition of the EU; managing migration challenges; building up comprehensive security; and the EU as a strong and credible global actor.

For the strongest opposition party in the Austrian Parliament, the SPÖ (Social Democrats), the involvement of citizens should not be a cosmetic undertaking. According to Andreas Schieder, Head of the SPÖ delegation in the EP, the European Parliament should take a leading role in the process and watch over the EU's member states, which are not necessarily interested in bringing about real change. Top priorities should be climate protection, the social union and a further democratisation of the EU.

The government underlines that in principle, the Conference is an open-ended process and that treaty change could be a possible outcome. The Conference is a chance to overcome plugged-in perceptions of the EU and to debate what the European Union should be able to achieve in the future. Prior to the EP elections in May 2019, Kurz argued for a renegotiation of the Treaty on European Union. The old treaty was in need of an update to confront new challenges. The new treaty should include an enhanced principle of subsidiarity.

For the last 12 months, public discussion events took place in all nine federal states of Austria and with different stakeholders, e.g. representatives of the federal states, pupils as well as prominent figures from civil society, science, economy and culture.

The Minister for European Affairs, Karoline Edtstadler invited Austria's citizens to actively participate in the Conference via the online platform launched by the European Commission, and via events taking place in Austria, including organised by Austrian citizens themselves.

The Covid-19 crisis has left its mark Austrian citizens' opinion of the EU and European integration. Although two out of three (66%) of Austrians are still in favour of EU membership, with criticism of the national as well as the EU's crisis management on the rise, support has been decreasing: from 73% in March/April 2020 to 70% in September 2020 and finally 66% in [February 2021](#). According to another recent [survey](#), almost one in two Austrians expects solidarity in the EU to decline due to the crisis, whilst only one in ten is optimistic that this will not be case.

Nevertheless, the majority of the Austrian population welcome the Conference. Three out of four (78%) are of the opinion that it is a good idea and makes sense. For the Austrian public, the three most important [priorities](#) of the Conference should be the adherence to the rule of law, a stronger geopolitical role of the Union and tackling climate change.

Belgium: clearly pro-CoFoE, but unclear on the details

by Francesca Colli and Benjamin Bodson

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo tweeted on 9 May 2021 that music festivals might resume at the end of the summer. The launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe, however, was absent from his Twitter feed. It might be less of a priority for him, though, than for his party colleague and predecessor, Guy Verhofstadt, co-chair of the Executive Board of the Conference on behalf of the European Parliament. While Belgium has taken a strong positive overall stance towards the Conference, its expectations and position on specific aspects remain unclear.

Belgium's positive attitude towards the Conference is visible in several public statements. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sophie Wilmès, one of the Council's observers on the Executive Board of the Conference, called the launch of the Conference a "[historical, democratic, citizenly moment](#)". She has [emphasised](#) the importance of the Conference and [fully supports](#) the initiative, citing Belgium's [historical](#) and ongoing defence of the European project and role as the seat of the EU institutions. Particularly important is that member states and citizens themselves are able to define the future of the EU in a way that addresses their concerns. According to Wilmès, the Conference "[must be an inclusive and efficient exercise, putting citizens \(...\) in the centre of the process](#)".

No less than 94% of Belgian respondents to the [Special Eurobarometer](#) on the Future of Europe indicated that "EU citizens' voices should be taken more into account for decisions relating to the future of Europe". Wilmès has declared repeatedly that while being the "greatest challenge of Europe", it is also in Belgium's interest that citizens keep/regain trust in the European Union, as Belgium benefits greatly from its EU membership.

According to the latest [Standard Eurobarometer](#), 56% of Belgians do tend to trust the EU, which is an increase of 13% compared to the summer 2020 Eurobarometer and slightly above the EU-27 average of 49%. The Belgian government also sees in the Conference an opportunity "to better explain the European project" to citizens.

Several Belgian authorities (e.g. the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), the [Chamber of Representatives and the Senate](#)) have been involved in a significant communication campaign to promote the Conference's [digital platform](#) and invite Belgians to contribute. The demand is there, as 64% of Belgian respondents to the Special Eurobarometer said that they were willing to take part in the Conference activities, making Belgians the second-most enthusiastic population about the Conference. Despite these statistics, Belgian journalists have taken a rather sceptical and/or cautious standpoint. Nevertheless, both the launch of the digital platform and the launch of the Conference itself were covered by a wide range of media.

However, the exact structure of Conference-related events within Belgium is still being discussed. Like France, Belgium intends to replicate plenaries and citizens' panels at domestic level, based on the model promoted by the European Commission (including the random selection of citizens). Debates will most likely be organised along the nine topics of the digital platform (and "other ideas") and will be joined by ministers from all

levels of power. Unsurprisingly, Belgium will opt for a decentralised approach that respects a delicate balance between all regions and communities of the country. Moreover, the recent opening of nine new Europe Direct offices across Belgium will certainly help in the promotion of Conference-related activities.

In terms of concrete reforms and treaty changes, Belgium's position also remains unclear. Belgium has shown itself to be open to specific policy reforms, with Wilmès stating that citizens' "expectations and hopes should be translated into concrete political proposals". Yet exactly what these reforms may consist of is as yet undefined.

Belgium did not sign the [non-paper](#) put forward by some other member states; De Croo [declared](#) that the Belgian government was not opposed to this non-paper but that it had "assessed the opportunity to sign it" and considered that "the document did not bring much". This *prima facie* lack of clarity simply shows that Belgium considers that a list of priorities should not be predetermined. It is keen to respect the bottom-up approach promoted by the European Commission and to let citizens decide on the priorities of the Conference.

On the specific question of treaty changes, Belgium is not asking for any, but nor will it oppose them if the results of the Conference call for changes. [Speaking](#) in the Federal Parliament earlier this year, Belgium's Permanent Representative to the EU affirmed implicitly that Belgium was keeping the door open; that the Conference results should "determine whether the EU's competences must be *modified or expanded* and how the EU shall work". That position is also in line with the viewpoint [expressed](#) by Belgian MPs during a debate with Commissioner Dubravka Šuica in March 2021. In addition, MPs from the whole political spectrum [raised concerns](#) about the very short length of the Conference and the fact that guidelines were still missing on how citizens should participate and how national parliaments would be involved in the process.

