

Professor Danuta Hübner

„The potential of the Conference on the Future of Europe cannot go to waste”

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It would be a great political mistake to accept the Conference on the Future of Europe as a one off event, with a certain framework of longevity followed by moving back to the business as usual.

I believe that the European Union as a men-and-women-made democratic construct needs a stronger deliberative dimension which in my view would strengthen our representative democracy and not undermine it, as some politicians worry.

I also believe that we should look at the Conference in a wider evolutionary context of the emergence of a European *demos*. COFE has been opening too many doors to see them shut.

On the *demos*, let me say that it has been a long standing dream of some Europeans – but it is obvious that you cannot build it from above or jump straight of the stage of non-*demos* to the stage of *demos*.

European *demos* can come into being only after a certain work is done.

To see it emerge from below we need to create as wide as possible space for deliberation in Europe on Europe, with multiple stakeholders, with different platforms for engagement responding to the nature of stakeholders.

Conference on the Future of Europe, an unprecedented process of the biggest ever public consultation, or if you wish a dialogue about Europe, can contribute to reaching that goal.

Conference has a multilayered, perhaps a bit complex structure, but it encompasses various modes of involvement, from a relatively loose one, in the form of a Multilingual Digital Platform, where everybody can say what they want, via a more structured one in the form of the Citizen Panels, through working groups where all stakeholders of Europe get together for focused discussions, to a politically obliging Plenary, charged with preparing the recommendations for change.

This is thus a meaningful combination of “soft” and „hard” elements, with certain level of expected commitment and with mixed representation of stakeholders.

I see it as an innovative form of organizing deliberative space that can rejuvenate the EU discourse in itself and reinforce a pro European public opinion.

The process of the Conference itself has a huge value added. It is not only outcome that matters.

The Conference is a great opportunity that cannot go to waste.

But there are challenges.

We can end up with a cacophony of ideas.

The pandemic is not gone. It has already derailed the most ambitious plan to make the Conference a totally immersive experience, done in person at every stage, with expansive program of events, including cultural ones. The formula of the Conference had to be scaled down in its scope.

Due to the fact that the pandemic is probably going to stay with us for some time, some exhaustion may set in, bringing the temptation to finish this exercise with the official end of the Conference rather soon, most likely by the end of the French presidency.

But we should not blame pandemic for lack of political will. And we definitely need political will of the Council to avoid missing the opportunity.

I personally think that as Conference grows, its potential becomes more even more visible.

I see that the more the citizens taste the power of their engagement during Citizen Panels, the more committed they seem to be.

Especially the Panels have awakened a dormant potential among the people, the appetite to really have a say in the European affairs.

Thus, we should not give in to the temptation to make the Conference a one off event and discontinue it after the French presidency.

There is no reason not to commit ourselves seriously to make some sort of Citizens Assembly a permanent mechanism in the structure of the EU decision making.

I must say that I am greatly impressed by the quality of debate in the panels. The last two ones, in Florence in December and in Natolin in January voted their often far reaching recommendations to be forwarded to the Conference Plenary.

The Natolin recommendations on the health and environment put these issues in the holistic context including for example, making production of food a matter of public education, to increase the level of consciousness in society.

They also include the proposal of developing a Common European Charter on environmental issues, point to the need of more financial investment to explore eco-friendly sources of energy. The coercion coupled with reward system to tackle pollution is also proposed. And in health care, a European standardization is on the table.

All these proposals bear directly on the competences of states – and here, the optimistic thing is, that within the framework of the Conference the states will have to react to them.

The scope of the recommendations shows that the citizens really want to exercise their power granted by the Conference mandate. And the pressure on the states is to be welcomed.

The Florence Panel, on “European democracy/values, rights, rule of law, security” came with a recommendation favored by 88.81 percent of the citizens, with a threshold of 70 percent, which says: “We recommend that the conditionality regulation (2020/2092, adopted on 16 December 2020) is amended so that it applies to all breaches of the rule of law rather than only to breaches affecting the EU budget”.

And another recommendation, that obtained 73.57percent of the votes, reopens the discussion about the constitution of Europe. Citizens should be able to vote on the creation of such a constitution. The process of creation of such a constitution should consider previous efforts that never materialized to a constitution.

And, as a sort of an icing on a cake, there is this from Florence:

“We recommend that the European Union holds Citizen’s Assemblies. We strongly recommend that they are developed through a legally binding and compulsory law or regulation. The citizens’ assemblies should be held every 12-18 months. The EU must ensure the commitment of politicians to citizens’ decisions taken in Citizens’ assemblies. In case citizens’ proposals are ignored or explicitly rejected, EU institutions must be accountable for it, justifying the reasons why this decision was made”.

They are not wishy/washy recommendations. They are very straightforward and very brave. If enacted, they have a potential of bringing a real change to the link between the Union and the citizens.

I think that the Citizens Panels output thus far supports the observation of Alberto Alemanno that "The Conference on the Future of Europe marks the first explicit admission that [citizens] – not the Member States or the EU institutions – are the EU’s ultimate source of authority and legitimacy.”.

The Conference is a certain „rite of passage” to a new form of the EU. And we should draw appropriate conclusions from this development