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## **BackgroundNote**

### **Session IV**

#### **The Conference on the Future of Europe**

#### **Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC)**

Paris, 21 February 2022





## Session IV

### The Conference on the Future of Europe

On 10 March 2021, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council adopted a joint declaration setting up the Conference on the Future of Europe, whose work began the following 9 May. **The Conference aims to listen to European citizens' worries and goals for the future of Europe** through citizens' panels - at the European and national levels - as well as through a multitude of events and debates organised throughout the Union and on a multilingual digital platform. The three institutions committed to following up on the recommendations made during the conference in full respect of their competencies as well as the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality enshrined in EU treaties.

The Conference set up an Executive Board with equal representation from the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission, as well as representatives of COSAC's presidential Troika. It also provides for a **Plenary Conference** which includes 108 national MPs and 108 MEPs.<sup>1</sup>

The Plenary Conference debates and discusses the **recommendations** made by citizens' panels and on the digital platform. It makes proposals to the Executive Board on a consensual basis. Its works are prepared by **nine thematic working groups**.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of these debates and proposals, the Executive Board, working on a consensual basis, drafts and publishes the conclusions of the Plenary Conference and presents the final results of the Conference in a report.

The Plenary Conference has met three times since it was set up and will meet another four times before presenting the Conference's conclusions,

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<sup>1</sup> Also take part in the Plenary Conference 54 representatives of the Council, 3 representatives of the European Commission, 108 citizens, 18 representatives of the European Committee of the Regions, 18 representatives of the European Economic and Social Committee, 12 representatives of social partners and 8 representatives of civil society.

<sup>2</sup> Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; Digital transition; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Migration; Education, culture, youth and sport; EU in the world; European democracy.

expected on 9 May 2022. Similarly, the four<sup>3</sup> Citizens' Panels<sup>4</sup> met, and several adopted conclusions, the main points of which are presented in this note.

## 1. A summary of the recommendations of the European Citizens' Panel n°2 on topic of "European Democracy; Values and Rights; Rule of Law, Security"

### *Fighting discrimination and ensuring the rights of individuals and nature*

In particular, the Panel suggests adopting European legislation setting up quotas (for women, minorities, seniors, and young people) to **fight discrimination** in the labour market. It also recommends using subsidies to foster the creation of affordable kindergartens and children's play areas in large and small companies.

Concerning **individual rights**, especially the **right to privacy**, the Panel suggests establishing an annual external audit and certification for organisations that process personal data at the European level. It also proposes strengthening the European Union's competences in education and awareness of data protection by reinforcing the rules of the GDPR and better protecting the data of minors.

Concerning the **rights of nature**, the Panel recommends making changes to Directive 98/58/EC concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes in order to introduce more detailed criteria to step up protection of animal welfare and respect for the environment. It also stresses the need to tax all negative emissions, pesticides, and excessive water use according to their impact on the environment. It also proposes levying customs duties on all imported agricultural products to eliminate the competitive advantages of countries that do not respect the same environmental standards as the European Union. Finally, it suggests taxing long-distance animal transport

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<sup>3</sup> Panel 1: "A stronger economy, social justice and jobs / Education, culture,, youth and sport, / Digital transformation", Panel 2: "European Democracy / Values and Rights, Rule of Law and Security", Panel 3: "Climate Change and Environment / Health", Panel 4: " EU in the World/Migration".

<sup>4</sup> These panels were made up of 200 randomly selected European citizens who are representative of the diversity of the EU, with one third being young people (aged 16-25).

and reallocating public subsidies to support a transition to sustainability.

*Protecting democracy and the rule of law by taking action on security and the media sector*

The Panel proposes generally stepping up the protection of the rule of law by making changes to Regulation 2020/2092 of 16 December 2020 on **conditionality** so that it applies to all breaches of the rule of law instead of just those breaches that have an impact on the EU's budget. It also suggests holding annual conferences on the rule of law after the publication of the European Commission's annual Report on the rule of law.

More specifically, it makes several recommendations to reorient how the **media sector** in Europe is organised. For example, it calls for a more rigorous application of European competition rules in the media sector to ensure media protection and pluralism in all Member States and to prevent political appointments to media companies' boards. In the future, it also recommends that the upcoming EU Media Freedom act entails rules on preventing politicians from owning media outlets or having a strong influence on their content. To this end, it advocates drafting a directive that lays out minimum standards for media independence. Finally, the Panel calls for more funding to fight disinformation and support existing organisations and initiatives, such as the Code of Practice against Disinformation, the European Digital Media Observatory, as well as initiatives already carried out within the Member States.

