

An uncertain future for Conference on Future of Europe

Written by **Martin Banks** on 23 March 2020 in News

The launch of the Europe-wide Conference, which aims to kickstart debate about the future of Europe, is looking increasingly unlikely amid the escalating Coronavirus crisis.



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Lasting up to two years, the Conference was due to be launched on 9 May to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the Schuman declaration and to involve both online consultations and citizens' gatherings or "agoras."

But, with EU institutions now having to conduct all but the most essential meetings remotely due to the Coronavirus, the planned launch in May is now looking highly unlikely.

Many also fear that the original model for the conference, backed by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, is no longer feasible.

However, a Brussels-based NGO, the "Europe's People's Forum" (EPF), has come up with a proposal which, it claims, would allow much of the Conference to be conducted, albeit online.

The Forum says it has developed a dedicated online platform would make it possible to consult those EU citizens who wish to participate about the policy areas that were to be discussed during the Conference.

The model was developed with support from the Danish Board of Technology.

Speaking about the proposal, EPF's Secretary General, Bent Noerby Bonde, said that with the EU effectively in lockdown, the Coronavirus crisis "is not just a threat to the lives and livelihoods of Europeans, it is also a severe stress test for democracy in Europe."

"It is more important than ever that the EU institutions maintain a dialogue with citizens and also engage them in deliberations about our values, future, and future policies" **Bent Noerby Bonde, EPF Secretary General**

"The Corona crisis will have a lasting impact on how we live together. But, so far, we have seen a lack of solidarity, for example, towards the Italian health care system," said Bonde.

"Our platform can be adapted to engage citizens in identifying and developing more resilient policy responses to the Corona crisis through actions at the European level."

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After a relatively slow start at the outset of the crisis, EU Member States are moving rapidly to support their health care systems and economies, while introducing ever more restrictive measures on the movement of their citizens.

In Denmark for example, all 10 political parties in the Folketing have just agreed a model for support for every citizen, starting with the unemployed.

The European Central Bank has, separately, announced €750bn of support for "families, firms, banks and governments" in the wake of the crisis.

Roger Casale, vice chairman of the Europe's People's Forum, said, "The additional resources are necessary and welcome but when it comes to strengthening the resilience of European societies it is not just a question of money. Democratic societies build resilience by strengthening the engagement of their citizens, because that is the way to build consensus and also to generate new ideas that work."

"There has not been a time since WW2 when the voice of citizens needed to be heard as much as it needs to be heard today so it would be a very bad idea to shut down the conversation about the future of Europe and EPF looks forward to playing our part in helping to keep the conference alive."

About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine