

BLOG POST May 12th 2022

Conference on the Future of Europe: what impact?

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 Reading time: 7 min

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an unprecedented deliberative process that deserves to have its priorities put on the political agenda. By a coincidence of timing, May 9 may have hidden behind the speech of the Russian president, scrutinized for its consequences in Ukraine and Europe, another key moment: the reception of the report of the citizens mobilized in the Conference on the Future of Europe by the executive board of this conference: Clément Beaune for the Council and the French presidency of the Union, Guy Verhofstadt for the Parliament, and Dubravka Šuica, vice-president of the European Commission in charge of democracy and demography. It is essential, for the credibility of participatory mechanisms, that all citizens' proposals are treated at their true value, i.e. to put key issues on the European agenda in response to the question: what matters to you and what should Europe do? These proposals are all the more important as they make a very explicit link between the economic and geopolitical importance of the European Green Deal, the placing of social policies on the European agenda and the strengthening of democracy through deliberative mechanisms.

A deliberative process

The European Union moves forward in response to crises, as we have seen with the post-COVID recovery, with a form of common indebtedness that strengthens solidarity between Member States in an unprecedented way, and as we see with the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine which triggered off reflections on the security of the Union. But the Union also moves forward when it responds to a demand from its citizens: the Green Deal, which gives Europe an ecological, but also an economic and geostrategic project, can be interpreted indirectly as a response to the ecological crisis, but it is above all a response to a strong demand citizens made at the ballot box, during the 2019 European elections.

It is the merit of the Conference on the Future of Europe to have been conceived not as a consultation on the question of more or less Europe, but as an opportunity for a group of citizens to deliberate in order to express their needs and, if possible, their demands in terms of public policy and the supranational organization of decision-making on a European scale.

A complex, plurinational and therefore plurilingual device, the Conference on the Future of Europe is unique in several key ways.

- A question ("What matters to you?") that is very relevant and conducive to guiding a deliberative process, where the cross-fertilization of opinions, arguments and counter-arguments between very diverse perspectives of citizens can allow new formulations of political problems to emerge from the collective, different from what would have been expressed in a simple consultation or survey, where everyone reacts individually.
- A process that seeks out voices that are not usually heard through random selection of citizens, and makes them work at various scales, as well as in hybridization with parliamentarians, civil society representatives and governments. This cross-fertilization of perspectives both enriching the deliberation and preventing this process from being seen as a withdrawal by the bodies (Commission, Parliament, Council) legally and legitimately in charge of moving the European institutions forward.
- A particular attention given to the possibility of dialogue between citizens of different Member States, despite the language barrier and the fragmentation of national political debates, all of which are different in their forms of polarization despite some major common features.
- A great clarity on the use that will be made of the results of this deliberative process: the executive committee, composed of a representative of each key body of the Union, received the 49 proposals on March 9 and is now required to react to them in order to prepare the responses to be made.

This last point is crucial for the credibility of the whole structure. Faced with the initial question of formulating priorities, the question is less whether the citizens' proposals will be implemented directly than whether the major public policy demands that emerge from them can be put on the agenda: if this is the demand that the citizens express after this immense deliberative work over several months, this demand obliges the institutions. Guy Verhofstadt concluded, for example, that the Parliament would seize the means at its disposal to trigger a process of revision of the treaties to take these demands into account.

Very political results

The first result is that there is indeed a demand for European policies. And this cannot be considered as only an artifact of the question asked, but as the result of a deliberation where eurosceptic citizens were able to express their

point of view as much as others, more favorable to the European project. What emerged, at the crossroads of local needs and global geopolitical, economic and ecological dynamics, is a confirmation of the need for policies on a continental scale, and that it is more strategic, in today's world, to rely on the supranational institutions already built than to seek to challenge them. Citizens also indicate the importance of strengthening the European Union's strategy in the world.

The second result is that the citizens' proposals are often extremely concrete on themes that are central to the ecological transition, particularly in relation to changes in food and energy in line with climate issues and the European Green Deal on the environment: these two themes, which are extremely close to the daily lives of citizens and their current concerns in the context of the price crisis on these two subjects, are also areas of European public policy. Citizens confirm the importance of European intervention on these issues, and underline the importance of posing the problem of European public action not only from the point of view of agricultural or energy production, but also from the point of view of uses and social consequences for citizens. This is an important signal to reinforce the Farm to Fork strategy, conceived as a policy on the scale of the food system as a whole, beyond the mandate of the Common Agricultural Policy, which focuses on production alone.

The third result is the importance of citizens' proposals on social issues. The framing of the proposals is itself fundamental: citizens question the possibility of continuing with pre-existing forms of social contract in a world of limited resources, where their increase in price will have unequal consequences. This is the most fundamental point on the agenda of the citizens' proposals: they are also concretely proposing changes in fiscal and redistributive policies and social policies on a European scale, which the Member States nevertheless wish to keep within their own sphere of sovereignty. This is probably a key point in the debates that this conference must open: since the ambition of the Green Deal for Europe is the right bet for the continent from an ecological, economic and geopolitical point of view, a debate on the social conditions of the transition and the policies on a European scale in this area cannot be avoided.

Finally, citizens show their attachment to the mechanisms of environmental democracy, from access to information and justice to the mechanisms of participation themselves, which complement the institutions of representative democracy. The innovations and experiences of environmental democracy appear to be central to the reflection on the more general way in which mechanisms centered on the power of collective deliberation, which the conference on the Future of Europe illustrates, must continue to take their place in the democratic life of the Member States and of the Union itself.

What next?

Bringing the institutions of the European Union closer to the citizens always seems extremely difficult, and all the more so as the fragmentation of national political spaces remains extremely strong: the Conference on the Future of Europe is no exception to this, the resonance in our national political space being likely to be very weak, overshadowed by electoral debates and very dense international news.

However, the credibility of participatory mechanisms, as well as the feasibility of the Green Deal, depends on putting the major political problems raised by citizens on the political agenda of each of the Member States and the European institutions. Strengthening the Green Deal and preparing for the transformations it will bring about not only in European production chains but also in the evolution of citizens' daily lives and practices: this implies putting much stronger forms of cooperation or coordination on the European agenda than we have today, adopting a clear international European strategy, and deepening the exercise of deliberative democracy in national and European institutions. Quite a task indeed! This is the expression of a citizens' demand, which European institutions and national actors should take up, and which the community of European think tanks, of which IDDRI is a part, will bring

to the political debates at all these levels.

