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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL**

SHAPING THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

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EUROPEAN COMMISSION CONTRIBUTION

22 January 2020

1. A NEW PUSH FOR EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY – THE TIME IS NOW

More than 200 million European citizens voted in the May 2019 European elections – the highest turnout in twenty years. This clearly shows that Europeans want a more active role in deciding what the European Union does. As digital technologies and social media fundamentally reshape political and civic participation, citizens, especially the younger generation, are demanding greater involvement in the way policies are shaped, beyond voting in elections every 5 years.

We must respond to this call.

The democratic system of the European Union is unique. It encompasses 500 million people and transcends borders. To make it even more vibrant, interactive and relevant to our citizens, we need to use new methods. President Ursula von der Leyen has pledged to do this by giving Europeans a greater say on what the Union does and how it works for them. This is the central premise behind the idea of a **Conference on the Future of Europe**.

Europe has enjoyed 10 years of continuous economic growth after years of fighting crises, more Europeans have jobs than ever before, and although some degree of euroscepticism is a reality, popular support for our Union is at one of its highest levels in almost 30 years¹. From this position of internal collective strength, we can now look forward and forge a vision for our future. **The time is ripe for a New Push for European Democracy.**

In an increasingly multipolar world, many Europeans remain concerned about their future and the European Union has to show that it can provide answers to their concerns. **European policy must help citizens and businesses benefit from the green and digital transitions.** It must address inequalities and ensure the European Union is a fair, sustainable and competitive economy. In doing so, we can show that Europe can be more assertive and promote its values and standards in the world.

As a major pan-European democratic exercise, **the Conference will be a new public forum for an open, inclusive, transparent and structured debate with citizens** around a number of key priorities and challenges. It will be a bottom-up forum, accessible to all citizens, from all walks of life, and from all corners of the Union, and **should reflect Europe's diversity**. It will be open to civil society, the European institutions and other European bodies, including the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as national, regional and local authorities, parliaments and other stakeholders – all contributing as equal partners. Ultimately, it is about strengthening the link between Europeans and the institutions that serve them.



¹ European Parliament autumn [Eurobarometer](#), December 2019.

Defining the concept, structure, scope and timing of the Conference must be a truly joint effort by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. This cooperation should take the form of a **Joint Declaration** by the three institutions, later to be opened to other signatories including institutions, organisations and stakeholders. National and regional parliaments and actors have an important role to play in the Conference and should be encouraged to hold Conference-related events. Their involvement should ensure that the Conference goes far beyond Europe's capital cities and reaches every corner of the Union.

The European Parliament and the Council are currently working on their contributions to this process. The European Parliament, in its Resolution of 15 January 2020², welcomed the proposal for a Conference on the Future of Europe, calling for an open and transparent process, which takes an inclusive, participatory and well-balanced approach towards citizens and stakeholders. The European Council, in its conclusions of 12 December 2019, underlined its interest in taking the Conference forward by asking the Croatian Presidency to begin work on the Council's position³. The Croatian Presidency has itself listed the Conference among its Presidency Priorities⁴.

This Communication is the Commission's contribution to this process.

2. AN OPEN DISCUSSION FOCUSING ON WHAT MATTERS TO CITIZENS

In order to focus the debate and allow for effective follow-up, the European Commission proposes to organise the Conference along **two parallel strands**: the first focusing on policy, and what our Union should seek to achieve, the second focusing on institutional matters.

2.1 A UNION THAT STRIVES FOR MORE

The Conference should be framed around the EU's headline ambitions, as set out in the Commission's six Political Priorities⁵ and the European Council's Strategic Agenda⁶. These include the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness and equality, Europe's digital transformation, promoting our European values, strengthening the EU's voice in the world, as well as shoring up the Union's democratic foundations. While these topics should frame the debate, they should not limit the scope of the Conference. Citizens should be free to focus on what they consider to be important.

2.2 INSTITUTIONAL MATTERS

The second strand should focus on addressing topics specifically related to democratic processes and institutional matters, notably the lead candidate system for the election of the President of the European Commission and transnational lists for elections to the European Parliament. The establishment of transnational lists would at least require changes in EU electoral law. This in turn would require a proposal by the European Parliament, adopted in

² European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0010_EN.html

³ European Council conclusions, 12 December 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41768/12-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>

⁴ https://vlada.gov.hr/UserDocsImages/Vijesti/2019/12%20prosinac/31%20prosinca/web_FINAL_PROGRAMM_E_EN_FINAL.pdf

⁵ A Union that strives for more – My agenda for Europe, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf

⁶ A new strategic agenda for the EU 2019-2024: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39914/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024.pdf>

the Council by unanimity, and the approval by the Member States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. As the Commission does not have competence in this field, its role should be that of a facilitator and honest broker between the European Parliament and the Council. In this regard, and if useful for the other institutions, the Commission stands ready to make available legal and institutional expertise, research on electoral processes and insight into inter-institutional relations.