Belgium's overall position is coherent with the general approach of its government towards the EU. When it came to power, the De Croo government indeed [promised](#) "pro-European engagement", underlining that it opted "resolutely for a firm, pro-European attitude" and saw European integration as a preliminary step that was necessary to increase "levers to control [Belgium's] strategic interests [and] values".

Bulgaria: the Conference should be about policies not institutional issues

by *Antoinette Primatarova*

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been launched at a time of deep confrontation and changes in the Bulgarian political landscape. The process started with massive anti-corruption protests in summer 2020. This mood for change was reflected in the April 2021 general elections, which empowered three new political players and put an end to the 10-year dominance of GERB (a member of the European People's Party). However, the fragmented parliament did not succeed in electing a government, so the president had to dissolve it, appoint a caretaker government and set new general elections for 11 July 2021.

Bulgaria might have several different governments during the Conference, as well as periods without a parliament (at least from 11 May to mid-July 2021) and a strong presence of parties with no affiliation to any of the European political families. The Conference cannot be expected to become a high priority for either the fragmented parliament(s) or the complicated coalition(s) that might govern in the months ahead. The good news is that the ongoing political confrontation does not put into question Bulgaria's general commitment to a strong and united European Union.

With well-established coordination of Bulgaria's participation in the EU, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of the Conference. On the basis of information exchange already underway with relevant ministries and non-governmental organisations, a common plan and programme, and ideas on how to promote the digital platform, are in development.

Experience with the 2016-19 EU [exercise](#) on debating the Future of Europe (and the 2019-24 Strategic Agenda as its outcome) is the basis for Bulgaria's preparation for the Conference.

Based on the assessment that institutional issues are not at the heart of citizens' concerns, Bulgaria is ready to argue that policies should be at the core of the Conference. Covid-19 makes debate about public health and economic recovery from the pandemic a must, with due attention to digital and green transformation. Cohesion policy & regional development and migration are two further Bulgarian priorities.

Bulgaria would not support linking the Conference to treaty changes, as it firmly believes that the full potential of the Lisbon Treaty must be used first. For Bulgaria, further European integration should remain an inclusive exercise and not allow the deepening of existing – or the creation of new – division lines within the EU.

The 2016-19 debates on the Future of Europe did not result in transnational lists and enforcement of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure for the 2019 European Parliament elections. Bulgaria would not support ambitions to use the Conference as an instrument to advocate transnational lists and possible employment of the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure for the 2024 EP elections. The strong presence of non-affiliated players in the next parliament(s) can further enforce this general position based on legal, institutional, geographical and gender (and other) balance concerns.

Bulgaria is not ready to support a move to qualified majority voting with regard to the CFSP (in general or concerning enlargement in particular), reform of the Common European Asylum System, or taxation.

Czechia: the Conference passes by

by Jan Kovář

While the Conference on the Future of Europe is now just beginning, having been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the preceding months show that Czechia does not seem to be overly invested in the Conference, at least judging by the government's attitude towards it. The current Czech government made its position clear that the direct involvement of – and consultations with – the citizens, with minimal government involvement, are the key ingredients of the Conference. In other words, the government does not see the EU member states and their governments as the key actors promoting their priorities and issues during the Conference. Quite the contrary: the government sees itself as a passive participant and pure intermediary. While on a general level the idea of the Conference is indeed to listen to the people, it is doubtful whether the government's purely passive role will steer the necessary citizen participation. It is also unclear to what extent the government's passivity, which it proclaims results directly from the underlying logic of the Conference, is not instead an excuse for its (typical) lack of ideas and issue priorities for EU policymaking. Perhaps the government's minimal involvement is a result of both: an appreciation of direct citizen involvement and a lack of will to engage substantively.

On national citizen participation, Czechia has a clearly stated preference for an inclusive, multistakeholder and decentralised approach. Beyond the national panels that the government office will help organise and the aim to mainstream the debates across all counties, the Czech executive does not have any specific ideas regarding the form that citizen participation should take. While certain member states are said to be aiming to stimulate citizen participation by promoting innovative formats, such as cross-border debates in border regions, Czechia does not appear to have any innovative ideas to guide participation.

On institutional issues, the Czech position is in line with that of Portugal, which currently holds the rotating presidency. The Conference should focus primarily on citizens' opinions and positions towards (policy) problems of their concern, rather than on institutional issues that they may consider dull. Also, the government maintains that its passive – at best supportive – role does not allow the mainstreaming of particular issues. Therefore, it does not take any position on institutional reform; the priorities must be citizen defined.

The Czech government holds a similar position towards the possibility of treaty change. The unofficial discourse is that unlike the Convention on the Future of Europe, the Conference a) is not a venue for member states to debate treaty change, and b) should not result in treaty change. The aim should instead be to find ways to make the EU more efficient within the existing treaty framework. However, the official discourse maintains that if there is demand for treaty change on the part of citizens, this question should perhaps be considered. Translated, this means that Czechia does not support treaty change, as it cannot realistically be expected that treaty change will be substantively debated by citizens. Finally, the Conference and its launch so far have not attracted high media attention beyond the usual suspects of EU specialised (online) media platforms, meaning that ordinary citizens have had limited opportunity to familiarise themselves with the exercise.

Denmark: don't rock the boat, do focus on tangible results for citizens

by Iben Tybjerg Schacke-Barfoed

Denmark is among those member states that were initially very hesitant in their support for the Conference on the Future of Europe. In fact, the Danish government's position has consistently been: "No treaty changes – focus on tangible results". This is reflected in a non-paper that Denmark signed with 11 other member states in 2020, which underlined the importance of the Conference in promoting "an effective and rule-based EU that delivers real, tangible solutions" and contained a footnote that the Conference should not fall within the scope of Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union.

The Danish government would like to see the Conference consider proposals for making the EU a global frontrunner on tackling climate change; protecting and promoting the rule of law; ensuring a just, green and digital transition of the economy; guaranteeing an effective, competitive and socially inclusive internal market; managing migration; and making the EU a strong and credible global actor. Horizontally, the Conference should also aim to increase the democratic legitimacy of the EU, including through [increased transparency](#) of the EU's legislative work and by considering opportunities to strengthen the role of national parliaments in the day-to-day work of the EU.

