

HELMUT SCHOLZ

# „THE FUTURE LIES IN YOUR HANDS“

## THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE (#COFOE) KICKS OFF



**A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE OF DIRECTION FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION REQUIRES A TRULY PROACTIVE APPROACH AND A CONCERTED EFFORT ON EVERYONE'S PART: LET'S SEIZE THE DAY – RIGHT NOW!**

On 18 and 19 June 2021, the first Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) held its inaugural consultation, an event which marked the start proper of the CoFoE's work. In all, 450 representatives of the various institutional players involved in the Lisbon Treaty came together in Strasbourg – some in person, others remotely (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) – to discuss how best to approach this challenging and complex process.

The CoFoE ([futureu.europa.eu](https://futureu.europa.eu)) finally got under way in Strasbourg on 9 May 2021 (Europe Day), a year later than originally planned. When she first addressed the European Parliament (EP) in summer 2019, immediately after the EP elections, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised the newly-elected MEPs a wide-reaching debate on the EU's future under the slogan A new push for European democracy, and to set up a conference designed to give political actors, civil society and ordinary citizens alike a platform to re-evaluate European integration, with reforms and even treaty amendments being on the table.

This change in direction towards looking to the future and making a public commitment to a ground-breaking, wide-reaching and open debate in which citizens of the 27 EU Member States could have their say was an attempt to win approval for the newly-installed European Commission. It was a bold undertaking to make: this European Commission had once again been appointed behind closed doors by the heads of government of the EU-27. EU citizens' voices had been sidelined, despite the fact that they had cast their votes for the lead candidates (*Spitzenkandidat\*innen*) put up by the various parliamentary groups, clearly delivering a further blow to public confidence in politics and democracy in the EU.

The European Parliament responded positively to this message: as the only directly elected EU institution, it pushed for all those participating in the CoFoE to do so on an equal footing, and led the way in setting out an intensive programme of preparatory work.

## **I BECOMES WE: INDIVIDUAL MEMBER STATES WORKING TOGETHER**

Like so many things during the pandemic, though, what had originally been envisaged as a two-year project stalled due to the first coronavirus lockdown. People quite rightly expected swift, firm action from the EU to combat the pandemic, but moving from a somewhat egocentric approach rooted in individual Member States' self-interest to one characterised by a collective resolve took an excruciatingly long time. The lack of a clear initial position from which to launch into a pan-European debate was coupled with the resonant urgency of a profound understanding of where to go next for the EU. To make matters worse, the many high-profile events which had been organised were unable to go ahead because of the pandemic. The situation exposed the substantially differing and opposing views of the CoFoE's three constituent EU institutions – and thus within and between the individual Member States – as regards the issues the conference should address, the goals it ought to set out to achieve and even its format. The launch date was postponed to an unspecified later date.

As it turned out, though, this delay may have been helpful in clarifying the varying initial positions and objectives of the Council, Commission and Parliament, as well as drilling down, at the preparatory stage, into the format the CoFoE should take and putting in place internal processes to clarify matters. There were varying levels of commitment to the idea, with, despite what they claimed, neither Croatia nor Germany being able – or indeed inclined – to promote a common understanding of the CoFoE during their respective European Council Presidencies. However, many European and pan-European networks, NGOs and trade unions, as well as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) had begun addressing in earnest what the CoFoE's goals and tasks should be, and outlining their own expectations and positions: the future debate should, they felt, not just be fruitless citizen-consultations in a different guise; rather, a citizen-based conference should involve people from every corner of each EU Member State, from

different social and vocational backgrounds, of different ages and, of course, should be gender-balanced. It should also be an opportunity for people to engage with representatives of the various EU institutions on EU politics and on how the EU works.

## **THE MAJOR CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME**

The 10 years of austerity in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-2010, and the increasing erosion – and indeed replacement – of the Community method it brought with it, and the attendant pressure on intergovernmental negotiating processes to reach compromises has left cracks in the model of European integration. Trust and confidence in politics and democracy is dwindling ever more rapidly. Member States' inability – or rather their unwillingness, and, in turn, that of the EU – to formulate and implement workable solidarity-based solutions to deal with the ever-growing number of refugees was and is the last straw. In addition, climate change, high-tech upheaval in science and industry brought about by digitalisation, and the wide-reaching structural changes this has set in motion for our governmental, economic and social systems demand a cross-border consensus on the EU's future. This in turn raises the question of the extent to which politics both at EU level and within the Member States themselves is capable of rising to these challenges.