In terms of **security**, the Panel recommends strengthening the protection of citizens, organisations and institutions against new threats coming from breaches of cybersecurity and the use of artificial intelligence for criminal purposes. It proposes making use of national centers for cybersecurity and the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity.

*Reforming the European Union's organisation and functioning*

The Panel makes several proposals to reform the European Union's **institutions**. Firstly, it calls for a new electoral law for the European Parliament: European citizens should have the right to vote for different EU



parties, each comprised of candidates from several Member States. The Panel also recommends changing the names of the EU institutions to clarify their functions. For example, the Council of the European Union could be renamed the "Senate of the European Union".

The Panel also wants to put **citizens** back at the centre of the decision-making process. Firstly, it recommends creating an online platform for European citizens to ask technical questions or request specific information from experts in order to obtain factual and sourced answers on EU policies. The Panel also suggests allowing the European Parliament to hold an EU-wide referendum on an issue of major importance.

In **voting**, the panel recommends setting up another digital platform to allow European citizens to vote **online**. The panel also wants to reform the current voting system in force in EU institutions by focusing on the issue of **unanimous** voting. For the Panel, votes could be weighted and calculated in an equitable way to protect smaller countries.

The panel also makes several recommendations to **better govern the economic players** within the European Union. First, it suggests making public investments more transparent. It also recommends taxing the revenue of large companies to contribute to public investment, especially in education. Finally, it proposes a more active fight against tax havens.

### *Building European identity*

First, the Panel recommends strengthening the **democratic culture** of Europe's citizens and leaders by fostering education in democracy in all EU Member States. It also recommends creating a charter or code of conduct for EU leaders.

It then insists on the need to reinforce **European identity**. To this end, it recommends developing and increasing access to existing translation technology, such as artificial intelligence, in order to reduce the language barriers to smooth communication between European citizens. It also suggests establishing a special fund to finance meetings between EU citizens, both online and offline.

In terms of **migration**, the Panel recommends encouraging the spread of European values and identity (Rule of law, democracy, solidarity) during the integration process for immigrants arriving in Europe. It also suggests developing programmes that seek to create social ties between EU citizens and immigrants and invites European companies to take part in these initiatives.

The Panel lays out several recommendations concerning the **information available on the European Union**. On this issue, the Panel considers that the European Union should provide the media with more resources and reliable information on its activities and the policies that it pursues. The EU should also make sure that this information is broadcast on the public television channels in each of the Member States. It also invites EU institutions and representatives to use more accessible, less bureaucratic language in their communications and calls for more widespread use of new communication channels – social media – to make a younger audience more aware of EU issues.

#### *Reinforcing citizen participation*

Finally, the Panel lays out several recommendations to strengthen **citizens' direct participation in the European Union's democratic life**. It recommends appointing independent citizen observers for all European Union decision-making processes, who would be tasked with certifying that the democratic mechanisms are working correctly. It also suggests establishing a new permanent body made up of representatives of European citizens, in charge of spreading useful and important information among citizens at large. Finally, it recommends holding assemblies every 12 to 18 months, comprised of citizens randomly selected under a law or legally binding regulation, to decide on a certain number of issues. Political leaders must then follow this body's recommendations or give an explanation.

Furthermore, the Panel recommends resuming negotiations to establish a **constitution for Europe**. To this end, it recommends constitutionalising human rights and democratic values.

Finally, the Panel suggests **promoting citizen participation** through

commercial and advertising campaigns.

## 2. A summary of the recommendations of European citizens' panel n° 3 on the topic "Climate change and the environment / Health"

### *Fostering access to quality healthcare for all*

First, the Panel recommends amending the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to make **health** a competence shared between the Union and Member States. The European **Medicines** Agency or a new specialised agency would be responsible for negotiating with the pharmaceutical industry and obtaining the most appropriate prices to ensure that quality treatments can be accessed at a fair local cost in all Member States. The EU must also ensure that private healthcare providers do not unfairly benefit from public funds to the detriment of public healthcare systems, which should receive increased funding.

In detail, the Panel insists on accessible dental care, the creation of personalised medical files accessible throughout the European Union for those who want them, and the standardisation of conditions of eligibility for medically assisted reproduction procedures.