Since the current Danish Social Democratic government came to power in June 2019, a domestic debate has unfolded on whether this government has taken a more critical position on Europe. The debate sprang from public statements by the prime minister on, for instance, the EU's handling of vaccines, the size of the multiannual financial framework and the promise that Denmark's opt-outs of EU cooperation on the euro, defence, and justice and home affairs would not be subject to national referenda in the foreseeable future. Hence, appetite for further EU integration is generally limited, also because the opposition is divided between small Eurosceptic right-wing parties, and centre-left to centre-right parties that would like to see a more constructive position on Europe, but do not agree on what that position should be. The government's approach to integration is pragmatic: it should be limited, fit with the general political programme of the government and remain within the scope of the current treaties. The EU's pandemic preparedness could be an area for further integration.

This position is backed up by a [recent poll](#) (February 2021), which showed that the majority of the Danish public would like to see more EU cooperation in fighting pandemics but simultaneously wish to keep Denmark's opt-outs.

The Danish government is expected to announce additional funding for events that form part of the Conference. Although a public plan has not been published yet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched a social and mainstream media campaign and will be conducting a number of dialogue meetings with non-governmental organisations and citizens in the whole country, as well as holding joint events with the Danish parliament and other member states.

Finally, as the Conference coincides with the 50th anniversary of Denmark's EU membership, it is expected that the debate on the future of Europe will be tied to a debate on Denmark's future role in the EU.

Finland: gearing up for active engagement and citizen participation

by Juha Jokela

Finland has approached the Future of Europe debates pragmatically over the past few years. With regard to the Leaders' Agenda of the European Council, the European Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe, and French President Emmanuel Macron's Citizens' Conventions launched in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, Finland has called for a debate on the substance of EU policies. In addition, it has highlighted the need to better implement past decisions. Ideas suggesting an institutional overhaul of the European Union, or treaty changes, have not been supported by Helsinki.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Finland joined 11 other member states in calling for a pragmatic agenda for the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2021. The 12 member states suggested that the Conference focus on substantive topics such as the rule of law, the digital transition, recovery from the pandemic, climate policies and migration challenges. Strengthening the EU's role in the world and developing its defence cooperation are likely to be high on the Finnish agenda. While the key national priorities are still under discussion, Finland is not keen to focus on major institutional or treaty reforms, such as transnational lists for European Parliament elections or a change to the process for electing the European Commission president.

The government has recognised the value of the Conference as a tool to enhance citizen participation, and the media have also shown some interest in it recently due to the intensified national debate on the EU. European matters did not feature prominently in the campaigns of the 2019 parliamentary election. The national election also partly overshadowed the European Parliament elections, which took place just two months later. Recently, the need to discuss EU affairs more broadly has been underlined, however, because of the heated political debate on the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, which required a two-thirds majority in the Finnish parliament and hence support from the opposition. The heightened national EU debate bears some resemblance to the debate concerning the management of the euro crisis, and it has once again empowered the Eurosceptic Finns Party in the national discussions. Yet also pro-European parties have been concerned that the new facility could lead to more permanent transfers or a fiscal union.

As the Conference has now been launched, Finland is clearly gearing towards an active national EU discussion. Planned activities include a roadshow around the country, with ministers, officials and experts. Moreover, civil society organisations have been encouraged to play an active role. The government's actions are especially targeting young citizens. Finland is also likely to highlight the role of its parliament in the process, as it occupies a central role in national EU decision-making.

Helsinki is becoming increasingly cautious about the potential outcomes of the Conference. Should major EU reform proposals begin to emerge from other national capitals and Brussels, the government is preparing to generate responses based on national discussions under the Conference and in light of its recently launched [White Paper on Finland's EU Policy](#). The paper underlines the importance of the EU for Finland across policy areas, and spells out a constructive Finnish approach to EU policymaking. Yet it closes the door on EU Treaty change and calls for focus on substantive policy matters rather than institutional reforms and transfers of competences.

France: young people should be at the heart of the Conference

by Georgina Wright

When President Macron was elected in 2017, he promised radical economic reform and deeper integration in the European Union. France needed a strong Europe, but for that Europe also needed to reform. For Macron, citizens more than governments should inspire the way the EU reforms, as without their support change is less likely to be meaningful or long lasting. It is no surprise then that the French president was the one to propose a Conference on the Future of Europe.

For Macron, the Conference should have two aims: to breathe new energy into the democratic debate in Europe and be a basis to understand what citizens want and do not want from the EU in the future. The problem for him is not that the EU tries to do too much, but rather that it does too little or is too slow to respond to major crises.

The EU needs better and tailored relations with its neighbours: the way it interacts when countries to its east cannot mirror priorities for its relations to the south. The EU needs to define its ambitions, from tackling climate change to dealing with China, even if these sometimes put the EU at odds with its principal allies like the United States. The EU needs to have the tools and resources at its disposal to promote and defend its values. France also believes that the EU needs to work harder to create a sense of belonging; to make the EU more relevant to the everyday lives of citizens, for example by including famous Europeans or European projects on euro banknotes.

The EU needs institutions that can respond to challenges: a smaller European Commission (with fewer commissioners) and more flexibility for member states to push forward projects of common interest, for example in the field of defence – even when some member states are opposed. Unanimity voting in the Council should be the exception rather than the rule: dropped for areas like fiscal policy and tax, though not for enlargement, treaty change or the EU's multiannual financial framework. The institutions should be reformed before the EU thinks about any further enlargement. Likewise, treaty change may be necessary; but in its absence, the EU should find ways to improve its decision-making processes through ad hoc groupings and a flexible format.

Unlike some member states, France does not support the *Spitzenkandidaten* process – at least not until it is certain that EU citizens have a good command of the intricacies of the EU system and understand the different parliamentary groupings.

But perhaps more importantly for Macron, the Conference should be first and foremost about listening to what EU citizens want. It should be open to everyone, not only those who work or are active in French politics. From the autumn, every region in France will be organising panels and events on the EU. Ministers and departments have also been tasked with thinking about how the EU impacts their work.