The CoFoE will need to address these extensive and complex issues if it is to succeed in finding genuine new solutions to the problems we face – solutions which not only reflect the respective visions of Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi of a peaceful, friendly and solidarity-based coexistence beyond national boundaries but which also form part of the very DNA of European integration. A broad-based social debate on this issue could ultimately become a mechanism which would help to prevent stonewalling on key issues around European integration – even among the European left. Recalcitrance when it comes to European integration is not an option.

## **THE STRUCTURE AND REMIT OF THE COFOE**

Casting our minds back may be helpful to gain a clearer understanding of the current political and operational tasks involved in organising the CoFoE. A year ago, the Council only wanted the conference to address its strategic agenda for the period 2019-2024, rather than fundamental, constitutional issues. The Commission, in turn, was envisaging dialogue with citizens in the sense of consultations and discussion forums on the key topics such as climate change, digitalisation and economic issues, first and foremost within the framework of an intensive 'listening' exercise. The views expressed were then to be analysed by the three institutions, primarily with a view to the imminent practical considerations to be addressed in terms of the weighting of the institutions, among other considerations setting out a course towards the European Parliament elections in 2024, for example discussions about the lead-candidate system and cross-border party tickets. The European Parliament was even more ambitious (see the European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020), wanting to see EU citizens have the opportunity – albeit subject to guidance and in the form of proposals – to themselves table topics for discussion by the CoFoE. The majority of MEPs stressed that the CoFoE must be able to address all issues and problems linked to day-to-day experiences in terms of their relevance to Europe, with no subject being off limits, and that it should be able to critically take stock of the situation.

A broad majority of the 705 MEPs representing the 27 Member States felt that the CoFoE's discussions ought ultimately to lead to tangible results, both in legal and treaty-related terms, and that from the outset, agreement should be reached on a follow-up process on how then to implement the proposals made and conclusions drawn in the context of EU politics. Many MEPs across a range of parliamentary groups agreed that the EU's democratic validity and social cohesion required scrutiny – particularly in light of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Brexit, and its ramifications for both the EU-27 and the United Kingdom

– many of which will not become apparent for some time – was one of the key vectors behind the idea of the CoFoE. In its resolution of 15 January 2020, and in subsequent policy papers, the European Parliament set out the need for clear concepts as to how the CoFoE should be structured, namely the Conference Plenary on the one hand and randomly selected Citizens' Panels on the other, with both of these mechanisms being on an equal footing and providing an interlinked framework for the CoFoE's activities.

This model is a first for the EU, with the Conference Plenary bringing together MEPs, members of the national parliaments of the 27 Member States, representatives of the European Commission, governments and all the other stakeholders detailed in the EU treaties, alongside Citizens' Panels. This blending of representative democracy with participatory democracy is designed to make the CoFoE clear and easy to understand as a concept, and to encourage citizens to get involved in thought-provoking public debate. The European Parliament is keen to promote a conference which seeks to achieve tangible goals yet does not prejudge what those goals should be, and which operates in a transparent, inclusive and conscientious manner. Such an approach will provide an open and credible basis to put in place the desired mechanisms urgently needed to enshrine the fruits of the CoFoE in legally binding provisions.

The Joint Declaration issued by European Parliament President David Sassoli, the head of government presiding over the current Portuguese Presidency of the European Council, António Costa, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 10 March 2021 demonstrates that it is indeed possible to align the various CoFoE objectives and that these objectives encompass the collective position: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/en\\_-\\_joint\\_declaration\\_on\\_the\\_conference\\_on\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_europe.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/en_-_joint_declaration_on_the_conference_on_the_future_of_europe.pdf)

This agreement essentially constitutes the CoFoE statute, blueprints on the form the conference should take and a reference document for all future decisions taken by its three constituent institutions on a consensus basis.

