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**“Citizens’ perspective as the crucial element
of the Conference on the future of Europe”**

**Keynote speech at the panel discussion of European Movement UK
"Conference on the Future of Europe and how people in the UK can
contribute"**

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First of all, let me say that it is such a great pleasure to see many faces I haven't seen for a while. And to see you interest in the European Union future. And thank you for not floating away.

We all have our own perspectives regarding the whole process of the Conference on the future of Europe. We focus on outcome. There are uncertainties; we have worries and hopes about the outcome.

Important as the outcome is, and the follow up as well, I think we should do everything to fully use the added values that can be potentially created by the process as such.

My hope is that the process, the way the Conference will develop will open a real democratic space for citizens’ engagement.

May another hope is that the Conference will not only become a place to seek pragmatic solutions to post pandemic Europe, but also to defend democracy and fundamental values in which our being together has been deeply rooted. There is a chance that our dialogue will fortify a strong current of pro-European pro-democratic public opinion.

This Conference is a chance to hear voices different from those of governments or political parties. Different from those that focus on a blame game, pointing to weaknesses and inefficiencies of Europe skilfully used to build often anti-European political capital. Voices different than voices of veto, rejecting European values and rule of law.

Hearing real voices of citizens is of particular importance now when we Europe and its citizens suffer from what we have witnessed for a while now, which is a cynical turn toward illiberal democracy in some parts of Europe. It is wrong to assume that we can manage it somehow. We must stop this turn. Only citizens can do it. European elections of 2019, experience of pandemics have shown citizens’ commitments to Europe. Even though across Europe we have seen similar concerns

on climate and rule of law, the Conference is a chance for citizens to reach out directly to other citizens with their message about Europe.

For politicians, institutions and us it is a chance to hear voices of all citizens, from all member states and also from European neighbourhood. That is why meeting like ours are so important. I hope that European Movement in UK, with your long tradition and commitment will bring the voices of citizens who continue to have Europe in their hearts and minds and who know that unites us on both sides of the Channel is much stronger than what might divide us, in particular if encouraged by political interests.

Conference is also a chance for young generation to engage within their local constituencies and across any border in their first ever debate on Europe of tomorrow.

I am often asked why now, why this in many ways unprecedented debate is taking place now.

We all know that European integration has always been a process of change, mostly of small systematic changes but from time to time, the European integration needed to make a big step forward. This big, strategic change always required brave decisions, common reflection and debate, a road map was designed. When we wanted to have single market developed or when we decided to have a common currency, we always had debates, road maps, implementation reports.

Last time Europe offered itself a big debating was the Convention on the future of the European Union, nearly two decades ago. Intergovernmental Conference followed and prepared a new treaty, Constitution of Europe, signed in Rome on 29 October 2004 and then unfortunately rejected by citizens of two member states.

Today, twenty years after the Convention we have established a new framework for the debate about the future.

It is legitimate to ask why we need this debate.

Since the time of Convention, the EU has changed dramatically. The world has accelerated its path of change and the current geopolitical landscape brings entirely new challenges. Well known challenges do not respect national borders. I think here of climate, migration, digital transformation, pandemics. If you add geopolitical environment to it, it becomes clear that we need a more assertive and more efficient and effective Europe in the global context.

But internally, within the EU, there are also largely unknown previously challenges like unprecedented threats to democratic foundation of the integration, to European values and rule of law. With the UK leaving the Union, we need to confirm European guarantees and gather around a much bigger than twenty years ago table of European unity. And, last but not least, the civic dimension of the Union has grown in importance enormously.

Lisbon Treaty has introduced the notion of the community of citizens, adding it to the community of states. But it did not grant it practical power. It is also true that there

are European leaders who have not yet digested the civic dimension of European integration. They tend to see the political role of citizens as a threat to the representative democracy. But I hope that it should not be a surprise that European democracy, systemically a representative democracy can benefit from flourishing participatory, deliberative democracy.

Politicians come and go, they are biased toward national interests, some of them during their political existence never manage to grasp the importance of common European interests.

Citizens' perspective is different. Citizens of various generations, but especially young ones, look beyond national interest, they look beyond Europe fragmented by national borders. They feel more easily citizens of Europe combining it with their local roots, local belonging. For them a hyphenated identity is natural.

Today to fight effectively against anti-European jingoism we need citizens to speak. We want them to speak in the framework of the Conference on the future of Europe. Its success depends on citizens' engagement. Yesterday, Vice President of the European Commission, Maroš Ševcovič told us in the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament that we have 25 thousand daily visitors on the multilingual platform of the Conference, and so far 400000 page views, 10000 participants registered, 3300 new ideas and 10000 endorsement of those. This is just the beginning.

And if you look at issues people want to discuss, it does not come as surprise to anybody that the most discussed topics are climate and democracy. These are issues, which were shared across Europe during 2019 European elections. At that time, it made me think that European demos was emerging from below.

And when we say that Europe is in your hands we actually hope that it is also in your heart and mind. Europe is about understanding and it is about emotion.

We do not start citizens' engagement in reflection and action on Europe now, with this Conference. Citizens' conventions, citizens' dialogue have taken place for years now. Therefore, indeed we are not starting from scratch. We have built for years a critical mass of citizens' engagement. True there is still long way to go. We also have had for a decade the experience with European Citizens Initiative. We know what works and what does not. We also know what issues people are interested in. However, we will look together for solutions to issues that hurt, that give hope or require direct involvement. Finding together solutions is what this Conference is about.

I personally hope that the system we proposed for the Conference will not generate political filters, that would limit debating or views that true nature of the panel system will be kept, that channels for communicating between different levels of debate will function.

I hope that treaty change, if needed, will not be stopped on the ground of the argument traditionally abused by politicians, which goes "citizens do not want treaty change". It is good that treaty change taboo is gone and the ideas in our debates

cannot only cover areas where EU has competences but also areas, which benefit citizens.

For years now, we know what people care for. It is climate, access to digital transformation, solidarity, democracy and rule of law, security and global openness.

So it is easy to envisage that what will come out from debates will be a Europe fit for the future, democratic, climate friendly, conducive to innovation, competitive, socially sensitive, globally meaningful.

Debates will take place through the multilingual platform from any place, libraries, schools, panels, European and national, there will be plenary meetings. We will need experts to help us with panel debates. The scope and scale of challenge is impressive. Except for European elections, we are beginning the biggest ever consultations of citizens on matters having impact on their life. The platform, which is a kind of social media framework, will be not only a place to register and participate but also a big inventory of ideas. Citizens will meet politicians at all, levels of debate, also in the plenary framework. We will be trying to build consensus on what should have a follow up taking Europe forward. A lot is in our hands. There are also risks to this unprecedented exercise. We can all fail but we cannot afford to fail. This is based on trust and responsibility of all those involved. We are all citizens but some of us have greater responsibility for Europe that delivers. Europe will need competences, budgets, executive capacity but also accountability and democracy. And emotions.