The President also wants to listen to what EU citizens in other member states think. He has promised to use France's presidency of the Council of the EU (from January to June 2022) to reflect on the main ideas that come out of the Conference and determine, together with member states and institutions, how to put these ideas into action. Of all the contributions, the French government will pay particular attention to the views, challenges and aspirations of the younger generations vis-à-vis Europe. The government has [promised](#) to put a digital platform in place by early July that will mobilise over 50,000 young people across France.

But not all in France share the government's enthusiasm for the Conference. According to a former French Minister, speaking under the Chatham House Rule, the Conference will have limited effect. French and EU citizens in France will be focused on economic recovery and jobs, not on the EU. Timing could also be a problem: France's presidential campaign next year may limit how far people in France actually get involved in the Conference – and the extent to which the government can engage with it.

There is also the question of how much reach the Conference will have in France. According to the [National Commission on public debate](#), more people than expected contributed to Macron's 2018 consultations on Europe, but most – if not all – contributors were already committed Europeans. There is no guarantee that the Conference will reach those who are ambivalent, agnostic or even opposed to the European project.

Germany: on board but lacking vision

by Nicolai von Ondarza and Minna Ålander

Germany has taken an ambivalent approach to the Conference on the Future of Europe. Although it originally brought forward a [non-paper](#) with France in November 2019 on how to shape and use the Conference, the Conference was not a priority for Germany during its presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020. Since the Portuguese presidency brought new momentum to the Conference preparations and secured its launch on Europe Day, 9 May 2021, Germany has begun to develop ideas for the Conference. Nevertheless, there is still no clear vision with regard to its priorities.

On institutional questions, as during its Presidency, Germany intends to push for qualified majority voting on the CFSP. Another institutional priority is democracy in the European Union, although the more precise contents of this broad term have not yet been worked out. Transnational lists for the European Parliament elections and a reform of the Commission president appointment procedure are in principle supported by the German government. Furthermore, the current federal government has hinted at health policy, climate and digitalisation as its policy priorities. It wants to avoid the Conference interfering, however, with ongoing legislative processes such as the Green Deal.

The elephant in the room remains the question of treaty change. On this controversial matter, under the current government, Germany is taking a cautious approach. According to Chancellor Angela Merkel, treaty change should not be an end in itself, but could be used where absolutely necessary to increase the EU's competences – for instance in health policy after the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. When it comes to the other parties, the Greens, Social Democrats and Free Democrats are at least in principle in favour of treaty change to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU. Overall, Germany remains committed to EU integration, with the clear exception of the 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) party, which is openly in favour of leaving the EU but is now polling lower than in 2017.

On national citizen participation, Germany has a clearer approach. Under the principles of "inclusive, decentralised and representative", the Foreign Ministry plans to organise citizen participation in innovative formats, including transnational events with its EU neighbours in border regions. A condition for citizens' events is that all discussions should be conducted based on facts and in accordance with the fundamental values of the EU. In the national media, apart from a few articles around Europe Day 2021, the Conference has not yet attracted much attention.

While Germany was not particularly enthusiastic about the Conference in the earlier stages and during its Council presidency, it is now committed to making the best of the opportunity to involve citizens. The biggest unknown is the result of the federal elections in autumn 2021, which will deliver a new chancellor and most likely also a new government coalition. This new coalition will have to develop a new vision of the EU in the coalition treaty negotiations. The current German government has a clear idea of citizen participation, but will likely only be a passive participant in the first stage of the Conference. The new government may well use the Conference to provide fresh impetus and ideas to the EU but, depending on the election results, the formation of a new government may stretch into late 2021 or even 2022.

Greece: counting on Europe for its future

by Filippa Chatzistavrou

After a very difficult decade, Greece has no doubts about its full commitment to the European Union to cope with its precarious present and uncertain future. The Greek government, in line with the country's longstanding position, has embraced an unconditional pro-EU stance. Despite an ongoing trend towards increasing fragmentation within the EU, the country's position remains firm. EU cooperation is viewed by the main political class and government elites as the only way forward to return to sustainable growth.

In the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Greek government is proposing a predominantly policy-oriented agenda. The further development of EU defence and security policy features prominently for Greece. A gradual deterioration in relations between Greece and Turkey in recent years explains Greece prioritising changes towards 'sovereign' matters (i.e. foreign policy, security, public order etc.).

The official line is that general institutional reform issues should not shape conversations to such a large extent as in the past. Questions such as facilitating the European Parliament legislative initiative, reforming the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure, reinforcing EU competence on health issues and moving towards greater application of qualified majority voting in policy areas that traditionally rely on unanimity should certainly be on the table, but should not dominate Conference discussions.

On the other hand, particular attention should be paid to real problems and concerns that are of interest to citizens. In this vein, the Greek government would like to push discussions towards an assessment of the conditions under which the EU could establish a permanent collective financial instrument as a logical continuation of the Covid-19 rescue funds, and other related policy instruments, in order to face future crises and also support excellence-driven and innovation policies. According to the Greek government, the Conference will also have to take up issues that raise important popular concerns, such as social cohesion policy, environment and climate change, and migration policy. Uneven population decline is another thorny issue that particularly concerns the Greek public authorities, which is why they would like to highlight its importance for Europe's demographic future.

With regard to treaty changes, without prejudging the outcome, Greek officials do not seem to be adopting a dogmatic line, since both solutions – either reforming the current treaties or supporting the establishment of a new treaty – are conceivable.

As far as methodology is concerned, the setting up of a bottom-up special platform, following in the footsteps of Emmanuel Macron's *Débats*, may allow key stakeholders to be invited to provide input at the national level, as well as encouraging youth participation by asking for their democratic opinion about ongoing discussions on the future of Europe. It remains to be seen whether this is a symbolic step or will actually reinforce EU democratic legitimacy.

While Greek society is very concerned about the critical socioeconomic and territorial effects of successive crises and sociopolitical shifts in a post-pandemic world, the Greek government seems to be relying on the EU to find solutions and satisfy popular demands as regards the main challenges of the 21st century. Persisting with such a strategy of offloading responsibility could prove to be a rather perilous exercise as long as the EU's capability to deliver remains questionable.

