

CHAPTER 6

The Conference on the Future of Europe and its impact on the current legislative term for and by citizens

“We keep a close eye on you! Europe is too precious to leave it only to politicians.” Here is a straightforward message from Jitka from Slovakia to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

But how can you make sure that citizens are actually involved? As Aneta, a representative from a Slovak NGO thinks that many down-to-earth citizen proposals need to be tabled at the Conference platform. Macro-regional structures and programmes should also be used to inject specific proposals to the Conference process.

As for communication tools reaching out to citizens in the debate about the future of Europe, Slovenian civil society organisations present quite ‘trendy’ suggestions: social networks, live Q&A sessions, vlogging, involving influencers with many followers, web gamification techniques, funny and educative quizzes, virtual reality. It is important to note that fun tools can be used for the most serious topics as well.

Katalin, a Hungarian NGO activist would use webinars to involve partner organisations. They underline that smaller civil society organisations should also be invited to take part in the preparatory process.

“Avoid the need to register on the participant website before being able to answer, use different languages, avoid EU bubble jargon that only people in Brussels speak, make the website more intuitive, giving the impression that voices will be heard.” These useful tips come from a Belgian colleague, Marie.

Unfortunately, the name ‘The Conference on the Future of Europe’ is quite remindful of the well-known EU jargon and its long, complex procedures do not make this event more attractive either. It remains to be seen whether the 3 EU institutions – with diverging interests – will in fact find a way to make the Union more citizen-focused with the assistance of the Conference.

Giving the floor to local people is just not enough. As Kurt, an NGO representative from Denmark warns, when you involve citizens, you have to be committed to their involvement. “It should not be only to legitimize existing policies. The proposals should be received with an open mind.” The citizens involved must be told what they can expect – if it is unclear, they can be easily disappointed.

What topics should be discussed to keep European citizens on board during the Conference? Igor from Ukraine mentions nature conservation and restoration, peace and security in Europe, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Stefano, an Italian colleague adds: “Developing a vision for post-Covid-19 Europe is essential, especially with the Conference on the Future of Europe coming soon. We believe now is the perfect time to reflect on the EU and analyse it.” In addition, more attention to a sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyle will translate into better life prospects, better quality of life, both for present and future generations.

“We ordinary people of the EU expect that European countries will become leaders and will show a personal example of combating climate change. Europe without coal would be the first step. Social integrity in societies would be the next factor for the successful future of Europe.” This is what Vitas from Lithuania expects from the Conference.

A Serbian representative, Stanka says: “Please find ways and space to listen to the citizens’ voice from the Western Balkans.” According to Aleksandar from Macedonia, the EU must

remind itself of its core values and stick to them (rule of law, justice, non-discrimination, self-determination), as well as make Member States respect them.

Civil society organisations must be included in almost every step of the Conference Sessions, writes a German NGO. There should also be spokespersons from the CSOs whom you can contact at any stage.

Video and web conferencing are helpful tools that Iva from Croatia recommends. Another Croatian, Pejo says that communication “should be mostly based on social networks because it gathers the largest number of young people, especially on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Young people, but also everyone else, spend hours watching contents on these platforms. In addition to all this, public debates, panels and round tables related to burning issues in Europe should be organised because this way everyone can express their opinions and point to problems affecting individuals and the community.”

All these ideas might result in a situation where macro-regionalism becomes one of the flagship projects of the Conference radiating a genuine European message to citizens.

Whatever the outcome of the Conference will be, EU institutions need to make sure that its conclusions become reality indeed. Making citizens disappointed is the last thing that European leaders would like to do with the 2024 EP elections on the horizon.

Specific suggestions

- Integrating more citizens' organisations in the decision-making processes related to the Conference (NN, Poland)
- Every participant of the Conference must have a “shadow” from a civil society organisation (expert on one specific issue of the Conference) and talk with this person beforehand. The findings should be made visible during the Conference by the participant in her/his words so that the opinion can enrich the Conference. (Hannes, Austria)
- Try to avoid members of political parties, the Conference is better with members from the broad civil society NGOs. The participation should be diverse. (Kurt, Denmark)
- The ongoing online platform of the Conference should be kept operational after the Conference. This would give citizens, representative associations and civil society the possibility to monitor the follow-ups of the Conference and react to the proposals. (Virgilio, Italy)
- Lobby from the proposals emerging from the citizens' panels. They should not be lost in the cacophony of conflictive ideas and interests. (Laszlo, Hungary)

Additional quotes

“Get into the dialogue but also get into doing. Talking and acting, both!” (Stefan, Germany)

“We need to keep advocating for the outcome of the Conference to be totally open in terms of possible new policies and Treaty revisions.” (Erasmus, Italy)

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