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The Conference is not only about its outcome

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Many stories can be told when it comes to the question of what was at the beginning of the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe. There are changes of long duration that led to official inauguration on the 9 of May 2021. My story would start with enlargements. I think we had seven of them. And it was clear that the bigger the Union was the more important it was to bring the Union and citizens closer together. New democracies started to join. Each enlargement brought different histories, needs and dreams. For decades the Union invested in better communication. Treaties strengthened the meaning of European citizenship. In particular, after the Lisbon Treaty entered into effect the European Union has become a union of citizens and not only a union of states.

I have always believed that every generation has the right and duty to ask why we need an integrated Europe, what is it for. But our last big dialogue about the future of Europe took place twenty years ago with the European Convention. And the last decade brought more challenges that do not recognize borders and can be best addressed at European level. I think here not only about climate change, migration, security but also those challenges trade and financial market related. Globalization lifted millions from poverty but exacerbated inequalities. European Union had been reacting to emerging challenges through small, daily policy steps and, from time to time, big milestone decisions.

Far too often lack of political will led to doing too little and too late, leaving unfinished businesses in a number of areas, including for example the EMU architecture and economic reforms. The ambition of building economically competitive Union, socially sensitive, climate friendly, resilient globally and autonomous in decision making still requires ambition and persistence in planning and acting.

And for this ambition the more united Europe, the deeper the citizens' feeling of ownership of Europe the bigger the chance of success.

The European Union is a democratic construct. The state must be a functioning democracy to join the Union. We all remember the cases of Spain and Portugal that were able to join after the dictatorships had been gone. The Central and Eastern Europe had to wait much longer on the other side of the river when the western part of our continent had integrated. Fortunately the door stayed ajar, citizens decided on transition to market economy and democracy and made it a reality.

All European citizens, since 1979, elect their representatives to the European Parliament. Political culture is based on representative democracy and the members of the European Parliament represent today all citizens of the European Union. But the last decades have proven that representative democracy can benefit from empowerment of citizens, from functioning participatory democracy. Its elements have been present in our system for years. It we have also developed many additional elements of democracy in the way we make our decisions. I am thinking here about the transparency, that allows all stakeholders of the integration processes, including civic society organizations, to influence the decision making process, proportionality in law making, impact assessment of legislative proposals, public consultations of all legislative proposals, European Citizens Initiative.

The idea of the Conference was seen by many of us as an opportunity of having an unprecedented public consultations on the future of Europe. There had been a risk of having nothing more than a cacophony of ideas and disagreements but there had also been a chance of finding a consensus about the future of our common place on earth and maybe even finding a way to establish a permanent mechanism for citizens' participation in European decision making.

Pandemic delayed the start of our reflection. In 2020 it was hard to imagine such a dialogue online only. But it worked. Presencial meetings possibilities have gradually grown. And so was the real engagement of citizens. It was pleasure to see that with time passing the engagement strengthened. And what came as surprise that there was not a moment when citizens would speak national interests line. They spoke about European interest.

It became very quickly obvious that this Conference was not only about its outcome, important as it is and will be, but that the Conference process as such had a huge value added.

In parallel, we could see European citizens on the streets of Europe during the 2019 European elections demonstrating support for climate protecting policies and European values on which the integration has been built. These concerns have been raised across the Union in a bottom up process. One could have the impression that the European demos has started to emerge from below. It had become clear that representative democracy can be strengthened by participatory democracy. In the years before the elections the intensity of public dialogue between European institutions and citizens had grown. Hundreds if not thousands of meetings, organized by European movements, academia, national and European institutions took place.

The citizen convention idea was launched by President Emanuel Macron, supported by the incoming President of the European Commission, and strongly endorsed in resolutions by the European Parliament.

Growing European expectations of citizens, reflected in the Euro barometer surveys clearly demonstrated that citizens are bolder in their European ambitions than national politicians, that their national perspectives do not blur their European expectations, that they feel good with their hyphenated identity.

When we finally started the debate in the mid of pandemic awareness of how much unity matters has skyrocketed and then the war added new layer of common concerns and responsibilities.

But the start of the Conference was not at all politically painless.

Looking at the whole event from today's perspective I would say we achieved more than it could have been expected. We are clearly seeing a set of citizens' recommendations enriched by joined discussions within the Working Groups where other so called complements, the European institutions, national parliaments, civil society movements had the opportunity to add their perspective to citizens recommendations. The pen has stayed through the whole process in citizens hands and the idea of establishing a mechanism that would allow citizens in a permanent way to have a say in the European process of decision making. From that

perspective the Conference as a common dialogue on Europe has a meaningful value which must not be wasted. Indeed, the Conference is not only about its outcome, important as it is. Institutionalizing this dialogue is finds, Engel for shaping European democracy.

We could see the approach of citizens to a common European interest, their perspective not limited by national interest, their approach to hyphenated identity, their boldness and growing engagement could be admired.

In my view, the whole process was an opportunity to understand how difficult the decision making, based on bringing together twenty seven member states and 450 million citizens, can be.

We could also watch how participants could gradually broaden up their perspectives recognizing that everything is linked with everything else, how important a holistic approach to our future is and that both technical and political dimensions matter. The Conference has been based on non preempting assumption, nothing was excluded from the debate, no conclusion was imposed from above, it was a fully fledged bottom up process. The four citizens panels, organized around broad issues like economy, social justice, culture, democracy and values, climate change and health, migration and Europe in the world produced 178 recommendations. Among other they included the right to affordable energy, minimum social standards and internet, protection of of fundamental rights, rule of law and democracy, adding health to shared competences, expanding research, meaningful reduction of unanimity voting, strategic approach and importance of enlargement, strengthening the use of international trade as a credible soft power of Europe and empowering the Union for its effective global role. Around ten of recommendations might require a treaty change.

The aggression of Russia and the insane and full of atrocities war has made the Conference a defining moment. A new perspective on the importance of enlargement has emerged, security and defense policy, in particular also effectiveness of decisions in the CFSP, reducing dependencies in critical areas like energy and supply chains, rebalancing toward greater autonomy without undermining the openness of the Union.

Clearly the war has added to the appreciation of values and unity among states and citizens. It proved also how important has been the capacity to build international

alliances of like minded democratic states around the world. The geopolitical Union has been born.