

**The Conference on the Future of Europe:
an opportunity to start closing the democratic deficit**

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I/ Introduction

The President of the European Commission **Ursula von der Leyen** announced in 2019 the organization of the **Conference on the Future of Europe**. In her [political guidelines](#) as the candidate to become the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen outlined her ambition regarding the Conference:

“I want Europeans to build the future of our Union. They should play a leading and active part in setting our priorities and our level of ambition.

I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years.

The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people, civil society and European institutions as equal partners. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

I am ready to follow up on what is agreed, including by legislative action if appropriate. I am also open to Treaty change. Should there be a Member of the European Parliament put forward to chair the Conference, I will fully support this idea.”



The objective of the Conference is to **widely consult European citizens on shaping future European policies**. This “major pan-European democratic exercise” was supposed to start **on May 9th, 2020**, and last for two years - it was however postponed for sanitary reasons due to the COVID-19 crisis.

II/ How will the Conference be shaped?

As proposed by Ursula von der Leyen, **each institution has now a position on the scope and the objectives of the Conference**:

- The **European Commission’s** [Communication](#) on shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe dates back to January 2020
- The **European Parliament’s** [resolution](#) on its position on the Conference was also adopted in January 2020
- The **Council of the European Union** finally adopted its [position](#) in June 2020

Even if the situation is far from being back to normal, **European institutions are reconsidering the start of the Conference**. In June, the European Parliament [called](#) for the Conference to start as soon as possible in autumn 2020. However, the three institutions have to agree on a **Joint Declaration** beforehand, to ensure that the result of the Conference will be both ambitious and implemented. The negotiations on this Joint Declaration will have to solve the disagreements of the Institutions on the modalities of the Conference.

III/ What are the obstacles to finally start the Conference?

Apart from the sanitary context, the Institutions will have to reach an agreement on several issues to make the start of the Conference possible.

The first disagreement is the change of treaties. The Commission is not opposed to opening these negotiations but is moving forward with precaution on the matter. The Parliament is a strong supporter of a change of treaty: it is the only directly elected European institution, which would benefit the most from enhanced democratic processes in the functioning of the EU. **Member States are divided**: if most are against the idea, France and Germany expressed very early in November 2019 their willingness to open the treaties, if necessary. The position of the Council of the EU strictly sets the Conference outside the procedure of changing the treaties

Another discord is the form of the Conference itself. All institutions agree on the necessity of physically gathering citizens, even if it has to wait until after the sanitary crisis. But the role of digital tools is still debated. The three institutions agree on using digital technologies. There is, however, no clarity on the articulation of these two aspects and the conception of these online tools.

The European institutions will most probably reach a consensus this autumn, even if the starting date of the Conference on the Future of Europe still has to be decided. Ursula von der Leyen declared on 17 September that the Conference is “almost ready to start”.

IV/ Why will this Conference matter for EU public affairs?

The Conference on the Future of Europe could have a broad impact on the functioning of European institutions. Even if the Conference does not immediately lead to treaty changes, it will underline how

the decision-making process can be improved. This will be particularly relevant after the highest turnout to [EU elections in 2019](#). The Covid-19 crisis also put the highlight on European institutions: if the immediate response was criticized, the economic recovery plan was covered by the media as a historic step for the European project.

The Conference will also concern all policy areas and give a basis for an agenda for the next plans of the European Commission. For instances, President von der Leyen called on 16 September, in her [State of the Union Address](#), a debate on new EU competencies regarding health policies. By reinforcing the direct link between citizens and EU institutions, EU policies might enter into public scrutiny, which has not been the case until now. All public affairs professionals will have, at the very least, to take into account the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe.
