

EU's attempt to reform itself branded 'biased from the very beginning'

The strong broadside comes after a symbolic event on Wednesday to mark the start of Conference on the Future of Europe.



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Ursula von der Leyen and David Sassoli, presidents of the European Commission and Parliament respectively, signed a joint declaration kicking off the process for the Conference.

The forum, scheduled to formally begin in May, will be the first opportunity at comprehensive reform of the EU in more than a decade.

The Conference will include randomly selected citizens' assemblies as a key component and aims to develop firm proposals on how to make the EU more democratic, effective and bring it closer to citizens, by spring 2022.

The forum, lasting a year, is also tasked with coming up with ideas and proposals for a new institutional set-up for the EU which is desperate to shore up support for the “European Project”, particularly after Brexit and the rise of populism in some Member States.

But the co-president of The Left group in Parliament has already questioned the legitimacy of the Conference, which was initially the idea of French President Emmanuel Macron and is also supported by German chancellor Angela Merkel.

Manon Aubry said, “European people demand major institutional changes, and the ‘Future of Europe’ cannot be limited to a communication exercise. Symbolic reforms won’t be enough: new treaties are required if we want to fight climate change, reduce inequalities, and restore cohesion within the EU.”

The French member said, “Citizens and MEPs must be fully involved and heard throughout the whole process. We strongly regret that only some political groups can vote in the executive board of the Conference. How can you pretend to make Europe more democratic if the consultation process itself is biased from the very beginning?”

“A top-down show dominated by politicians will be utterly counter-productive. After the year we have all been through, we need to amplify the voices of frontline workers, youth, migrants, women, and the marginalised throughout the continent” **Martin Schirdewan, co-chair, The Left**

Her co-leader Martin Schirdewan said, “The Left will be insisting that this is a people-focused project with treaty change a fundamental part of the objectives.”

“Only by ensuring genuine citizen involvement can we build a process that leads to the much-needed changes to Europe’s institutional makeup,” said the German member.

“A top-down show dominated by politicians will be utterly counter-productive. After the year we have all been through, we need to amplify the voices of frontline workers, youth, migrants, women, and the marginalized throughout the continent. We already know what the usual suspects will say - let’s hear new voices, new ideas.”

Further reaction to the Conference came from German member Daniel Freund,

representative of the Greens/EFA group on the body, who commented, “It’s no secret that the EU needs fundamental reforms. The crises of the last decade have shown that the EU is necessary but needs change.”

“This Conference must drive Europe closer to its citizens. We need more democratic participation and oversight in the EU. Too many major decisions have been held back due to narrow-minded, national perspectives in Council.”

“This Conference is the chance for us to learn from the mistakes of the past and build a Union fit for the future. If we are to meet the global challenges of climate change, digitization, and defending the rule of law, then it must be by putting citizens at the heart of EU decision-making.”

“Citizens’ assemblies are innovative and worked well in Ireland and at the French Climate Convention. We need to ensure that the Conference doesn’t get bogged down in inter-institutional squabbles and that it delivers for citizens. This Conference should not hesitate to put further integration and treaty changes on the table.”

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Socialist leader Iratxe García Pérez said, “This Conference is long overdue. It was proposed before the COVID-19 outbreak, and now it makes even more sense to think together how to reshape our Union to make it fit for today’s challenges.”

At Wednesday’s signing, Sassoli said, “Today marks a new start for the EU and for all European citizens. The Conference will be a unique opportunity for all European citizens and our civil society to shape Europe’s future, a common project for a functioning European democracy.”

Von der Leyen said, “Today we are inviting all Europeans to speak up, to say what Europe they want to live in, to shape it and join forces to help us build it. Citizens’ expectations are clear: they want to have their say on the future of Europe, on matters which affect their lives. Our promise today is equally clear: we will listen.

And then, we will act.”

The forum will focus heavily on civil society representation and Copenhagen-based Bent Bonde, secretary-general of the Europe’s People’s Forum, told this website, “The Conference will succeed if the voice of every citizen can be heard, especially those who feel marginalized and disenfranchised and if every citizen can see their interests reflected in the European policy proposals that emerge from the local and national agoras.”

“We stand ready to assist with the innovative methodologies that will be needed to achieve this.”

Former UK Labour MP Roger Casale, acting president of Europe’s People’s Forum and founder of New Europeans, has keenly championed the Conference from the start and added, “There is no time to lose if we are to make the Conference a meaningful chapter in the evolving relationship between the EU institutions and the citizens of Europe.”

“I hope the Conference will lead to a permanent mechanism for the participation of citizens identifying the future priorities of Europe.”

“We strongly regret that only some political groups can vote in the executive board of the Conference. How can you pretend to make Europe more democratic if the consultation process itself is biased from the very beginning?” **Manon Aubry, co-chair, The Left**

European Economic and Social Committee President Christa Schweng said on Thursday that the Committee “is looking forward to actively contributing” to the debate as an observer.

She said, “I am pleased that the important role and involvement of organized civil society in the Conference was confirmed. The EESC is looking forward to preparing a substantial and valuable contribution, working closely with hundreds of organizations that our members represent. We are ready to bring our bottom-up expertise to enrich the work on a new, convincing narrative for the EU.”

“The Conference is a unique opportunity for societies in the EU. Businesses, workers, farmers, consumers, and NGOs are finally able to engage in a structured way and have their say in shaping future EU policies.”

“This is urgently needed to give them a sense of ownership of their EU. The goal of shaping the future of an EU emerging even stronger from the COVID-19 crisis can only be achieved through active engagement with citizens and other stakeholders coming from all walks of life.”

Elsewhere, Johannes Greubel, a policy analyst at the European Policy Centre, warned, “One year is simply not much time to run extensive citizens’ panels at European, national and regional levels.”

“Not only do we have a large number of topics to discuss, at the end of this process, but all those different strands also need to be brought together - in the Conference plenary and then by the Conference leadership, which is tasked to formulate concrete next steps. That leaves little room for actual citizen involvement.”

He added, “But the Conference is not yet bound to fail. If it starts with bringing down the scope of each of the different topics and focuses on a few salient issues, it can still make a difference.”

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