

CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

In adopting its resolution of 15 January 2020, the European Parliament officially launched the process which will culminate in the announcement of the conclusions reached by the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In these tense and troubled times, the finishing line in 2022 seems a very long way off. Parliament, though, has sensibly undertaken to follow up the Conference ‘without delay’ (paragraph 31) to ensure it leads to firm commitments. The ‘high-level patronage’ of the three Presidents – of Parliament, the European Council and the Commission – will lend momentum to the entire process (paragraph 20).

Evident throughout the resolution is the laudable intent to encourage European citizens to play an active role in both the preparations for and the work of the Conference. An interinstitutional memorandum of understanding (paragraph 28) is expected to shed light on the Conference’s precise format and timeline, and on how the many civic ‘agora’ fit into the equation.

In short, that document will set out the procedures required for direct coordination under the stewardship of the European Parliament and the other European institutions, shielded from populist interference and insidious anti-parliamentary sentiment.

Thanks to the Lisbon Treaty (Article 12 TEU), we can of course count the national parliaments among the institutions which ‘contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union’. The ‘strict parity’ clause governing their equal representation with the European Parliament will safeguard this network of elected assemblies which, 20 years ago, played such a decisive role in the Nice Convention on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Indeed, it would be a serious constitutional error to break up this cohesive unit and simply lump the individual parliaments together with their respective national governments, which have their own representative body, the Council.

Moreover, the work set in train by the resolution of 15 January will no doubt provide yet further confirmation of the golden European rule that conferences and treaties are only ever the product of continuous efforts to forge an ‘ever-closer Union’, come what may.

The Conference has, then, already begun. Its format and conclusions will clearly be shaped to a large extent by the precise measures that the EU is forced to take in the next two years.

The health emergency, economic stagnation, the migration crisis and the fallout from Brexit are four extraordinary challenges which call for an extraordinary response. There is neither time nor room for ordinary administrative procedures – and certainly not for the renationalisation of policies. Any European citizen can see that these four challenges transcend borders and the capabilities of any one Member State.

This is why the ‘future of Europe’ will begin when we recognise that, in view of the sheer scale of the challenges facing us, we need to come up with not only new laws, but also new procedures and new institutional arrangements.

The major questions hanging in the air (such as proposals for a euro area budget, banking security, the joint supervision of common borders or national benefits for those left unemployed by new working arrangements) must be answered using methods that allow no scope for delaying tactics or obstructionism.

Europe’s fate will, once again, be determined by its ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties. This Conference will reveal whether we are up to the challenge.