3. CREATING THE RIGHT SPACE FOR EUROPEANS TO HAVE THEIR SAY

3.1 BUILDING ON EXPERIENCE

As a starting point, **the Conference should build on the well-established citizens' dialogues** while introducing new elements in order to increase their outreach and strengthen ways for people to shape Europe's future. The European Union should also draw on its wealth of experience in consulting citizens to ensure the Conference reaches the largest number of Europeans possible. This experience includes:

- Some 1,850 citizens' dialogues organised between 2015 and 2019, gathering 218,700 participants in 650 locations across the European Union;
- Hosting the first-ever European citizens' panel on the Future of Europe, which brought together 100 citizens from all across the Union, selected through polling experts;
- Over 900 visits by Members of the Commission to national and regional parliaments since 2014.

The Commission is already committed to significantly stepping up its outreach to citizens, notably outside the capitals. President von der Leyen has already asked each Member of her Commission to visit every Member State in the first half of their mandate. Every Member of the College should also take part in Conference-related events across Europe and engage with citizens, national, regional and local politicians and actors.

The Conference should also build on the useful experience of the EU's institutions and Member States from their active engagement with European citizens. For example, many Members of the European Parliament have engaged in citizens' dialogues and other debates in recent years. The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions have also launched major outreach initiatives. The Conference must draw from the experience of different forms of citizens' consultations and participatory democratic events, such as the citizens' assemblies organised in Member States. In this spirit, national parliaments, as well as social partners, regional and local authorities and civil society must play a fundamental role throughout the Conference.

Existing tools that allow citizens to contribute to EU policy-making should also be promoted as part of the Conference, such as the European Citizens' Initiative or the 'Have your say' public consultations⁷. Other European Union programmes such as Erasmus, DiscoverEU and the European Solidarity Corps, could also be used to promote the Conference through the dissemination of information about how to participate in the Conference on the programme-specific websites or, for example, as part of the DiscoverEU itineraries.

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say_en

3.2 TAKING CITIZENS' DIALOGUES TO THE NEXT LEVEL – NEW FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Promoting new forms of citizens' participation will increase legitimacy and trust in our Union and complement its representative democracy. The Conference must address a specific element of the citizens' dialogues, namely the connection between citizens' views and practical policy-making. This will show Europeans that their voices count.

The Commission is committed to taking the most effective actions, with the other EU institutions, to ensure that what citizens debate is translated into EU policy-making.

Issue-specific **deliberative panels**, gathering citizens and experts should meet at regular intervals throughout the Conference. These panels should hear contributions gathered in the framework of the Conference, as well as the views of stakeholders and elected representatives, with the aim of reflecting on how best to follow-up with recommendations for action. The Commission is also ready to promote broader and more decentralised deliberative panels. A 'European citizens' panel' – representative of geography, gender, age, socio-economic background and/or level of education of citizens – could meet several times during the Conference and report to the Conference with a list of proposals for recommendations.

In addition to the citizens' dialogues, **we should be open to new forms of participation.**

A **multilingual digital platform**, for example, could give permanent and easy access to the Conference. The aim of the platform would be to maximise participation, accessibility and transparency by:

- Including all documentation related to the Conference and the topics discussed;
- Livestreaming debates;
- Gathering the outcomes of debates in one place;
- Promoting other interactive ways for public debates to take place as part of the Conference.

In addition to the town-hall-style citizens' dialogue format, a wide range of other **Conference-related events should be organised by local, regional and national partners.** All institutions and civil society partners that wish to participate in the Conference should be asked to subscribe to the principles and objectives defined in the Joint Declaration.

Broader, interactive and creative forms of participation, such as sporting events or festivals, should be used, in particular to attract young people. In the same vein, Conference-related 'hackathons' could be organised to encourage innovative thinking on specific themes, as well as other initiatives to encourage people to take part in their own way. Likewise, it is important to reach the older generation and ensure traditional forms of participation are given attention.

The most important part of the process is promoting the widest possible participation and inclusion of views from across the Union. **All Europeans should be given an equal opportunity to engage** – whether young or old, whether living in rural or urban areas and whether knowledgeable about the Union or not. Reaching out to the silent majority of Europeans, empowering them and giving them the space to speak up is essential for our democracy. The diversity of Europe should consistently be reflected throughout the process with events that reach out to people, no matter where they live in Europe or what their background is. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring gender equality, the representation of minorities and persons with disabilities.

4. OUTREACH

The success of the Conference will largely depend on how effectively and widely it is communicated to Europeans. The European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission should join forces with other EU institutions and bodies, as well as with local, regional and national political representatives, institutions and stakeholders, and share the responsibility of promoting the Conference, ensuring that their actions complement and reinforce each other. The one million elected representatives at all levels in Europe are instrumental in promoting and enriching the debate in their respective constituencies.

Ambitions will need to be matched with the appropriate means. **All EU institutions should be ready to contribute resources, notably financial, for the organisation and roll-out of the Conference.**

All Members of the College will play their part in communicating the Conference, with Vice-President Šuica leading the Commission's work on the Conference, supported by Vice-President Jourová on the institutional strand, as well as Vice-President Šefčovič on the foresight and inter-institutional side. Likewise, the European Parliament and Member States could also designate points of contact to act as public faces or as ambassadors for the debate. This can increase visibility and impact at national, regional and local level.