Ireland: positive yet pragmatic

by Alexander Conway

Ireland is committed to engaging with the Conference on the Future of Europe, although precisely how it plans to shape the Conference remains to be clarified. According to the Irish Prime Minister, Taoiseach Micheál Martin, the Conference is a "[very practical way of boosting citizen engagement with the European Union and Ireland's place in it](#)".

The protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law within the EU will be a priority for Ireland, and it hopes to work together with like-minded member states on these issues. Ireland is supportive of expanding EU competences and capacities and enlarging the EU budget, provided they strengthen the EU's ability to act as a "[direct enabler of \[economic\] growth](#)". As one of the EU's most open and globalised economies, Ireland is in favour of an 'open' approach to strategic autonomy, and the government opposes any initiatives that could lead to the creation of artificial barriers that distort trade or competition.

On institutional matters, Ireland has expressed caution about replacing qualified majority voting on CFSP questions, although Taoiseach Martin has noted that [current decision-making procedures](#) could be more effective.

In March 2021, Ireland and 11 smaller member states issued a [non-paper](#) opposing treaty change and [stating](#) that the Conference should not create new legal obligations or unduly interfere with existing legislative processes. According to an [Irish government memo](#), it would "stress the importance" of policy issues rather than institutional or treaty changes, which could require a referendum in Ireland. This reluctance is informed in part by Ireland's history of European referenda. Though [Irish citizens are broadly very supportive of the EU](#), the Irish experience has shown referenda to be unpredictable. Both the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon were rejected by the Irish electorate, in 2001 and 2008 respectively, before passing at the second attempt. There may also be [concerns](#) over possible competence 'spillovers' into sensitive policy areas, like the Irish policy of military neutrality, and corporate taxation.

Notably, however, Taoiseach Martin [remarked](#) in May 2021 that the Irish government has to be "open to potential treaty change [...] notwithstanding the challenges it presents". He supports greater EU competence to address public health and climate change challenges, which smaller countries cannot achieve alone.

Ireland is a strong advocate for citizen engagement, building on the success of its own citizens' assemblies and 'Shared Island' initiative. Thomas Byrne, Minister of State for European Affairs, has stated that the Irish government views this engagement as "[really critical](#)" and has planned a series of (initially virtual) regional [events](#) to facilitate citizens' engagement with the Conference. These events will be expanded in 2022 to include a special focus on hearing the voices of EU citizens in Northern Ireland, the Irish diaspora and younger citizens.

Overall, Ireland plans to engage constructively with the Conference and its outcomes. The coalition government supports the Conference, and the Irish position is unlikely to be changed by the 'rotating Taoiseach' arrangement, under which Leo Varadkar will take the role of Taoiseach halfway through the government's term on 15 December 2022. In the aftermath of Brexit and Covid-19, Ireland is keen to use the Conference as a means to harness ideas and positions on Europe through active citizen engagement, both at home and abroad.

Italy: a premise for a more integrated and democratic EU

by Eleonora Poli

The Conference on the Future of Europe is considered by the Italian government to be a fundamental opportunity to give voice to citizens across the EU and, according to the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi di Maio, its success now depends on "[finding the correct balance between multiple citizens' demands and member states' national interests](#)".

As far as institutional reforms are concerned, the Italian government is supporting the transformation of the debt-sharing mechanism – introduced by the Next Generation EU as a temporary measure – into a permanent instrument to boost European economies at large.

Moreover, it is in favour of creating a European tax system on plastic and carbon emissions, as well as on financial transactions and digital activities. This could allow the EU to acquire its own financial resources, which could then be used to obtain more competences in strategic sectors, encompassing health, social and defence matters, and to finance more projects on sustainable and green development to boost citizens' welfare across Europe.

The strengthening of the supranational dimension of the EU decision-making process is also fundamental. This could be achieved by moving from unanimity to qualified majority voting within the European Council, moving the EU towards a more political union.

To date, Italy's political priorities are all related to the need to boost national economic recovery through innovative, equitable and sustainable plans, and to keep new migration waves under control. Both issues can be solved only through effective solidarity and cooperation among member countries, which the Conference could promote. Indeed, if the Conference is transformed into a [constituent phase](#) for Europe, meaning that its results can be converted into political initiatives and taken into due consideration by European and national institutions, Italy would be open to supporting a process of treaty reform.

Thanks to the Next Generation EU and the funding Italy will receive, anti-European rhetoric from parties such as La Liga (which is now part of the government) and Brothers of Italy, has decreased. This does not mean that Italians are now Europhiles, however. Those parties will again use anti-EU discourse to fuel discontent and win fresh elections if the current government and European institutions fail to deliver what citizens expect of them.

For this reason, the Italian government and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs see the Conference on the Future of Europe as an opportunity to promote participatory democracy in the EU and to mark an end to perceived top-down European decision-making processes which have contributed to growing Euroscepticism in Italy.

Moreover, they are also encouraging the organisation of several consultations and [dialogues](#) involving Italians but also citizens from the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans region. The Conference is also politically relevant for Italy to take a clear stand, alongside France and Germany, against the many detractors of treaty reform, and to renew its commitment to promoting a more integrated and democratic Europe.

Latvia: hoping to boost citizen engagement

by Aleksandra Palkova

In Latvia, the Conference on the Future of Europe is not a new topic. Debates on the future of Europe in Latvia took place under the title “Dialogues with Citizens” in 2013-14 and 2018 in the form of a wide-ranging consultation with citizens. Nevertheless, [Latvia remains passive](#) regarding the Conference and its priorities.

The Conference will still start in the context of a pandemic crisis. Therefore, Latvian citizens indicated in the [Special Eurobarometer](#) that one of the main priorities of the Conference should be to improve the European Union's response capacity during crises. However, the Latvian government is hesitant about expressing an active position on the Conference and is not giving it very high priority. So far, there have been no announcements from Latvian higher authorities on the priorities of the Conference itself. On the first day of the Conference, there were only two announcements on the topic from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: a general introduction to the Conference, and a statement that it was a new opportunity for citizens to participate.

