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„The Conference on the Future of Europe needs to fortify pro-European public opinion”

Spinelli Group MEPS discussing the Conference on the Future of Europe with federalist and pro-European national Parliaments

Spinelli Group Plenary Session

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We are on the eve of launching the multilingual digital platform and this is an important event to be welcomed on Monday. On the other hand, I am preoccupied that the date for the first meeting of the Conference plenary is now being delayed from 10 of May as previously envisaged, to June. We should be careful not to lose the momentum and to keep citizens waiting more!

On Tuesday, Commissioner Suica gave a presentation in AFCD of the multilingual digital platform. Under the slogan "*The Future is in Your Hands: Make Your Voice Heard*", the platform will allow citizens to start organizing events and contribute with opinions and engage with topics of their interest. It will be the Conference's central hub, where all contributions will be brought together and shared, including decentralised events, the European Citizens' Panels and Conference Plenaries.

A specialised feedback mechanism will aggregate and analyse key points raised, so that they can also be taken into account during the European Citizens' panels and Conference Plenaries. The platform will also provide information on the Conference's structure and work, as well as resources for event organisers including a catalogue of key events through which they will be able to promote their initiatives at local, regional, national, and European levels. Citizens will easily be able to look up events in which they wish to participate thanks to an events map.

We should already think of the events that should be organised as soon as the platform is launched. Pro-European forces have to take the initiative in starting the EU-wide dialogue. We already have the network and on Monday we will receive the necessary tools to kick start the Conference. We must not let populists and nationalists take over the Conference.

Unfortunately, I am afraid that the eurosceptics are much better mobilized to take advantage of any means available, including the digital platform, to hijack the agenda and put their message forward in a forceful way that would give an impression that the citizens of Europe support their vision of Europe. This danger is underappreciated.

The communication with citizens will be crucial - we need to make them aware of the multilingual platform and encourage them to take part in the events and discussions. This is our role as representatives elected by the citizens - both in national parliaments and in the European Parliament. This is why we should use all of the possible means - social media, our websites, traditional media and even paper letters to make the people aware of how they can contribute to these unprecedented democratic public consultations.

Pro-European citizens have chosen all of us to represent them and it is our job to make sure that their voice is heard. We need to join forces on the EU and the national level and engage with our constituencies and strengthen the voice of Europeans in this debate. Their ideas and initiatives must cut through the wall of Eurosceptic governments and other members of the Conference plenary wanting to keep the status quo and avoid any changes.

Social media, webinars but also public opinion surveys clearly show citizens' attachment to a Europe that cares about its citizens and remains open to the world. Today's citizens want to be more directly involved in policy making, political discussions and decision-making. And in order to ensure that it remains strong in future, democracy must react to changes in society and address citizens' expectations. But Europeans are getting tired of waiting and we have to provide them with concrete proposals before the hope turns into a mistrust. This Spinelli forum is a perfect opportunity to think of these proposals and how to implement them effectively.

We must not forget that at every stage of the Conference the discussions have to be as inclusive as possible. We need to listen to the voice of citizens from the entire EU territory, from the smallest remote local communities to the most cosmopolitan city. This means that we need to organize events, face-to-face assemblies of citizens representing European diversity. At the beginning we have to focus on organising and widely promoting the online events. Subsequently, the physical or hybrid meetings should be convened in high schools, universities, libraries or even town halls.

The whole process should not lose its dimension of 'citizen joy', especially in pandemic time we need the joy that comes from encountering other people. If the panels will be not only online, but also with personal participation – there should be some cultural events accompanying it, that would give people a modicum of normality in these abnormal times.

The process of preparing the Conference activities has to be transparent and there must be a clear plan regarding the allocation of Citizens' Panels in terms of geographical, age and other balances. They should be structured, but not to the point of overstructuring that would strangulate the idea of free exchange of ideas. We cannot lose the sense of direction: this is a bottom-up process, not the other way around.

The Plenary should be a condenser of all the received proposals. We cannot allow a situation in which members of the plenary are just cherry-picking the ideas which

they consider useful. Citizens input should result in inclusive transmission of recommendations for implementation by the institutions.

If needed we must become a transmitter and 'condenser' of citizens' recommendations and ideas for the future EU.

Some political forces are trying to preempt the agenda of the Conference. We cannot allow only politicians to determine what the CoFE will be about. This is our responsibility to ensure that the voice of citizens will set the strategic orientation of the Conference's agenda. Under no circumstances shall we agree to let the institutions capture this democratic exercise. If we will not succeed, this may result in a complete loss of citizens' trust towards the EU.

The EU's democratic legitimacy needs to be continually re-established and created and this is why the EU depends on the support of their citizens, even more than the member states.

The outcome of the Conference cannot and should not just be a report to the European Council. The Conference is an all-inclusive debate, whose result should fully reflect contributions from all stakeholders that have been invited to provide feedback to the Conference

The outcome of the Conference should be in line with the mandate that all of us have received from citizens. Their feedback should be a part of the conclusions of the Conference. If there is general support for legislative initiatives or Treaty changes, then this mandate should lead to concrete action on European level.

On the other hand, we also have to find the way to keep the Conference discourse within the rational bounds and not allow those who want to destroy Europe to have a substantial influence, especially on the recommendation that would be funneled to the Plenary.

The basic political issue concerning CoFE is whether the Conference will fortify a strong current of pro-European, pro-democratic public opinion in areas where governments are to different levels either strongly Eurosceptic or opportunistically leaning in this direction. The Conference will allow citizens of such states or regions to be heard across Europe.

We clearly see that there are empty spaces in Europe's capacity to act which can be again captured by anti-European populists. That is why this Conference and direct engagement of citizens is so important.