Concerning the **healthcare system**, the Panel recommends standardising healthcare professionals' training and working conditions throughout the EU, in particular with decent minimum wages, maximum working hours, and identical training standards for the same certifications.

In **research**, the EU could increase the budget for joint research projects in health and increase scientific cooperation at the EU level.

In matters of **taxation**, the Panel recommends lowering taxes on feminine hygiene products and hormonal contraception products used for medical reasons.

### *Moving towards a more sustainable society by changing consumption habits*

The Panel makes several recommendations to reorient the economy and the

model of consumption. First, the **fight against planned obsolescence** entails extending product warranty periods, setting a maximum price for spare parts after the warranty period, and reducing taxes for repair services. Stricter **environmental and social standards** should apply in a harmonised way throughout the EU and be **applied to imported goods**. The Panel recommends establishing a uniform **eco-score system** that specifies the global environmental footprint of each product sold in the European Union in order to make consumers more aware of what they buy. Clothing items that arrive in the common market should show an indicator that guarantees that the product meets **sustainability** criteria. **Advertising** for products that harm the environment should be limited or prohibited. The EU should also take measures to **reduce waste** by encouraging recycling, removing unsustainable packaging used for foodstuffs, and fostering a circular economy.

The Panel also wants a directive that requires **urban development programmes** to respect specific environmental requirements, to make cities greener especially with regard to buildings. This will allow renewable energy sources to be used, reduce energy consumption, lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and include vegetation in architectural projects. Rapid and massive forestation and reforestation in the European Union should be encouraged, as should the expansion of protected areas for biodiversity.

#### *Taking action in the fields of energy and transport*

In the field of energy, the Panel recommends making **CO<sub>2</sub> filters** mandatory for coal power plants. The EU should provide financial aid to Member States that do not have enough resources to install these filters if they apply the EU's climate policies. It also recommends expanding **wind** energy, which should be used to produce green hydrogen. **Fines** should be imposed on polluters alongside financial support for organisations designed to help restore the ecosystem. Finally, the EU should reduce the quantity of goods imported that do not meet its environmental footprint standards.

Concerning transport, the EU should financially support **Member States** in expanding **public transport** networks and Internet connectivity in rural areas. Priority should be given to **railroads**. This seeks to make rural areas more

attractive and reduce the pollution related to overpopulated cities. The EU should also encourage the purchase of **electric vehicles** that meet good battery life standards. Investments should also be made to develop other non-polluting technologies such as **biofuels and hydrogen** for vehicles whose electrification is difficult to achieve, such as **boats and lorries**. Finally, the panel recommends encouraging **bicycle use**, especially by building new bike paths.

#### *Taking action on food to preserve health and the environment*

The Panel recommends that the EU grants subsidies to expand **organic and vertical agriculture**. Only **sustainable** agriculture should receive subsidies. The EU should also set minimum standards for food quality, the traceability of foodstuffs, the consumption of seasonal foods in school cafeterias, and subsidise healthy products in schools. The concept of **local and quality** foodstuffs needs to be defined. Furthermore, the panel recommends a drastic reduction in the use of **pesticides** and **chemical fertilisers** in all types of agriculture while speeding up research into **natural alternatives**.

Intensive industrial **livestock farming** should be reduced to limit methane production and water pollution. Inspections related to banned excessive use of antibiotics and other veterinary medicines in animal feed additives will need to be stepped up. EU legislation should require the use of hormonal substances and endocrine disruptors in food production to be shown on food labels.

Finally, the Panel recommends establishing a European-wide scoring system for **healthy food** that relies on the best practices in force in Member States in order to apply labels to food products to inform consumers of their impact on health. **Taxes** on food that harms health should be applied to reduce their consumption.

#### *The essential role of education and training*

The Panel places special emphasis on the role of education and information. It recommends including food production in public education by supporting the creation of **gardens in schools** and a **week for health** in all Member



States, with mental health given particular prominence. Issues of mental health and sexual education should appear in school curricula. Courses on providing first aid should be provided to all EU citizens free of charge.

The EU should also establish a **digital platform verified** by several experts that provides citizens with independent sources of information based on scientific data **to understand** the issues related to **climate change**.

A common charter should be adopted to provide Member States with a framework to organise regular information and educational campaigns for citizens to **increase their awareness of the impact of their daily actions**, such as the method of transport they use and how they process their waste.