The government emphasises Latvia's longstanding priorities of maintaining and strengthening the achievements of the EU, such as the functioning of the single market and the Schengen area, as well as economic convergence and cohesion, and would like to see Latvia at the core of the EU in the economic sphere. This shows continuity in Latvian priorities since its accession to the EU. Furthermore, Latvia expects that during the Conference, topics such as European strategic autonomy, the further division of competences between the EU and the member states in health policy and quality of health care, and more comprehensive qualified majority voting will be discussed. In general, however, Latvia considers social policies to be a national competence.

Regarding institutional reform, Latvia is satisfied with the current institutional balance of the EU, but the government is ready to discuss possible proposals to strengthen the EU and to work better in the interests of European citizens. Latvia perceives a treaty change as a Pandora's box that is better left unopened. As the Treaty of Lisbon showed, it took nine years from the Convention on the Future of Europe to conclude the treaty change, as the process was full of complexities. If, in the end, a conversation about possible treaty change arises, the position of Latvia remains to oppose it. If the other member states start the process, however, then the changes should only include what has been agreed upon in advance.

Another challenge will be to keep Latvian citizens informed about the Conference. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been entrusted with the primary communication function. The essential message from the Ministry is the openness of public administration to society and the opportunity for every Latvian citizen to influence the future of Europe.

Conference events in Latvia are focusing on introducing new elements of participatory democracy. Citizens will develop their suggestions, comment on other people's ideas and organise events. Latvian citizens have an overall positive attitude towards EU integration. The Conference is therefore expected to create new impetus for a better understanding of EU processes and active involvement of citizens, especially young Latvian activists and non-governmental organisations.

Lithuania: focus on participation and policy results, support for institutional status quo

by Ramūnas Vilpišauskas

Public debates on the Conference on the Future of Europe gathered pace in Lithuania in 2020. First, the parliamentary committees of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs jointly presented their [opinion](#) on the future of Europe and Lithuania's position on 18 September 2020.

The opinion was quite explicit with respect to support for the current institutional status quo in the EU, in particular the support for more effective common action on the Strategic Agenda for 2019-24 within the current framework of the EU Treaty, preserving the current number of commissioners and the current institutional set up of the EU leadership.

There was also support for maintaining the discretion of the European Council (EUCO) regarding the choice of European Commission president, but reservations about the idea of transnational lists for European Parliament elections. Lithuania opposes extending qualified majority voting to the areas important for national sovereignty, as existing veto rights allow small member states to preserve their input into the joint decision-making of the EU.

Lithuania joined the group of 12 EU member states, mostly from Northern and Central Europe, in presenting their March 2021 [position paper](#) on the expected outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The paper stressed the need to use the process as an opportunity to ask voters what they expect from the EU, with a focus on results rather than inward-looking institutional debates. This underlined the view that the Conference should not create legal obligations, duplicate or unduly interfere with the established legal processes. In other words, by joining this initiative Lithuania reiterated its support for the current institutional status quo and its opposition to EU Treaty change.

Lithuania's government refers to its position as a "policy first" approach. It stresses that the main goal of the Conference should be to deliver concrete results to the benefit of citizens, with the top priority being recovery from the pandemic, along with the European Green Deal, the digital agenda and an inclusive, more integrated and secure Europe. At the same time, it expresses its conviction that current treaties offer ample possibilities for the EU to respond to current challenges, implement the Strategic Agenda and make the EU fit for the future. The Conference is not seen as a treaty change process, which can only be mandated by the EUCO following the procedure set in Article 48. Also, national parliaments must be involved as closely as possible during all the processes of the Conference.

Even though parliamentary elections in Lithuania brought to power former opposition conservative and liberal parties in October 2020, the newly formed government maintained the same position as the previous one. It should be noted that all parliamentary parties support Lithuania's membership of the EU.

Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned a public opinion survey about the CFE and an expert [study](#) on Lithuania's national position with respect to potential EU institutional reforms. The public survey conducted in September 2020 showed that almost a third of respondents were satisfied with the status quo in the EU (greater support than for any other option of five scenarios presented in the European Commission's White paper on the future of Europe), although the majority did support particular institutional reforms and EU Treaty change. Asked about the need to give more powers to the EU, large majorities supported giving more powers to the EU in the areas of foreign, security and defence policy and the fight against terrorism, while a majority opposed more powers in the areas of education, health care, social security and employment, competitiveness and taxation, and demographic issues.

Underlining the importance of fully utilising online tools, the MFA initiated public debates with various stakeholder groups (experts, academics, youth and NGOs) in late 2020 and planned to continue in 2021 with the official start of the conference in June organised jointly by the MFA and delegations of the European Commission and European parliament in Vilnius, 10-15 citizens' dialogues in the regions and five events with foreign partners, including within the EU Baltic Sea strategy forum in autumn 2021.

Media coverage of the matter has so far mostly been driven by press releases, broadcasting official debates and reporting on events such as the official opening of the conference; there has been little interest in substantial discussion.

The Netherlands: broad support for the EU – avoid inward-looking debates

by Adriaan Schout

A number of general trends in Dutch EU policy are relevant to assess its position vis-à-vis the Conference on the Future of Europe. First, the Netherlands is a country with a long tradition of favouring European cooperation over European integration. Despite very broad support for the European Union in general, there is also an impression that the EU has a certain tradition of *frappez toujours* (i.e. of rehashing proposals even after being voted down) when it comes to proposing deeper integration ideas. The Constitutional Treaty that was vetoed in 2005 was one of the turning points in Dutch EU policy. Yet, at EU level, a range of initiatives has been taken towards deeper integration and recent proposals to broaden the EU's own resources. As a result, a number of broadly supported motions have been adopted in the Dutch parliament against the transfer of competences and increased financial transfers.

Second, the Netherlands is generally open to practical proposals relating to policies that make the EU better and more transparent. This positive tone towards pragmatically furthering European cooperation was also visible in the adoption of the budget for the Next Generation EU fund, which, in the end, was hardly disputed. In dealing with common challenges, the EU agenda is already quite full with the current work programme of the European Commission. Hence, initial reactions of the Dutch government towards the Conference supported suggestions for better involvement of the wider public in the EU's existing policy ambitions related to, among others, climate change, migration and steps towards qualified majority voting in foreign affairs.

