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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

RESOLUTIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

INTERACTIO – REMOTE – 144TH COR PLENARY SESSION, 5.5.2021-7.5.2021**Resolution of the European Committee of the Regions on the Conference on the Future of Europe**

(2021/C 300/01)

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR)

1. fully supports the need for a broad, genuinely inclusive, transparent, geographically and politically balanced, and decentralised debate on the future of the European Union;
2. welcomes the much-awaited launch of the work associated with the Conference on the Future of Europe, despite continued challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and looks forward to contributing to the achievement of ambitious, far-reaching and lasting results with tangible benefits for all EU citizens;
3. regrets the delay in the launch of the Conference that will cause the process, designed to last two years, to be reduced to one year; urges, nevertheless, the redoubling of efforts in order to make the Conference a success of democratic participation and citizen involvement;
4. highlights that the Conference should be a process that gives a voice to all citizens, regardless of their background, age, origin or place of residence; encourages all actors to organise events and promote the digital platform among the entire society, going beyond the usual groups participating in the debates on the EU, so that it results in a fully inclusive debate;
5. takes note of the Joint Declaration signed by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission and welcomes in particular its clear references to regional and local authorities, regional parliaments and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality; reiterates its call to become a signatory to the Joint Declaration;
6. points out that there are approximately one million elected representatives at local and regional level in the EU, who work on behalf of their citizens in nearly 90 000 subnational authorities. They make up the largest level of democratic representation, are closest to citizens in the EU and are collectively responsible for half of public investment in the EU and for implementing well over half of European legislation, thus significantly contributing to the attainment of the EU's political objectives;
7. reaffirms the positions outlined in its resolution from 12 February 2020 and reiterates that most topics selected for debate during the Conference, including the climate, the environment, depopulation and the demographic challenge, health, education, culture, migration, the rule of law, digital transformation, a stronger economy and social justice, fall within the competences of regional and local authorities; therefore underlines that it will not be possible for the Conference to deliver concrete proposals unless a substantial part of these proposals emerge from active dialogue and consultations with the subnational level;

8. defends the view that the Conference should follow an open-ended approach with regard to reforming policies and institutions and pave the way for lasting reforms of the European Union, going beyond the duration of the Conference;
9. considers the Conference to be an opportunity to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to strengthen their sense of ownership in the European project through the 'European House of Democracy', with local and regional authorities as its foundations, Member States as its walls and the EU as its roof; commits to playing an active role in examining various political avenues for enhancing multilevel governance and promoting further integration in Europe in areas in which it is justified and brings added value;
10. believes that, in light of the current pandemic, it has become vital to strengthen democratic principles and the pivotal role of cities and regions in providing credible answers to people, and to emphasise the importance of working together across all levels of governance and across borders to face common challenges. This should be fully reflected in the composition and the rules of procedure of the Conference;
11. intends to play an active role in the Conference through the participation of its members in the Executive Board and as delegates in the Conference's plenary deliberations; commits to providing thematic input to the Conference on matters of key concern for local and regional authorities, including through a number of local citizens' dialogues that the CoR will organise throughout the EU; calls for the participation of young people and of people representing the diversity of our societies as a prerequisite to holding comprehensive discussions;
12. considers that the Conference plenary should be built on solid democratic foundations and should therefore include among its members an appropriate number of representatives of regional and local parliaments and councils, alongside their counterparts from the European Parliament and national parliaments; underlines the need for a geographical, political and gender-balanced representation in the Conference;
13. underlines the need to step up administrative efforts to include, in the debate of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the voice of the EU's outermost regions, whose circumstances are unique and specific within the EU and which can act as spearheads for the EU in other continents;
14. welcomes the launch of the multilingual digital platform for the Conference on the Future of Europe and commits to promoting and contributing to it by organising participatory dialogues and delivering relevant feedback; encourages local and regional authorities to disseminate the platform among their citizens and to promote the participation of the entire society, regardless of background, origin or place of residence;
15. considers that all kind of views about the EU and its future need to be represented, both in the events and in the digital platform, to have a Conference that can be considered as a truly democratic process; points out, however, that minimum values must be respected and that among these views, those which go against human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, either involving abusive, defamatory, hateful or racist statements or statements contrary to public order, should not be allowed; organisers and participants should commit to respecting these values at all times;
16. notes that the CoR has already started organising debates in its plenary sessions and commission meetings, and adopting opinions on topics relevant to the Conference's work. Furthermore, major CoR events — such as the EU Week of Regions and Cities, the annual EuroPCom Conference and local and regional citizens' dialogues and consultations, as well as events organised by the Committee's political groups — will be focused on the Conference;
17. underlines the need to redouble efforts at all administrative levels to include in the Conference of the Future of Europe debate the voice of areas that suffer from serious and permanent natural or demographic disadvantages, such as sparsely populated areas, island territories, cross-border regions, or mountain regions;
18. highlights its ongoing initiative to consult citizens through local and regional dialogues hosted by CoR members, with a series of successful events already conducted before the launch of the Conference. These events facilitate citizens' interaction with politicians across all levels of government and demonstrate that the debate on the direction in which the European Union is heading matters significantly to Europe's regions and cities;

