

Second Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe in Strasbourg

23 October 2021

9:00 – 17:00

*On Saturday 23 October 2021 the Conference Plenary met for its second meeting in Strasbourg, with the **full citizens' component** (80 ambassadors of the European Citizens' Panels, 27 representatives of the national panels and events and the President of the European Youth Forum) present. Citizens were outspoken about their expectation to have a real dialogue and debate. It was the first opportunity to **focus on citizens' contributions** from the [European Citizens' Panels](#) (followed by a debate), national panels and events, the [European Youth Event](#) and the [second interim report from the Multilingual Digital Platform](#) (followed by a debate). It was also the first time that the **nine thematic Working Groups** met, composed of members from all components. Representatives of the **Western Balkans** countries were invited to this session and given the floor. 405 members participated in the Plenary, 274 on-site and 131 remotely. From the Commission, Vice-Presidents Šuica, Šefcovic, Jourova and Commissioner McGuinness participated.*

In their opening remarks, Co-Chairs Member of the European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt, Slovenian State Secretary for EU Affairs, Gašper Dovžan and Commission Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Dubravka Šuica welcomed in particular the 80 ambassadors from the European Citizens' Panels, who participated for the first time, and stressed the need for the Conference to be citizen focussed. They also emphasized the role of national panels and events and welcomed representatives of the Western Balkan countries. Vice-President Šuica specifically called for gender balance in all Working Groups.

European Citizens' Panels (agenda point 2)

Vice-President Šuica introduced the work of the European Citizens' Panels so far and the upcoming work leading to the recommendations of Panels One and Two in December. She shared her personal experience of attending a Panel and the impressive commitment of a very diverse group of citizens in this work.

Two representatives from each of the European Citizens' Panels presented the work and the streams on which the respective Panels agreed to focus on.

Representatives of **Panel 1 (Stronger economy, social justice and jobs / youth, sport, culture and education / digital transformation)** stressed in particular the importance to work on education and a European dimension in education; the fight against unemployment, especially for the young and of ensuring a transition between study and work; the value of cultural and sporting activities; the effects of digitalisation; adequate social security systems allowing all to live safely; the urgency to tackle climate change and ensuring at the same time competitiveness and a fair society; gender equality and more equality between rich and poor. They voiced their expectation for a genuine dialogue.

Representatives of **Panel 2 (European democracy/values, rights, rule of law, security)** underlined in particular that they will focus on a Europe of respectful debate and without discrimination; the protection of rights for all; equal rights for women and LGBTIQ; the right for young people to have jobs; reliable information and fighting fake news; more cooperation on data protection and protecting privacy and fighting corruption. They also raised education to make sure there is a better understanding of what the EU does; the issue of unanimity voting; a direct election of the Commission President; increasing power of the European Parliament and the idea to have a single

constitution that is above all national law; direct citizens' participation and transparency in decision making.

Representatives of **Panel 3 (Health)** identified as areas of work a humanitarian international fund to which all countries contribute to create hospitals and tackle health problems, such as COVID-19; a European health passport; health education from a young age onwards, including sexual education; the protection of the environment, with concrete projects such as bottle refund systems; more protection of the climate and the need for sustainability; public transport also in rural areas; support for local products and the need for everyone to be able to afford sustainable options.

Representatives of **Panel 4 (EU in the world/migration)** identified as areas of work irregular migration and the need to tackle root causes and improve quality of life in countries of origin, legal ways for migration and targeted training and integration; combatting trafficking and ensuring respect for human rights. They underlined the need for the EU to be self-reliant and to strengthen the EU as a global power and international partner; the importance of an ethical approach in trade policy and security and defence; the topic of a joint army; enlargement, and relations with neighbouring countries.

In the following debate:

- The work of the Panels and the streams identified were welcomed as a very good starting point for substantial discussions, with very relevant topics identified for the further work of the Panels and the Conference overall;
- The importance of this new relationship between representatives and citizens as a new model of democracy fit for the 21 century was stressed, as well as the commitment to follow up on recommendations and keep track of the implementation of the results. The possibility of more permanent, structured citizen participation in the future was also raised;
- Some called for more diversity and inclusiveness of the Conference and urged for a real dialogue, including also disadvantaged groups;
- Several participants referred to topics identified by Panels and on the Platform in their interventions;
- Topics underlined included: the potential of local communities and regional parliaments; economic strength as a necessary basis for many of the projects put forward; innovation; the social charter and social progress protocol (and the possible integration in the Treaties); climate change and just transition; overconsumption and waste; electric mobility; migration; digital transformation; a common voice in foreign policy; strategic autonomy and challenges of demographic change; lowering the voting age to 16;
- While some raised the option of Treaty change where necessary, others considered institutional reforms not as priority and suggested to focus on policy;
- Many stressed the importance of respect of the rule of law; some stressed the need to respect the constitutional identity of all Member States and considered that much of what is being suggested is about taking competences away from Member States.

Vice-President Šefcovic shared his experience as chair of the Working Group on health and that it is clear how much the debate benefits from a brainstorming with the citizens and different actors, he stressed the importance of health not only at personal level but also of society as a whole, and the need to focus on mental health and health literacy. There are very high expectations from the process, but so is the potential.

Report by the Representatives from National Panels and Events (agenda point 3)

This agenda point was chaired by Co-Chair Dovžan, who stressed the importance of the activities at Member State level as a means to bring the Conference close to citizens. The 27 representatives of the National Panels and Events, part of the citizens' component, took the floor and gave short overviews of the activities in the respective Member States. A small number of Member State are planning citizens' panels, in all Member States there are various types of events ongoing, some relying on a bottom-up, decentralised and civil society driven approach, others organising large national and many regional events, often focussing on young people and including cross-border events. The Platform is the central place to report on these events.