With the current agenda on practical policy solutions, there is a reluctance to engage in inward-looking EU debates about institutions and procedures. Moreover, the Conference follows some rather unpopular debates, such as those on the Constitutional Treaty, the barely noticed debates initiated by Juncker's White Paper on the future of the EU, and the 2018 citizens' dialogues that produced few results. The national survey in 2018 showed once again that the EU is broadly supported but that citizens are not emotionally attached to integration, meaning that this support can also decline. Consecutive governments have tried to steer the EU away from debates that strengthen its image as being preoccupied with itself and to focus instead on the added value of the EU in terms of policies.

Third, the Netherlands has learned to avoid drawing red lines, so will adapt flexibly to newly arising majorities in the EU regarding debates on deeper integration. Ambitious decisions that may result, possibly including treaty change, will have to be taken by unanimity. This will presumably be hard to achieve or result in watered-down intentions. In light of this, expectations of the Conference are modest. The government suggested a change of style in the EU towards 'under-promising and over-delivering'. The Conference poses the risk of the EU being seen, again, as overly ambitious and under-performing.

Poland: clear priorities and moderate expectations

by *Melchior Szczepanik*

Poland is approaching the Conference on the Future of Europe with a set of well-defined priorities that the government has been promoting – on occasions through joint declarations with the Visegrad (V4) states – for a number of years. Completing the single market through the elimination of the remaining barriers to free movement, particularly in the areas of services and labour, is considered vital for the European economy to rebound quickly. Poland will call for just green and digital transitions, stressing the necessity to ensure adequate EU support for the states for which this process may be particularly challenging and costly. The government will also continue to make a case for closer cooperation in tax matters aimed at fighting tax evasion. Poland will insist on the benefits of continuing the enlargement process and deepening ties with the European neighbourhood.

Institutional reform is not seen as a priority. Poland is sceptical about the majority of proposals that have been circulated, such as more qualified majority voting or transnational lists in European elections. Granting national parliaments a greater say in EU matters remains the key Polish proposal in the institutional realm. Treaty reform is also not perceived as necessary, but Poland is ready to engage in a debate – in the form of an intergovernmental conference – should the Conference deem that a revision of the treaties is required.

A subcommittee was created in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament with a mission to follow the work of the Conference and prepare the chamber's contribution. The government has encouraged citizens to take part in the debate via the digital platform set up by the European Commission. Details of national events involving citizens remain to be announced. While support for EU membership has been strong in Poland, according to the Special [Eurobarometer survey](#) on the future of Europe, Polish citizens' willingness to participate in the Conference is slightly (four percentage points) below the EU average, with 47% claiming they would either definitely (9%) or probably (38%) get involved.

Given the time and organisational constraints, Poland does not expect the Conference to yield any proposals for far-reaching reforms. It is seen rather as an opportunity for the institutions and member states to listen to the citizens and adjust existing policies accordingly. This stance corresponds to the general attitude towards integration held by the major party (i.e. Law and Justice) in the ruling coalition, which privileges a Union focused on existing policies rather than on new undertakings, and ascribes a central role in EU governance to intergovernmental bodies. As one of Law and Justice's junior coalition partners is displaying an increasingly critical stance towards the EU's recent decisions (especially the creation of a recovery fund through common debt), the government is likely to express reservations about proposals for closer or more diversified integration. Opposition parties – apart from the right-wing Eurosceptics – emphasise the need to boost EU competences (especially in health, foreign policy and defence), and display more openness to treaty change. They also call for the enhancement of mechanisms for assessing the rule of law in individual member states and the sanctioning of shortcomings in this respect.

Slovakia: focus on topics that will resonate

by Vladislava Gubalova

With the Conference on the Future of Europe finally on its way, Slovakia is gearing up towards a series of activities, designed to involve citizens but also to produce coherent recommendations. The Slovak government has been a willing participant in the preparation stages at the European level and a proponent of a quick start of the Conference. Slovakia has attached one additional goal to the Conference activities: to educate citizens about the added value of the European Union, beyond freedom of travel or European funds, and to set proper expectations.

At the same time, as a small European state, Slovakia is not feeling comfortable about institutional changes that might endanger its national interests, preferring the community decision-making method. It does not support the *Spitzenkandidaten* format for the election of the European Commission president, or the introduction of transnational lists for European Parliament elections. It is, however, receptive to the discussion of qualified majority voting being extended to new areas. The Slovak government is open to some institutional changes if they lead to more efficient and democratic processes and follow the principles of subsidiarity, rule of law and a reduction in administrative and regulatory burdens.

Slovakia is among the member states that have not committed to the idea of a treaty change. Rather than moving towards an uncertain and long path to treaty change, the Slovak government stresses the need to have tangible results, felt by the citizens.

In its conference plan, the Slovak government has identified 14 different topics, divided by long-term 'resonant' topics, such as the single market, social justice, cyber security, digital and green transition, and new themes brought by the current crisis, including deepening integration in health care, crisis management and strategic autonomy. Certain priority will be given to topics that are part of the Council's Strategic Agenda but also directly 'hit home' in Slovakia. These include the green and digital transition, resilient democracy, completion of the single market and the EU's external dimension.

The activities around the Conference in Slovakia will be divided into two parts: the WeAreEU segment and the National Convention segment, providing opportunities for inputs from citizens and experts. The public part (WeAreEU) is an improved concept from 2018. What makes it interesting this time is the involvement of the regional and local governmental structures. A [policy brief](#) prepared by GLOBSEC identified that these subnational structures often have better infrastructure and know-how for citizens' deliberations. Concurrently, working groups of professionals will prepare recommendations for specific areas where they have experience and expertise, as part of the National Convention segment. The outputs from the public and expert deliberations will then be presented and discussed during three national conferences. These dual activities are meant to both bring the EU closer to the citizens, allow them to express their concerns and opinions, and also draft expert proposals to complement the citizens' recommendations.

