

# The Conference on the Future of Europe: From citizens' recommendations to EU policy



## **CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE / EPC ROUND-UP**

**Ivano di Carlo , Sophie Pornschlegel , Francesco De Angelis , Laura Rayner , Danielle Brady , Filipe Ataíde Lampe , Silvia Carta**

Date: 05/05/2022

On 29 and 30 April, the final Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) adopted its conclusions in 9 subject areas, consisting of 49 proposals and countless affixed measures. They are the culmination of an entire year of European Citizens' Panels; plenary sessions; and local, regional and national events and engagement on the multilingual digital platform. By all the

different means available in the Conference context, people from all over the EU have weighed in on crucial policy questions, including climate change, democracy, digitalisation, foreign affairs, migration and well-being. Citizens, alongside politicians and other stakeholders, were able to express their ideas about how the Union should deal with current and future challenges.

On 9 May, the outcome of the Conference will be presented to the presidents of the three EU institutions, who have committed to follow up on the citizens' proposals. What do the recommendations consist of? How feasible are the ideas? And how can EU leaders take them on board? In this EPC Round-Up, experts and EPC analysts assess the outcomes of the Conference in their specific policy areas and explain how the EU could turn the citizens' recommendations into concrete policy actions.

## GREENING EU CITIES



Filipe Ataíde Lampe, Junior Project Manager, Connecting Europe  
@FilipeALampe

The Conference participants propose a range of ambitious measures which target the EU's environment and climate agenda. Creating more sustainable European cities must become a top-flight priority for EU policymakers.

The European Citizens' Panel 3 proposed measures for the sustainable transformation of cities focus on sustainable and safe road transport (recommendation #4); placing nature at the heart of urban development (recommendation #6); and expanding, restoring and protecting natural ecosystems in cities (recommendation #11).

While the EU has already issued numerous strategies and proposals in these fields, the Conference recommendations reveal that citizens want an even more active European Commission in the greening of cities.

There are various ways the EU can answer the citizens' call for greener cities. First, **prioritising cyclists and pedestrians** over motorised vehicles and increasing permanent inner-city car-free zones. Second, **establishing further minimal green requirements for urban development projects** and extending the requirements of the EU's Environmental Impact Assessment Directive.

Third, **protecting and restoring urban ecosystems** while increasing their visibility for local communities. Fourth, **incorporating the citizens' recommendations into the EU's Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities**, a strategy for 100 cities to become climate-neutral by 2030. And finally, continuing to engage citizens in environmental decision-making for all urban transformation in Europe.

*[Read the full Commentary here.](#)*

## RENEWING THE EU ECONOMY



Francesco De Angelis, Junior Policy Analyst, Europe's Political Economy  
@fradea91



Laura Rayner, Policy Analyst, Social Europe and Well-Being  
@lerayner

The final CoFoE proposals demonstrate that Europe's citizens recognise not only the urgency to renew the EU's economic model and social contract but also the many opportunities.

They acknowledge the emerging consensus for European strategic autonomy (recommendations #8.3, #12, #17) and aligned economic and political strategies (recommendations #11, #29.1). Nevertheless, they also expect equity and sustainability to be intertwined with these goals in the form of a European model of sustainable well-being. More specifically, they refer to wider societal or environmental goals, such as the vision of a more social Europe, the European Pillar of Social Rights, lifelong EU support for citizens, and social and gender dimensions in EU investments (recommendations #12-16).

In short, the citizens wish to see the development of a European model of sustainable well-being underpinned by a shared understanding of what matters to them. The following action points can help turn this into reality:

- The EU should **put a sustainable well-being economy at the centre of its policymaking**, demonstrating that the calls of the Conference have been heard and reflecting the urgency of the climate crisis.
- **Social fairness and environmental sustainability should be embedded** in the reform of EU economic governance. Value-based indicators that reflect the twin transitions and the well-being of people and the planet should be incorporated into the European Semester process.
- Participatory democracy must continue, with opportunities for citizens to define a 'Well-Being Framework', determine which indicators best reflect their priorities and values, and co-create policy.
- **Communication must be two-way**, with the efforts given to listening to citizens' concerns equal to informing them of EU policy decisions.
- **A regular exchange between the EU and the Wellbeing Economy Governments should be established** to learn from their experience in pursuing a well-being economy approach. Similarly, working with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to identify internationally comparable indicators is important for the EU to measure its impact.

The need to shift to a sustainable well-being economy is no longer a question of 'if' but 'when'. It is time for politicians to own this agenda and understand the strength of feeling that runs beneath it.

*[Read the full Commentary here.](#)*

## GENDER EQUALITY & CARE WORK



**Danielle Brady, Junior Policy Analyst, Social Europe and Well-Being**

 [@bradydanielle23](#)



**Laura Rayner, Policy Analyst, Social Europe and Well-Being**

 [@lerayner](#)

Although typically unrecognised, undervalued and heavily dominated by women,

care work has been finally acknowledged as essential in supporting our economies and societies throughout COVID-19. This appreciation was re-emphasised in the citizens' recommendations of European Citizens' Panel 1. The following steps translate these recommendations into concrete proposals to reduce gender inequalities, strengthen care systems and prepare for future demographic change.

1. The EU should **promote investment in the care sector** (recommendations #20, #22, #23).
2. The upcoming European Care Strategy must **set targets for the provision of qualitative, affordable and accessible care across the EU**. Not only must it revise the 2002 Barcelona European Council targets for early childhood care, but also set new ones on elderly care and those requiring full-time care.
3. The Care Strategy should also **create a platform for member states to share their best practices**. This would be a mechanism for transferring knowledge to create long-term systems that offer affordable, accessible and qualitative care to all EU citizens.
4. The European Commission must **ensure that the Work-Life Balance Directive is implemented** across the EU27. As recognised in recommendation #2, a work-life balance enhances social cohesion, contributes to a level playing field in the labour market and positively affects individual well-being.