Some already had identified priorities emerging from events, such as permanent participatory democracy, youth participation, lowering the voting age to 16, challenges of digitalisation, brain drain and demographic change. This agenda point was not followed by a debate. Many had left the hemicycle at that time; this was noticed by many of the citizens who openly questioned whether politicians are really listening to them.

Report from the European Youth Event (point 4)

In the afternoon, three young members of the European Citizens' panels that had participated in the European Youth Event presented the outcome and the recommendations resulting from that. The top five ideas are: 'Make recycling easier across the EU', 'Hold companies accountable', 'The rule of law', 'Federal Europe' and 'Unite in Multilingualism'. This point was not followed by a debate, but some referred to the EYE report in the debate on the following point.

Multilingual Digital Platform (point 5)

Co-Chair Verhofstadt introduced the latest state of play on the Multilingual Digital Platform, providing statistics on the use and contributions and referring to some of the most endorsed and/or commented ideas under the different topics. This included ideas linked to a just transition and a most commented idea on the promotion of nuclear energy, the idea of a European army, an idea relating to the abolishment of unanimity, a stronger role for the European Parliament and transitional lists; gender equality; the European pillar of social rights and the unconditional basic income. He informed about the upcoming report in December.

In the following debate:

- The Multilingual Digital Platform was seen as an excellent and innovative tool to engage citizens and gather ideas;
- There were also several suggestions to maintain the Platform beyond the Conference, possibly also in the context of a more structured citizen participation in the future;
- It was suggested that certain features could be made more user-friendly and attractive (for example to have an app) and that more needs to be done to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities;
- Concerns were voiced that the Platform is not yet well known enough and does not yet reach enough citizens (in particular young people and women) and more needs to be done to make full use of platform, spread the news and reach beyond the 'usual suspects'. Some questioned whether there has been really anything new so far and whether critical voices and ideas on decentralised approaches are there as well;
- It was stressed that many ideas from the Platform already found their way in the debate of the Panels, and several interventions referenced ideas from the Platform directly;

- The Platform was also seen as a tool to stay in touch with third countries, such as the Western Balkans;
- Some remarked that there are many rather 'meta-ideas' and some very concrete ones and that the Working Groups could help to take this further;
- The use of co-official languages in Spain was raised [*NB: there is a possibility to contribute in these languages via a specific mechanism but some participants appeared not to be aware.*].
- In their interventions participants underlined the importance of several topics raised on the Platform, including: ambitious ideas on health; mental health; a health passport, a strong and more competitive Europe; the role of regions; a more open, fair and social Europe; end unpaid internships; minimum wages; fostering the social dimension, pillar of social rights; ensure convergence between regions, including outermost regions; the EU as a global actor; the role of the Western Balkan countries; global leadership in climate; circular economy; the importance of clear and reliable information for democracy; transnational lists; discussions between a federal and more nation state orientated Europe; more citizens participation; transnational lists and right of initiative; common defence.

Vice-President JOUROVÁ emphasized in her intervention that the concerns about a possible censorship on the Platform at the beginning did not materialise and provided information on the moderation of the Platform, underling that while there is no tolerance towards hate speech only four users had to be blocked so far and the moderation team has worked diligently.

Commissioner MCGUINNESS stressed the need to reflect on the future of the financial system, the banking system, use of digital currency and cryptocurrencies, financial literacy, sustainable finance and how to boost innovation and support of SMEs in the digital and green transition.

Vice-President ŠUICA stressed the need for a better promotion of the platform and encouraged all to help the promotion of this powerful tool for citizens. Asked in a blue card question about treaty change, she recalled that nothing is excluded however we are still in the listening mode and need to see the process and not to prejudge its outcome.

Representatives from the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia and Kosovo took part) welcomed the possibility to participate and emphasized their wish to be more substantively and formally involved and to cooperate beyond topics such as enlargement as such. They underlined that Europe's future cannot be complete without the Western Balkan countries.

Generally, the introduction of a system of **blue cards** (as used in the European Parliament, 1 minute question with 30 seconds answer) seemed to be a success inducing a more dynamic exchange in the debate. For example a representative of a national government asked a question to a citizen whether he regarded the Next Generation EU as a successful tool for the future. In his reply the citizen was very thankful for getting a question, and appeared well prepared to respond; he said that the Recovery packages will have a transformative affect if well implemented.

Closing of the Conference Plenary

The three Co-Chairs closed the meeting and stressed that discussions in the December Plenary will be different, as ambassadors of Panels 1 and 2 will present recommendations and there will be more time for debate. This should also allow to address criticism that was voiced by some citizens in relation to missing dynamic exchanges in this Plenary. In relation to the Platform, the usefulness of the tool was stressed (referring also to the idea to keep it as a permanent feature) and all were called on to promote it.

Working Groups

The Plenary session on 23 October was preceded by the constitutive meetings of the **Working Groups** with all components, including citizens, the day before. Two of the Working Groups were chaired by the Commission (Vice-President Šefcovic and Vice-President Jourova). The Working Groups are assisted by the Common Secretariat and summary records will be prepared. These constitutive meetings of the Working Groups (lasting 2 hours) were an opportunity for members to have a first exchange on the basis of the input from the European Citizens' Panels and the Multilingual Digital Platform so far. Citizens made the point that although they were given the floor at the start, once politicians started to speak, it was difficult for them to interject and asked for better involvement for the next time. The next meetings are expected during the December Plenary session.

Susanne Höke and Viktoria Palotai (Common Secretariat)

See also the joint press release: [Conference on the Future of Europe \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-room/detail/168000)

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