While there is some excitement around the Conference, the Slovak government sees this as a platform for Slovakia to communicate its positions on the EU. Additionally, the exercise can contribute to properly adjusting citizens' expectations of the EU.

Spain: ready to turn results into action

by Ilke Toygür and Héctor Sánchez Margalef

Spain is one of the member states to have warmly welcomed the Conference on the Future of Europe. Thanks to its traditional pro-European stance and proactive involvement, the Spanish Secretary of State for the European Union, Juan González-Barba, has an observer seat on the Executive Board of the Conference. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs therefore gave an initial push to this democratic exercise on the agenda, while aiming for extensive consultations on the planning phase with local and regional authorities on the issue of European integration.

There are at least four priorities that the Spanish government would like to advance in the Conference and achieve tangible results. First, broadening and deepening European citizenship while unlocking its full potential by, for example, including Erasmus as a third-generation right. Second, increasing the role of cities in multilevel governance of the EU, and seeing them more included in the decision-making process. Third, there is the urban-rural divide, from the question of how low-population density territories can be made eligible for EU funds to ensuring a fair transition in these areas after the Green Deal. Third; the government aims to give the politics of symbolism a new push, from sports (EU athletes competing under the European flag as well their national one at the Olympics) to a new European Bauhaus or the creation of exchanges between 'European schools' at all age levels.

According to official sources, Spain is open to discussing any topic brought to the table in the Conference, while taking into consideration its citizens' demands. It is also open to treaty change, but did not put this out as an objective to achieve. Officials underline that there is no consensus in the Council and no point in taking it as a primary objective if it is likely to fail. Institutional reforms are expected to be on the agenda, however, and the inclination is towards the implementation of transnational lists rather than the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, as this already failed after European Parliament elections in 2019. The debate over changing the unanimity requirement to qualified majority voting in the EU's external action is also widely accepted among political elites within the Spanish government.

In order to mobilise and engage with civil society, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already launched a call, [Hablamos de Europa](#). The objective is to encourage participation and debates on the topics highlighted by the Conference in every region, attracting people from all walks of life. Both virtual and in-person activities are supported, while collaboration with other member states is encouraged.

Spain sees the Conference as an opportunity to discuss different issues that are on the agenda of European citizens beyond the discussions of the EU bubble like treaty changes or institutional adjustments. The country is also looking to achieve tangible, visible results that can be converted into action. It is important to remember that Spain will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2023, and will play an active role in the implementation of the decisions that are taken in the Conference. Spain is a pro-European country with the desire for further integration. In recent years, the changes that its party system has been through have led to alternative political forces that may instrumentalise the EU in the future. So the Conference should be a useful platform to reaffirm the European compromise.

Sweden: it's the conversation, Europe!

by Jakob Lewander

Swedish expectations of the Conference on the Future of Europe are lean on concrete output and ambitious on citizens' input. The Swedish government is not considering the Conference as a moment to leap forward substantially on institutional overhaul or treaty reform, or to define new directions for further European integration. The Swedish purpose is policy oriented, and focused on an inclusive and transparent citizens' dialogue without creating legal obligations. To this end, Sweden has signed a [document](#) of common approach with 11 other countries (Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands and Slovakia) outlining their main focus and preferences regarding the Conference.

As regards policy, Sweden aims, among others to: deepen the discussion on the Union's promotion and consolidation of the rule of law and fundamental values; realise the EU's green transition on a global scale and strengthen the link between a just green transition and a boost in international competitiveness; achieve common, fair and sustainable management of migration policy; and promote gender equality.

First and foremost, for Sweden the Conference is an opportunity for bottom-up dialogue with and among EU citizens – with a reasonable scope of expectations on outcomes. The government is promoting the participatory activities of the Conference throughout civil society, the social partners of the labour market, the education system, and regional and municipal associations. As Sweden sees it, the principal task for today for the EU is to deal with the effects of the pandemic. The desire for treaty change or institutional reform, such as the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and transnational lists, is at best considered lukewarm among the Swedish population and many member states, as well as unfit for the purpose of the Conference.

However, in order to deal with the immediate effects of the pandemic, Sweden already sees ample and sufficient room within the current state of the treaties to act in concert on issues such as health care and vaccine purchases. From a Swedish perspective, the fundamental question on the future of the EU lies in the Next Generation EU fund and whether this is treated and considered as a one-time occurrence (which is Sweden's obvious stance), or as a permanent framework for the Union. The future of the EU – in substance – will therefore not be determined by this Conference. Rather, in Swedish eyes, it is the inclusive conversation with citizens on concrete policies that is key for this year. No topic should be excluded from the conversation, but its outcomes must be framed within existing legislative procedures and the scope of the treaties.

Contributors

Ålander, Minna, Research Assistant, EU/Europe Research Division, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Bodson, Benjamin, Associate Fellow, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

Chatzistavrou, Filippa, Research Fellow, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

Colli, Francesca, Associate Fellow, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations

Conway, Alexander, Researcher, Institute of International & European Affairs (IIEA)

Edthofer, Johanna, Researcher, Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)

Gubalova, Vladislava, Senior Research Fellow, GLOBSEC

Jokela, Juha, Programme Director, The European Union Research Programme, Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA)

Kovář, Jan, Senior Researcher, Institute for International Relations Prague (IIR)

Lewander, Jakob, Researcher, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS)

Palkova, Aleksandra, Junior Researcher, Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA)

Poli, Eleonora, Senior Research Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Primatarova, Antoinette, Programme Director, Centre for Liberal Strategies (CLS)

Ramūnas Vilpišauskas, Jean Monnet Chair Professor, Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University

Russack, Sophia, Researcher, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

Sánchez Margalef, Héctor, Researcher & Project Manager, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)

Schmidt, Paul, Secretary General, Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)

Schout, Adriaan, Senior Research Fellow, Clingendael Institute

Szczepanik, Melchior, Analyst, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

Toygür, Ilke, Analyst of European Affairs, Elcano Royal Institute & CATS Fellow, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Tybjærg Schacke-Barfoed, Iben, Head of Analysis and Communications, Think Tank Europa

von Ondarza, Nicolai, Head of EU/Europe Research Division, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Wright, Georgina, Head of Europe Program, Institute Montaigne