Future of Europe conference in limbo

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The two-year event was supposed to launch on Europe Day but has been postponed due to the ongoing Coronavirus crisis.

Parliament’s President David Sassoli says that the much-vaunted Future of Europe conference, which was due to be launched this weekend but has been postponed due to the ongoing health pandemic, “needs to be convened as soon as possible.”

The event, which will last up to two years, was billed as an ambitious grass roots “conversation” that would reconnect the European project with the continent’s citizens. It was heralded as a key plank of the EU’s response to Brexit and increasing public support for populist political parties.

But the conference has been plagued by a series of internal feuds about who should take charge at
the top of what was supposedly a “bottom-up” process and what the scope and remit of the conference should be.

Proponents of the initiative, championed by French President Emmanuel Macron, had pencilled in Europe Day this Saturday, 9 May, as the start date for the conference.

The date had a threefold significance. First, 9 May is the 70th anniversary of the Schuman declaration, which led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community and though a series of subsequent transformations to the EU as it is today.

“"It is time for an ambitious debate on the future of Europe with EU citizens and all stakeholders, in order to shape the Union in which we want to live together and to find an agreement among European citizens on the political foundations we want to build for the recovery of the European continent." David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament

Second, Saturday is also just seven weeks before the start of the highly significant German presidency of the EU and third, a 9 May start date would have meant that the conference would have closed in the first half of 2022, during the French presidency of the EU and just ahead of the French presidential elections.

Ahead of the Schuman Declaration anniversary on Saturday, Parliament’s President David Sassoli issued a statement reasserting his, and Parliament’s, commitment to the conference.

He also said the health crisis has “shown at a very high cost that the EU remains an unfinished project and that the failure to organise solidarity, or to counter the on-going attacks on fundamental rights and rule of law are not theoretical debates.”

The Italian MEP added, “It is time for an ambitious debate on the future of Europe with EU citizens and all stakeholders, in order to shape the Union in which we want to live together and to find an agreement among European citizens on the political foundations we want to build for the recovery of the European continent.”

Sassoli continued, “In this context, we continue to believe that the planned European-wide project, the “Conference on the Future of Europe” is the appropriate forum to fulfil this ambition. The conference needs to be convened as soon as possible and has to result in clear proposals by engaging
directly and meaningfully with citizens, in order to bring about a profound reform of the Union, enabling it, above all, to take decisions in the common European interest so as to make the EU more effective, united, democratic, sovereign and resilient."

“It is important that we use this Europe Day this weekend to call for a bold and courageous vision to match the ambition of the Schuman Plan” Giovanni Brauzzi, former deputy head of mission at the Italian embassy in London

In a reference to the continuing discord about the make-up and structure of the conference, including disagreement over who should head the body, he said, “We reaffirm Parliament’s position and take note of the Commission’s position that the conference process, its concept, structure, timing and scope should be agreed upon jointly by the three institutions.”

Sassoli called on Member States “to come forward with an ambitious position” concerning the conference.

Undeterred by its postponement, 15 NGOs from across Europe have come together to launch what they call “a citizens-led conversation” about the EU’s future, called “Citizens Take Over Europe.”

It launches on Saturday with an online conference where participants get the opportunity to debate the EU’s future. The NGOs include New Europeans, EU Democracy Lab, We Move, European Civic Forum and European Alternatives. A keynote speaker at the launch is Timothy Garton Ash, the award-winning British historian.

Ahead of this weekend’s event, attention has focussed on a proposal by a team of policy experts and citizens’ rights campaigners, led by retired Italian diplomat Giovanni Brauzzi, to hold an international conference on the lessons learned to be from the Coronavirus crisis, including the creation of a “health union” in Europe.

Brauzzi, a former deputy head of mission at the Italian embassy in London, said, “It is clear that closer healthcare integration cannot be achieved without considering a whole series of related issues such as subsidiarity, economics, citizenship, internal borders and even trade and external affairs. That is why it is important that we use this Europe Day this weekend to call for a bold and courageous vision to match the ambition of the Schuman Plan.”

He added, “We are therefore launching our appeal for an international conference as soon as possible to discuss all these issues together, both from the perspective of the policymakers and very importantly from that of the citizens.”

“The Council was never enthusiastic and has simply used the Coronavirus to sit on its hands instead of engaging with the other two institutions to agree a way forward. Without such an agreement, the Future of Europe Conference has been thrown into limbo” Roger Casale, New Europeans

His comments partly echo those of the Commission and some MEPs who have suggested that the Future of Europe conference should focus on healthcare issues if and when it does finally go ahead.

Speaking ahead of Saturday's “Citizens Take Over Europe” event, Roger Casale of the New Europeans NGO, told The Parliament Magazine, “It is clear that the number one thing that citizens
want to talk about at the moment is health in all its aspects – physical, mental and emotional. If we are to get this right our lifestyles and priorities need to change. The first thing we need to do is to talk about that, which is why such initiatives are so important.”

The former UK Labour MP said, “What is exciting is just that it is quite clear that citizens still want to talk about the Future of Europe, even though the institutions have put the planned Future of Europe conference in ice. The politicians may have underestimated the resilience and commitment of citizens and civil society organisations to structure and take forward that conversation ourselves – and now many of them want to be part of the conversation."

“We are very encouraged by the explosion of interest from the Commission and Parliament in our proposal for a health union post the Coronavirus crisis and we look forward to engaging with them at the follow up conference we will be appealing for on Europe Day.”

Of the three EU institutions. Parliament has been seen as the most enthusiastic about the conference with the Commission being a facilitator. Casale said “The Council was never enthusiastic and has simply used the Coronavirus to sit on its hands instead of engaging with the other two institutions to agree a way forward. Without such an agreement, the Future of Europe Conference has been thrown into limbo.”

About the author

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