

Integration at a Crossroads: The Future of the EU and German European Policy

Factsheet: “Making European democracy more vibrant: The Conference on the Future of Europe”

Making European democracy more vibrant entails a more participative democracy in which EU citizens and civil society are actively involved. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) should not only promote the dialogue between EU institutions and EU citizens, but also allow the latter to get more involved in EU politics thus achieving increased social cohesion. Due to the pandemic, the Conference had to be postponed and the role of digital media in shaping democratic processes has become all the more important. The Conference aims to provide citizens the opportunity to contribute their ideas about what the EU should look like in five or ten years. This implies that political and institutional reforms resulting from that process need to be part of the picture.

- What are key conditions for a vibrant European democracy?
- In how far can the CoFoE contribute to European democracy and what will make it a success?
- How is the CoFoE perceived in Germany and how can Germany contribute to a more democratic EU?

Goals

A more vibrant EU democracy should foster participatory democracy, which is meant to further the maximum participation of citizens and civil society in political life. In this regard, the CoFoE, which started on 9 May 2021 and is scheduled to end in Spring 2022, should involve citizens and civil society in a dialogue on the future of Europe. This dialogue addresses fundamental future issues for the medium and long-term development of the EU such as the future of the European economic and social model, sustainability and climate protection, innovation and digitalisation or the fundamental values of the EU. The Conference will also focus on the lessons that Europe can learn from the pandemic. As a result, the aim of the Conference is not only to promote the dialogue between citizens, experts and EU institutions in order to successfully shape the EU's common future, but also to formulate proposals for concrete measures.

Challenges

- The aims of the CoFoE are too ambitious. Citizens should develop ideas about the future of the European economic and social model, sustainability and climate protection, innovation and the digital transformation or the fundamental values of the EU. Yet, it is unclear how, barring treaty change, the recommendations generated by the conference will be put into practice and followed up. The CoFoE seems to be less a vehicle for reform rather than a forum for reflection on the EU integration process and its resilience.
- The CoFoE [lacks the necessary support at member state level](#) to bring about concrete policy changes. They resist against an ambitious Conference and do not allow for a »Convention 2.0« as envisioned by the European Parliament.

- Digital literacy and technical equipment are the major obstacle for citizens' active participation to the Conference's platform.
- The CoFoE has a very short schedule to achieve its ambitious aim and its governance structures are too heavy and it will be difficult to find a compromise between all involved institutions (Council, Parliament and Commission)

Possible Solutions

- The future of EU democracy will be decided in national and European parliamentary elections. Information and communication is therefore key. The digital media can be a facilitator in this regard by focusing on and communicating widely the Conference's content.
- Member states' political systems should spread information about European institutions while supporting an open debate about the future form of the EU to strengthen the democratic basis of Europe. Education in schools and beyond keeps playing a major role in informing all citizens about their opportunities for participation, as well as transparency about political decisions.
- Possible institutional reforms might entail electoral reforms in the EU e.g., making the »Spitzenkandidaten« system mandatory until 2024.
- Since complex decisions require a high level of expertise, referenda at the European level are viewed rather critically. It is worthwhile to discuss the benefits of [citizens' consultations and citizens' fora](#), in which citizens can directly discuss with decision-makers, improve the democratic climate, strengthen the voice of civil society and increase the will to participate in politics.

German Dimension

- *Relevance:* Germany can only profit from a strong and cohesive EU, since Europe, as maintained by [Chancellor Angela Merkel](#), has weathered crises because at the end of the day everyone was aware of what is indispensable – fundamental rights and cohesion. A stronger Europe is a more democratic Europe, which is also the goal of the CoFoE.
- *Position:* As emphasised during Germany's Presidency of the Council, Germany actively supports the Conference and aims to increase the voice of civil society. This should also allow to counteract disinformation and Euroscepticism within the country.
- *Outlook in view of German federal elections:*¹ Some political parties in Germany, such as the Green Party or the Free Democratic Party (FDP), posited that the results of the Conference are to be implemented within the framework of European legislation, up to and including treaty amendments. The FDP even envisages a federal Union based on a legally binding European Constitution.

¹ Based on the party's respective electoral programme of 2021.