

The Conference on the Future of Europe: towards a “Citizens Union”

Luigi Moccia, President Centre Altiero Spinelli, Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence

January 07, 2020

The new year begins for the European Union (EU) in the name of a double challenge.

On the one hand, Brexit with its pending issues and the uncertainty of its medium-long term consequences that may affect the development of the integration process.

On the other, the announcement of a “**Conference on the future of Europe**”, between representatives of the European institutions and member states, open to the participation of “citizens’ panels” and civil society representatives (such as “academics, business and worker representatives, as well as religious and spiritual leaders”), according to **the idea first advanced by President Macron with a letter of March 2019 addressed to “Citizens of Europe”,** “in order to propose **all the changes our political project needs, which is open even to amending the EU treaties.**”

The idea of this conference was taken up by the newly appointed president **Ursula von der Leyen** who in her presentation speech to the European Parliament of the program of the new European Commission ([A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe](#)) has foreseen its launch, on the basis of an agreement between Parliament, the Commission and the European Council, starting from 2020 and the conclusion in 2022: “**I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe**, to start in 2020 and run for two years. **The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people**, civil society and European institutions as equal partners.” (as written in the final part of the program significantly titled: *A new push for European democracy*).

*

This initiative **could be a chance for a qualitative leap forward** capable of generating “**new concepts to guide the future of Europe**”: as stated in a joint Franco-German proposal document on what should be the main issues and guidelines of the **Conference** ([Conference on the Future of Europe: Franco-German non-paper on key questions and guidelines](#)).

In the current state of affairs, it is perhaps legitimate to doubt it, given that many EU reform proposals have already been put forward in recent years; but in a context of European leadership that is still rather weak and uncertain, as the capacity and the political will by Union institutions, first of all the Parliament and the Commission, to take action towards member states, in their turn conditioned by divisions and low mutual trust. Otherwise said, the obvious difficulties that such an ambitious initiative will face, lead to doubt if it is a sort of ‘escamotage’, albeit creative, of a limited and unlikely scope of application (on the model substantially of the numerous consultation and dialogue initiatives with citizens already experimented in the past by the Commission), rather than a courageous ‘innovation’ likely to influence the definition and conduct of the policies and related decision-making mechanisms of the Union.

But precisely for this reason, it is certain that the expectations of something new in the Union’s institutional and policy landscape are ever greater and more widespread.

It is therefore worth bringing the attention on the announcement of this Conference, which is expected to take place in **two phases**: a **first phase, starting from February 2020 and until the summer**, should be focused – as stated in the Franco-German document – on “**issues relating to the democratic functioning of the Union**” (electoral system,

transnational lists, the system of *Spitzenkandidaten*, citizens' participation); and a **second phase** on “**policy priorities**”, starting from mid-2020 (under the rotating presidency of the German Council of the Union) and ending in early 2022 (under the rotating presidency of France).

As regards the contents and the expected results of the Conference, again the aforementioned document, while stressing the necessity of empowering the role of EU citizens in terms of a “**broad ownership**” of such initiative, that is to say **to make Union citizens true actors in all respects, alike with the institutions and member states**, proposes that the “**Conference should address all issues at stake to guide the future of Europe with a view to making the EU more united and sovereign;**” to this end focusing on both policy issues **identifying “by block of policies, the main reforms to implement as a matter of priority” (including the possibility of amendments to the treaty)**, and **institutional reforms as “cross-cutting issue,”** in order “**to promote democracy and European values and ensure a more efficient functioning of the Union and its institutions.**”

All that in the name of a “**strong involvement of our citizens**”, *i.e.* European citizens, in order to start “**a bottom-up process**” by a “**EU-wide participation of our citizens on all issues.**” A process that should end with the formulation of “**recommendations**” to be presented to the European Council “**for debate and implementation**” (in the words of the Franco- German non paper).

The European Council (EUCO), at its meeting of 12-13 December 2019, while taking into consideration “the idea of a Conference on the Future of Europe starting in 2020 and ending in 2022 [...] should contribute to the development of our policies in the medium and long term [and] **should build on the successful holding of citizens’ dialogues over the past two years and foresee broad consultation of citizens in the course of the process**”, has postponed any decision in this regard, giving a mandate to “the Croatian Council Presidency to work towards defining a Council position on the content, scope, composition and functioning of such a conference and to engage, on this basis, with the European Parliament and the Commission” (as stated in the [Conclusions](#)).

For its part, **the European Parliament**, demonstrating its commitment to pursuing the idea of this Conference, has set up an internal **working group** (composed of one representative per political group, as well as a representative of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, AFCO), which drafted a document ([Main outcome of the Working Group](#)). There are summarised the main results achieved on the basis of the consensus of a majority of political groups, regarding the organisational aspects as well as the scope and objectives of the Conference: the launch of which should be preceded by “**a listening phase [to] enable citizens from across the European Union to express their ideas, make suggestions, and propose their own vision of what Europe means for them.**” Furthermore, in the spirit and in support of the initiative as “**a bottom-up exercise**” where **European citizens can contribute precisely with their voices** so that “**the future of the European Union is based on their ideas of that future,**” a participatory democracy mechanism is there envisaged in the form of “**Thematic Citizens’ agoras**” consisting of **selected groups of citizens**, which should be joined by **two assemblies representing the youth world (Youth agoras), aged between 16 and 25 years.**

*

Apart from the questions on the nature and the scope of the Conference and its organisational and procedural configuration, with particular regard to the final recommendations, in case they will imply treaties amendments, in relation to revision procedures and the role of the European Council and member states in this matter (not by chance explicitly mentioned in the EUCO Conclusions: “The Conference [...] needs to involve the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission, **in full respect of the**

inter-institutional balance and their respective roles as defined in the Treaties. **The European Council underlines the need for an inclusive process, with all Member States involved equally.** There should be **shared ownership by EU institutions and Member States, including their parliaments**”), however, the possibility remains that this Conference will represent an important opportunity to debate on issues and prospects for relaunching the European project.

*

The Conference key points, judging by the documents mentioned above, **all converging in highlighting the need to listen to the voice of European citizens**, focus on **two main areas**: that of **participatory democracy as a means of empowering EU citizens role** and that of **common policies at Union level**.

In both of them **the issue of citizenship assumes importance as a starting point from which to move towards the goal of a European political unity**, that is a **Union of citizens, rather than states**.

Indeed, the crisis that seems to undermine the integration process more than any other before is essentially **a crisis of EU credibility in the eyes of its citizens** and of the world in general as a **government entity capable of playing its own role as a regional power based on common policies and actions**.

This crisis of credibility is attributable to a situation in which **national states and governments formally united by the treaties continue to be disunited in terms of these policies and actions**, due to **different and conflicting interests, mutual resistance and mistrust**.

Hence **the paradox of a Europe united on paper** by the treaties, but **in fact divided and in any case mediated by the *raison d'État***: as a sort of “**united states of Europe without Europe**”, *i.e.* without the common denominator of a **politically effective Union citizenship in the forms of both representative and participatory democracy as the only true legitimation basis of a united and sovereign Europe**.