

Op-ed: Powering up democracy is key to peaceful future for Europe, by Christa Schweng and Roger Casale

When the Conference on the Future of Europe was launched in 2021, Europe was at peace and had been since the war in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s. If the invitation to engage in a conversation about Europe's future seemed ambitious a year ago, imagine what it looks like from today's perspective.

In fact, there has probably been no better time to talk about the future of Europe and in particular the future of European democracy than today. Democracy has been the foundation of peaceful coexistence in Europe since the Second World War. It is the key to understanding what makes European societies so successful, so attractive and so resilient.

How can we make democracy in Europe work better? What lessons have we learned from the Conference on the Future of Europe? What will be its legacy?

Balanced assessment

There are two pitfalls to avoid in assessing the Conference on the Future of Europe - the first is to talk it up too much, the other is to talk it down.

To many the conference seemed like a once in a lifetime opportunity to stamp their mark on the future of the EU. We should welcome the fact that so many citizens engaged with the Conference. Above all we should listen closely to what they had to say.

Many of the recommendations made by the citizens do not require treaty change (as strongly requested by some politicians). In fact, in many areas work is already underway within the institutions to address these concerns.

More sceptical voices in the EU Commission may even have become more open to policy input from citizens as the year progressed. Some officials told us at the start of the process: "We are already working on these policies so why do we need the Conference?". By the end we were hearing a more nuanced message: "We are working on these areas and have learned from the citizens we can do this better."

As well as input to current work streams, the Commission received much food for thought from the Conference in terms of future work programmes. Such recognition qualifies as a measure of success. It needs to be built on.

Lessons learned

Any process of genuine engagement with citizens requires a feedback mechanism to secure its legitimacy. That is why it is so important that the European Commission sets up a mechanism to monitor the recommendations made by citizens. The way to do this is to create a dashboard of the policy recommendations and then to use it to chart what will

happen to the proposals as called for by the European Economic and Social Committee since the start of the Conference.

All who took part in the Conference need to see that their energy, commitment and above all ideas made an impact. Transparency as well as fair representativeness are essential factors for a participative democracy. The dashboard would allow all stakeholders to consult the state of play of the follow-up measures. If a proposal is not taken forward, this has to be explained to ensure a maximum of transparency.

A second lesson to be learned is that the pain-staking work of gathering proposals, making sense of them as well as of monitoring and following up those proposals requires the support and involvement of experts. Here, the recommendations of the democracy working group foresee building on already existing structures. Organised civil society, under the lead of the European Economic and Social Committee, will be one of the main actors in this follow-up process. It is vital that those tasked with setting up and facilitating the consultative panels and other participative measures at regional, national and European level are politically neutral and have the necessary level of expertise.

Consistent methodology is the key to obtaining valuable insights from citizens. This is why the Europe's People's Forum has launched the permanent Center for European Citizens Democracy. It is a direct response to the call from citizens during the Conference to 'power up' democracy in Europe at all levels. The Center for European Citizens Democracy will build on networks of professional practitioners, democracy research institutions, and civil society institutions, including many of the already existing structures. The European Economic and Social Committee will be invited as one of the main actors in the Center.

A third lesson is that we are still at the very early stages of reaching the majority of European citizens who live outside the so-called "Brussels bubble". We need to keep building the conversation about the future, especially in those parts of Europe where interest and engagement is weakest.

Lasting legacy

Today we face not just the triple challenge of post-COVID recovery, climate change and war in Ukraine, but also a lack of participation by citizens. During the COVID pandemic, governments introduced more and more invasive measures to contain the virus. Such measures can only lead to success if they have the consent of citizens. Tackling climate change requires changes in behaviour by all citizens on an even greater scale.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated once again that a nation's greatest strength is its people, and above all their striving for freedom. Democracy is the channel by which this love of freedom can find expression.

It is time for European governments to dare more democracy, to build on the qualified success of the Conference on the Future of Europe and to fully use the best available mechanisms and methodologies to give citizens a voice between elections, not just as say in choosing their leaders through their vote.

It is time for Europe to lead the world in demonstrating how the power of democracy can be unbridled and put to work to meet the multiple challenges faced by complex societies for the common good.

And finally, it is time to find a way to keep citizens talking about and shaping the future of Europe.

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