19. recalls that the Conference needs to reach every area of Europe, urban and rural; underlines the fundamental role that subnational levels might play in ensuring the Conference's debates arrive in rural areas and in allowing their specified needs to also be considered;
20. values inter-institutional cooperation and increased synergies in the roll-out of such activities and will facilitate other outreach activities by cooperating with its partners, such as: regional parliaments through the Conference of Regional Legislative Assemblies of Europe (CALRE), the RLEG initiative promoted by a group of regions with legislative powers, the RegHub network and the Cohesion Alliance network, young elected politicians through its own dedicated programme, regional and local politicians in charge of the Europe Direct centres and the 'Building Europe with Local Entities' (BELE) pilot project;
21. will continue to strengthen its cooperation with European and national associations of local and regional authorities, with communities of stakeholders from regions and cities, with the second chambers of national parliaments, and with other actors;
22. commits to increasing the Conference's impact and outreach, and to promoting and using innovative forms of participatory democracy. Local and regional authorities have a proven record in feeding citizens' input into the political decision-making process; calls on the Member States to actively shape the conference at national level and to ensure the involvement of local and regional authorities. It is crucial that they join the debate and reflection, enlisting the support of citizens in their territories, so that their voice is heard and their expectations are reflected in the political decision-making process;
23. calls for the establishment of a permanent European dialogue with citizens to strengthen democracy at all levels of government and to encourage citizens' participation and ownership of the EU project, as stipulated in its opinion *Local and Regional Authorities in the permanent dialogue with citizens*⁽¹⁾, adopted in October 2020; considers that citizens' dialogues should not be a one-way communication exercise, but should feed into EU policy-making;
24. underlines that the follow-up to citizens' contributions, and in particular the final recommendations of the Conference, are as important as the method of input; stresses that this follow-up should be carried out in a coordinated and inclusive manner, and should also fully involve the CoR; further considers that the Conference should be granted sufficient time to present concrete proposals for improving the EU's institutional framework and making it future-proof; recognises that, as much as the Conference can gain public trust, it can also lose that trust if the promise of delivery and inclusiveness of views expressed is not kept; insists that the success of the Conference will ultimately lie in the fact that citizens note that their voices have been listened to and that they have contributed to shaping the future of the EU;
25. stresses that, in order to support its political and institutional mission, for the duration of the Conference, the CoR has set up a High-Level Group on European Democracy⁽²⁾, chaired by former European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, which will stimulate discussions about the CoR's vision of European democracy from the subnational governmental perspective and on how to reinforce the impact and influence of local and regional authorities and the CoR in the European decision-making process;
26. looks forward to working with the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU and to presenting local and regional authorities' contributions to the EU's future at the 9th European Summit of Regions and Cities, to be held during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU;
27. instructs its President to forward this resolution to the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council and the Presidency of the Council.

Brussels, 7 May 2021.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽¹⁾ CDR 4989/2019.

⁽²⁾ The High-Level Group is chaired by President Emeritus of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and comprises six other members: former European Commissioners Joaquín Almunia and Androulla Vassiliou, former Members of the European Parliament Rebecca Harms and Maria João Rodrigues, the President of the European Youth Forum, Silja Markkula, and Tomasz Grosse, Professor of the University of Warsaw.