The underlying structure of the CoFoE and its various mechanisms are in place, and the intermeshing discussed above between the Conference Plenary and the Citizens' Panels is taking shape. Since late April 2021, too, a multilingual and interactive digital platform has been in place to enable as broad a range of individuals as possible from all Member States to get together online (there is no geo-blocking and the platform is available in other countries and regions, for example to individuals in the United Kingdom, the western Balkans and other countries neighbouring the European Union).

The CoFoE comprises three components: the Conference Plenary, European Citizens' Panels and the interactive multilingual digital platform. In addition, following a suggestion by the Executive Board, autonomous citizens' panels will be set up at Member State, regional and local levels to enable people to take part in the CoFoE itself via the interactive platform.

The Conference Plenary comprises 450 participants: 108 representatives of the European Parliament 54 representatives of the European Council and 3 representatives of the European Commission, and 108 representatives of the respective parliaments of the 27 EU Member States (Germany is represented by two members of the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) and two members of its Federal Assembly (Bundesrat)). There are also 80 representatives on the Citizens' Panels, a third of whom are aged under 25, the President of the European Youth Forum, and 27 representatives of national associations and/or national citizens' panels, making up a total of 108 participants. There are also 18 representatives of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, and 8 representatives of the social partners within the framework of the Lisbon Treaty, namely the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and BusinessEurope, and 8 representatives of organised civil society. The Conference Plenary will openly discuss all positions, ideas and specific recommendations emanating from Citizens' Panels, as well as contributions made during topic-

specific discussions on the digital platform, and in keeping with the Conference Charter and the fundamental principles underpinning the EU; issues discussed need not fall into any specific predetermined policy areas.

The four envisaged Citizens' Panels will comprise 200 EU citizens selected at random on the basis of a set of criteria designed to ensure a broad cross-section of participants in terms of nationality, rural/urban origin, socioeconomic grouping, professional background, gender and age. The selection process is currently in progress. From 4 September 2021, a total of 200 citizens from the 27 Member States, selected according to the principle of degressive proportionality and in line with the composition of the European Parliament, will meet in the context of four panels. This ground-breaking structure aims to address the issues for debate in as much breadth and depth as possible. The format should also ultimately ensure that the participants in the four panels are able to determine their own roadmap and select which and how many topics to debate. Naturally, suggestions will be made, for example by means of grouping together lists of topics for the digital platform (see below). The plan is to have three rounds of consultations with each lasting at least two days, two of which will be held in person so that participants can get to know each other and can truly work together; these consultations will happen in all 24 official EU languages. As with all consultations in the framework of the CoFoE, discussions within the Citizens' Panels will be streamed publicly online and the relevant documentation will be made available on the digital platform.

The multilingual digital platform is intended not only as a tool to enable people to take part in the CoFoE themselves but also as a means of disseminating as much information as possible about the progress being made. Private individuals and local and regional citizens' panels will be able to use the platform to take part in debates and submit their own contributions, and interact with other conference participants in real time. Individuals will also be able to use the platform to organise and publicise their own events relating to topics discussed or suggestions made as part of the CoFoE; the outcomes of these events and discussions can then also be posted publicly on the platform. It will also serve as a channel for reaching interested parties throughout the EU and for them to be actively involved in the discussions, digitally and interactively, in person across any number of locations. The Joint Declaration calls on the Conference Plenary to register views expressed in this way and to give them due consideration.

## **KEY TOPICS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE COFOE**

Debate within the CoFoE will be structured around 10 general, fairly broad topics, although this breadth of coverage may entail a risk of straying from the core issues at hand:

Climate change and the environment

- > Health
- > A stronger economy, social justice and jobs
- > EU in the world
- > Migration
- > Values and rights, rule of law, security
- > Digital transformation
- > European democracy
- > Education, culture, youth and sport
- > Other ideas



In terms of the range of topics to be addressed, it is crucial for the European Parliament to be able to broach a wide variety of issues – and across parliamentary groups – in some depth. However, the very broad topics listed above are once again indicative of the difficulty the constituent CoFoE institutions are having in reaching a consensus here.

An Executive Board will be responsible for steering the CoFoE, assisted by a Joint Secretariat. The Executive Board will be made up of representatives of the European Parliament, European Council and European Commission (three representatives of each of these institutions, with each having an equal weighting). In a bid to include all EP groups on the Board, the latter will also include observers. So in the case of the European Council, as well as the heads of the three Council presidencies (currently Portugal, Slovenia and France), there will be another four observers representing the governments of the Member States and from the Permanent Representatives Committee (COREPER).