The Conference should be easily recognisable to citizens through a single Conference identity. This should include a common visual expression that is used and applied by all partners for all activities organised under the umbrella of the Conference. The Commission proposes a comprehensive communication approach that mobilises all the institutions and their collective resources, creating synergies and maximising the Conference's impact. A joint promotion plan should be set up, with each institution sharing the responsibility for the successful outreach of the Conference.

Joint and multilingual communication efforts should have a particular but not exclusive focus on young people and digital platforms. For example, the Conference could mobilise Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps alumni, as well as other networks involving young people, to act as ambassadors for the Conference; likewise for the hundreds of thousands of people who registered with the together.eu website, who could also act as ambassadors for the Conference.

The Commission's Representations in the Member States and the European Parliament Liaison Offices will have a key role to play in raising awareness about the Conference, stimulating equal, inclusive and fair participation, coordinating the activities carried out at national and regional level and organising events and discussions under the umbrella of the Conference.

EU Networks present in the regions, and in particular Europe Direct networks, can help in stimulating and organising regional conversations. For example, the European Commission's Representations could identify a number of Europe Direct contact centres to act as regional hubs to help organise and follow the debates, liaising with regional and local authorities and organising their own engagement activities.

Social media must play a role in widening the outreach of the Conference, including through relevant multipliers, both in promoting the digital platform and in helping citizens join the debates physically or online.

Communication about the conference should be transparent, reflecting the work carried out in the context of the Conference. The multilingual digital platform will serve as the main hub for all information and activities at national and EU level. **All partners should use the**

digital platform and apply the highest transparency standards while communicating on their events.

A calendar of all Conference-related events should be made publically available via the platform, and meetings and large-scale events should be web-streamed wherever possible. Contributions and supporting materials, including clear and educational information on the issues at stake, should be published online. Particular attention will be paid to countering disinformation.

5. FOLLOWING UP ON WHAT CITIZENS SAY

A discussion of this magnitude will only be fruitful if and when it is followed up with real action and tangible results. In the Political Guidelines, President von der Leyen has therefore pledged to follow up on what is debated and agreed during the Conference. This is a key deliverable and a novelty of the Conference, which should ultimately show that participating in democracy is a constant process that thrives beyond elections.

A feedback mechanism should ensure that the ideas expressed result in concrete recommendations for future EU action. It could be specific to themes as they emerge, and could take various forms such as reporting by the Commission's Representations, opinion polls from conferences, and expert monitoring of online and social media discussions and other available data. The Commission can contribute to this process, with quarterly reports, for example. These reports should be publically available and proactively communicated. Such reports will provide valuable insights and will be closely linked to the Commission's work on foresight by identifying the social, economic and political trends that can help make European laws future-proof.

As part of the feedback mechanism, it will be important to determine how to integrate citizens' feedback into a **coherent set of recommendations**. The Commission is ready to **take into account citizens' feedback and proposals in the setting of its legislative agenda.**

6. THE TIMELINE

The Commission proposes to launch the Conference on **Europe Day – 9 May 2020**. This year will mark the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Schuman Declaration and the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. As the launch would coincide with Croatia's rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, the kick-off event could take place in Dubrovnik.

An event under each rotating Presidency of the Council could take place outside the capitals, which would underline the local nature of the Conference, as well as the Council's commitment to play an active role in it. These events would provide another opportunity to present any intermediate milestones.

In the first semester of 2022, under the French Presidency of the Council, the outcomes and recommendations of the different debates should be presented and next steps considered. **It is important that this commitment to follow-up is formalised from the very beginning of the process in the Joint Declaration.**

Concerning the institutional strand, the timeline should be determined by the upcoming 2024 European elections before which any potential changes to electoral law would need to be operational.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is becoming clearer every day that citizens want a more active role in the policy-making process, including at the EU level. This is as true for Europe as it is beyond our borders. The overarching aim of the Conference on the Future of Europe is to encourage European citizens and make it easier for them to get involved in democracy beyond the European elections. The Conference should not replace representative democracy, but serve as a means to complement and reinforce it.

The Conference cannot be a simple stocktaking exercise. It must be a way of enabling European citizens to shape EU policies. By opening up stronger and more constant communication channels for citizens, with a variety of platforms for all Europeans to have their say, we can ensure that Europe truly delivers for Europeans based on what they want.

The Conference is an opportunity for the EU to showcase how it can further evolve in future through constructive engagement with its citizens – an exercise that can inspire other parts of the world.

This Communication is the Commission's contribution for the discussion between the three institutions with the aim of determining jointly and swiftly the scope, format, structure and objectives of the Conference in a Joint Declaration. This should then be open to other signatories, including institutions, organisations and stakeholders. The wider the outreach, the better.

The Commission is convinced that a stronger partnership between European policy-makers and Europe's citizens will serve to amplify their voices and guide European policy-making in the future. Building on the momentum and success of recent outreach, now is the time to seize the opportunity and launch this truly unique debate.