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## Future of Europe. Certainties and questions regarding the EU Conference

The Conference on the Future of Europe takes shape - not without raising questions and doubts - in response to the EU crisis, with a view to addressing citizens' needs, envisaging reforms of EU regulations and institutions. On Wednesday 22 January, the EU Commission published its proposals for the Conference, following those presented by the European Parliament in Strasbourg on 15 January in preparation for a decisive meeting of the EU Council of Ministers on 28 January.

**Citizens at the centre.** "People need to be at the very centre of all our policies. My wish is therefore that all Europeans will actively contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe and play a leading role in setting the European Union's priorities. It is only together that we can build our Union of tomorrow." Ursula von der Leyen, President of the Commission, one of the Conference's main advocates, highlighted citizens' central role.

The document released in Brussels - confirming all the advance information published on 20 January by SIR - proposes to launch the Conference on Europe Day – 9 May 2020, in Dubrovnik

(Croatia holds the six-month presidency of the EU Council of Ministers) and run for two years. The chosen date marks the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Schuman Declaration and the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

**Political priorities and reforms.** The Conference on the future of Europe "will allow for an open, inclusive, transparent and structured debate with citizens of diverse backgrounds and from all walks of life": Dubravka Šuica (in the photo), Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, was tasked with illustrating the Executive's "communication" in the press room of the Berlaymont building. The European Commission proposes to focus the Conference on two "parallel strands, the first focusing on policy, and what our Union should seek to achieve." These include "the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness and equality, Europe's digital transformation, promoting our European values, strengthening the EU's voice in the world." The second strand should focus on addressing topics specifically related to democratic processes and institutional matters", notably the European election system, (including transnational lists); the lead candidate system for the election of the President of the European Commission (Spitzenkandidaten); qualified majority voting in the Council, overcoming the unanimity principle; legislative initiative in Parliament rather than in the Commission.

**"Unique opportunity".** Vice-President Šuica explained: "The Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique opportunity to reflect with citizens, listen to them, engage, answer and explain. We will strengthen trust and confidence between the EU institutions and the people we serve. This is our chance to show people that their voice counts in Europe." Will the Conference deliver effective results, extending beyond the mere intentions? "If we failed to obtain tangible results, for the benefit of the citizens, perhaps it would be better not to start at all".

"We don't want to continue doing what has been done so far," she argued, "we need to listen to citizens and respond to their requests."

The Commission is proposing a conference "guided" by Brussels, with several meetings over the coming months, reaching out to all European countries through various types of events, "especially those regions with the highest degree of mistrust of the Union." Do you really believe in the success

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of the Conference? - asked the reporter. "Of course I do, or I wouldn't be here. I know that in the past similar experiences have failed due to the fact that the proposals did not lead to reforms, to innovations that citizens expect."

**Question marks.** The Commission sees the Conference as a "bottom-up forum" accessible, transparent. A multilingual online platform will ensure transparency of debate and support wider participation. Other EU institutions, national parliaments, social partners, regional and local authorities and civil society are encouraged to participate. It is regrettable that Churches and religious communities, recognised under Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty, are not explicitly mentioned. But this is only the first knot to be unravelled. Indeed, the question is whether the "agora of citizens" and the "agora of young people", accompanying and contributing to the Conference on the future of Europe, will be truly heard.

Moreover, will the convention - whose two-year extension could be excessive - actually manage to envision Europe's future, with a horizon of 10, 20 or 30 years?

Will it be able to deliver tangible and evident results for citizens, thereby reviving the "desire" and "dream" of a united Europe? What if in their "agora", citizens asked for "less" and not "more" Europe? (given the blowing Euro-sceptic and nationalist winds it can't be ruled out...). What if, in order to relaunch the integration process, it proved necessary to revise the Treaties, with the consequent, complex and risky procedures of drafting and ratification? Would EU Countries' leaders expose themselves to persuade their parliaments and citizens that this is the best way forward?

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