In addition, the three chairpersons of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) can also attend meetings of the Executive Board as observers, as can one representative each of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, and representatives of the social partners and other EU institutions.

The same principle applies in terms of dealing with the CoFoE's findings: once the final report has been drafted, the three EU institutions will be required to ascertain, within their respective remits, how, in accordance with the EU treaties, conclusions can be drawn from the report.

## **RE-ESTABLISHING TRUST IN EU POLITICS**

Despite scepticism surrounding the chances of and opportunities for the CoFoE being able to put in place binding conclusions as regards a follow-up process, the European left must use this window of opportunity to scrutinise its own ideas and positions as regards a social and democratic Europe: what do we, the European left, want from a European perspective? It is already clear from many activities within the European Parliament, from public meetings and from small-scale workshops at national, regional and even pan-European levels in relation to the 'how' of the CoFoE (rather than the 'what', as previously) that there is a wide range of divergent views on the challenges of working together in managing crises. We need a reason-based approach to debate on the various topics, and to draw up fundamental and very specific proposals, arguments and responses, be they current or emerging, both during and above all in the aftermath of the pandemic. What can and should a collaborative and solidarity-based process of reconstruction look like? How should the EU's multi-governance structure be adjusted, rebalanced or completely reformed? How should the remits for a European Health Union in terms of responsibility and decision-making be formulated – and what does this actually mean, if health is not recognised as a public good? A conference on the future of Europe must, above all, promote greater participation by citizens in the democratic process, and a regaining of trust and confidence in EU politics.

Measured against the yardstick of living together in the EU on the basis of a solidarity-based and collaborative approach, which to date has played second fiddle to the neoliberal mindset of the internal market and a myriad of political and economic interests associated with individual Member States, the scale of the work to be done is clear. The fact that negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 have dragged on for more than three and a half years points – almost symbolically – to a key question in this discussion of the future of the EU: how can and should the balance between European/international and national parties be restored? The answer to this question is: by and for the benefit of individuals. One example of this is the directly elected European Parliament, in view of the duties and responsibilities involved, calling for a significant bolstering of

the EU budget and a transformation fund to tackle the burdens placed on all 27 Member States as a result of the coronavirus crisis, with the idea being that such funds would be derived from the European Union's own resources in the guise of EU-level taxation, such as a digital tax or a financial transaction tax among others. The absence of any appropriate legislative right of initiative for the European Parliament in respect of such a collaborative solution, and the nationalist-populist recalcitrance on the part of the governments of the 27 Member States represent both a logjam and a way out, in the form of a shift in decision-making competencies. Two decades on since the last debate about European politics, alternative decision-making mechanisms are finally once again on the agenda. One aspect of this is, of course, the return in recent years of more loosely formulated basic premises of European integration: does relentless competition on the EU single market remain as virtually the only determinative key component of Economic and Monetary Union, and is that enough in view of the global challenges posed by technological transformation and digitalisation, of the necessary socio-environmental restructuring of social added value and redistribution across a social and environmental union? For example, rethinking how the EU's taxation policy works, a policy which must necessarily be determined by a union of states and the purpose of which must also be determined, or, for example, the question of EU-wide legally binding and guaranteed implementation of democratic principles and basic standards, based on the rule of law, to enable as many individuals as possible to play a part in the political and social anchoring of the EU in the democratic foundations of our respective countries. It sounds like a utopian idea, far removed from ordinary people's day-to-day problems – but should provide a sturdy framework for linking up CoFoE discussions with the appropriate fundamental considerations, which doubtless lie ahead, relating to the future development of the EU of today with all its attendant conflicts and fracture points, double standards and compromises in terms of its goals. However, the EU also provides enrichment, drive and impetus for development by harnessing its wealth of very varied historical and cultural, political and economic experience, perspectives and interests into a joint integration project.