But while these four steps would address gender inequalities, strengthen care systems and prepare for demographic change, a deeper reassessment of the norms associated with care – pay, conditions and, vitally, responsibilities – is still required. Otherwise, even with EU investment, a Care Strategy and a fully implemented Work-Life Balance Directive, a 'gender-equal Europe' will remain nothing more than an aspiration.

[Read the full Commentary here.](#)

## EU FOREIGN POLICY



Ivano di Carlo, Policy Analyst, Europe in the World

 @ivano\_dicarlo

The citizens' recommendations on EU foreign policy reflect what they expect from the EU in a world where it is constantly confronted with multiple challenges that

threaten its internal and external security.

The participants identify a set of ambitious policy priorities which can contribute to ongoing debates in a domain renowned for being in the jealous custody of the EU member states. These include (i) the EU's strategic outlook in foreign policy and (ii) the reform of its institutional foreign policy arrangements.

Acknowledging the inevitable nexus between security and economy, the citizens offer recommendations to help the EU remain open to the world but not vulnerable to it. For instance, they propose making the EU more autonomous by reducing the strategic dependencies that hamper its capacity to act and undermine its security (e.g. energy) (recommendations #17, #18). Other recommendations mirror, to a certain extent, the recently published Strategic Compass, such as protecting research in strategic priority sectors (i.e. space, cybersecurity) (recommendation #23.3) and using the European Peace Facility to project the EU's role in international crises (recommendation #21.2). However, neither new formats of cooperation (e.g. a European Security Council) nor – as one might have expected – a greater role for the European Parliament in EU foreign policy were proposed.

Institutionally, some recommendations deserve further attention as they are part of a more extensive EU-level debate. For example, strengthening the role of the High Representative (recommendation #21.3) or introducing qualified majority voting in EU foreign policy (recommendation #21.1).

The CoFoE conclusions call for greater EU involvement in the world at a complex historical moment. The war in Ukraine is raging at the EU's borders and reshuffling its domestic and foreign policy priorities. The interdependent nature of the challenges we face requires an EU that shoulders more and new responsibilities for its security and defence. While the citizens' proposed measures will not solve the underlying political and structural challenges of the Union, they can at least give new impetus to a debate that is taking hold not only in Brussels but also across many member states.

## EU DEMOCRACY



**Sophie Pornschlegel, Senior Policy Analyst and Project Manager,  
Connecting Europe**  
@spornschlegel

In the CoFoE, citizens developed several recommendations on democracy in the EU. While they do not provide ready-made solutions to Europe's democratic woes, they pinpoint with astonishing accuracy the issues that decision-makers should urgently tackle in this field.

Firstly, the citizens point to the danger of the EU being considered hypocritical when promoting its democratic values. They suggest that the EU should first strengthen common democratic values within its borders. Only then, in a second step, can it become a 'global ambassador' for the EU's 'democratic model' (recommendation #14). In order to better respect the EU's values, the citizens suggest widening the rule of law conditionality regulation to include all breaches of the rule of law, and not only those affecting the EU budget (recommendation #10). The citizens also propose organising an annual conference to discuss the results of the European Commission's rule of law report (recommendation #11).

Three conclusions can be drawn from the citizens' recommendations on democracy. First, **citizens are well-aware of the EU's problem with democratic erosion**. Second, **decision-makers should not see these citizens' recommendations as ready-made solutions** but rather as an additional tool to improve their decision-making. Last, decision-makers should recognise that **connecting citizens to ongoing political debates holds an intrinsic value**.

*Read the full Commentary here.*

## EU MIGRATION & ASYLUM POLICY



Silvia Carta, Policy Analyst, European Migration and Diversity

 @CartaSilvi

The comprehensive list of citizens' recommendations on migration touch upon different crucial issues in EU migration and asylum policy: **legal labour migration** (recommendation #41); **humane border management** (#42); and an **asylum system** based on solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility (#43-44).

The good news is that the European Commission has just presented a new legal migration package that aligns with the recommendations on legal migration and labour market access for migrants. The upcoming discussion and negotiations on these proposals give EU policymakers and member states the chance to show that they are willing to listen to EU citizens and create more accessible and attractive opportunities for third-country nationals to work and live in the EU.

More complex, however, is the area of asylum. Many of the recommendations' proposals have already been debated (unsuccessfully) in the past few years. The recommendations identify some of the sticking issues in the EU asylum debate, such as the lack of solidarity (#44) and the greatly divergent protection standards across member states (#43-44). But solving them with legislative reforms, as the proposals suggest, might be difficult. Two consecutive attempts to reform the EU asylum rules – first in 2016, then the New Pact in 2020 – bear witness to the enormous difficulties in reaching a consensus in the EU.

All might not be lost. The EU's unprecedented mobilisation around Ukrainian refugees shows that the EU and its member states have the instruments to make the CofoE recommendations work in practice. The activation of the long-dormant Temporary Protection Directive proves that a coordinated, humane response is possible, despite the practical challenges. That Ukrainian refugees have been able to enter the EU legally and access protection without undergoing Kafkaesque procedures means that they are spared the unnecessary sufferings that other asylum seekers face.

Ultimately, be it through legislative improvements or better implementation of the existing laws, the EU already has the tools to improve the conditions of all those looking for protection. What has lacked so far is the political will. The open arms

for Ukrainians should be the rule, not the exception. The CoFoE also points in this direction: European citizens want policies that fully respect migrants' and refugees' rights.

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