The CoFoE must honestly address the issue of the added value of integration, solidarity, values and opposing interests. The left specifically must focus squarely on the fact that very different life plans will clash, as will the opposing interests, in the context of European politics, of political parties each having their own ideas about what society should be like and the direction of travel. Equally, a CoFoE will only make sense if Eurosceptics and opponents of the EU, and their objections, can be included in the debate and given the opportunity to be heard (see also <https://europa.blog/beginnt-am-9-mai-2021-ein-europaischer-fruhling> (link only available in German)). An inventive and frank approach will be needed both in the discourse itself and its follow-up. One thing is clear, though: societal players can and must be given the opportunity to drive debate within the CoFoE by organising their own events and discussions – indeed, that is precisely what many NGOs are counting on under the auspices of the Civil Society Convention, Democracy International and environmental, women's rights and democracy networks at both EU and Member State levels). Equally, to ensure truly open debate, it is crucial that CoFoE discussions be reflected clearly within its structures and that a binding feedback mechanism be put in place. A number of Member States are planning independent citizens' panels and dialogue at national level, the outcomes of which should, in turn, be reflected in the work of the CoFoE.

## **THE COFOE AS AN EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRACY**

Many stakeholders agree that the CoFoE is long overdue. It has been almost 20 years since the last major debate on the workings of the EU, the accompanying Convention and work on a constitutional treaty for the EU and a Charter of Fundamental Rights applicable to everyone living within it. The draft treaty was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands, and many radical left-wing parties in the EU Member States also rejected it – rightly – given the plans to establish an unbridled 'free' market economy and the fundamental

neoliberal orientation of the Economic and Monetary Union, and their criticism of the focal points of the EU's common foreign policy and, first and foremost, its common security and defence policy. Today, societies in all EU Member States and the European Union as a whole constitute a union of states and a sui generis structure in terms of the complexity of crisis management processes and systemic limitations inherent in the current capitalist accumulation model when it comes to the fundamental question of where the EU goes from here. The climate crisis, with the fight to combat the ongoing loss of biodiversity and the need, within the next 10-15 years, for the socially and environmentally oriented restructuring of our economy and the accompanying impact this will have on individuals' everyday lives, raises questions about the political and social framework. It also clearly demonstrates that it is the tangible interplay between the economy, the environment, the welfare state, international relations, culture and the democratic framework which will form the basis not only for an alternative politics but also for a wide-reaching and radical new direction for the relationship between national and international structures, and between those at regional and EU-wide levels, and that this is an interplay that must be achieved.

The Left in the European Parliament and its six members in the latter's delegation to the CoFoE Conference Plenary will make a constructive and analytical contribution to proceedings, giving due consideration to the past while looking to the future. Precisely because the CoFoE's success will hinge on the active involvement of as many stakeholders as possible, communication about and with it will be crucial; equally important will be its ability to radiate out into society and across political parties. It will have a responsibility to speak out, keep issues under discussion and encourage and tackle proposals and considerations from all EU institutions, and ensure that citizens from all social spheres can play an active role. Nothing is off limits when it comes to scrutiny – not least the reason why EU responses to the burning issues of a social, environmental and future-oriented Europe are so few and far between, and why the solution adopted is always that of the lowest common compromise denominator. This needs to be addressed. The CoFoE provides an opportunity for there to be a key forum for debate and shared understanding that will help to get a truly solidarity-based Europe off the ground.

The CoFoE also represents a new democratic experiment: what form that takes and how successful it will be remains to be seen. Ultimately, though, decisive factors will be how citizens of the 27 Member States are able to have their say and take an active stand, and, in so doing, call for change to the status quo, and a vote by the CoFoE for reforms to the European Union, as this will determine the Council's willingness to engage with reforms – should they be worthy of the name – which will weaken the latter's role and bolster that of the Parliament and thus of participatory democracy, i.e. direct citizen involvement. It will be all about shifting existing power configurations to gain insights and create new majorities. It will be a difficult and protracted process but one which will also be challenging and worthwhile!





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## **ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG, BRUSSELS OFFICE**

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left-wing non-profit organisation providing civic education. It is affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide. The Stiftung works in the context of the growing multiple crises facing our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organisations around the globe, the Stiftung focuses on democratic and social participation, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and alternative economic and social development. The Stiftung's international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions. The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung works towards a more just world and a system based on international solidarity.

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