

# EXPERT'S INSIGHTS

## Europe's New Chapter: Navigating the Future in a Shifting Global Landscape

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### Abstract

The management of each of the crises that the European Union has been facing in the last decade has shown that individual national approaches lead to a chronic inability to make collective decisions on strategic issues and that this cannot be the future of a swiftly adaptive and geo-politically oriented Europe.

The Future of Europe Conference offered the opportunity for European institutions to reconsider the relationship with Europe's citizens, giving the public a direct voice through innovative participation in the democratic process. But we cannot allow ourselves to stop there, and leave it be a mere listening exercise.

The next step is using those tools and the momentum around the conversation of Europe of tomorrow that had started with the Conference of the future of Europe to adapt the Union and its institutions to the necessities of the modern-day world.

As European citizens, we need a strong European Union, capable of acting swiftly in a wide range of policy areas, from health and fiscal policy, energy procurement, and climate, to foreign affairs and defence. We need a powerful Europe on the global stage, able to keep its promises to those that aspire to become part of it. A Europe that can tackle new security and defence threats, and foreign interference and that can set new global standards for a clean environment while fighting unfair industrial competition. A Union, that stands up for rule of law and a responsive approach to migration.

**Keywords:** European Union, the Future of Europe Conference, EU institutions, EU's foreign policy, Green Europe/European Green Deal.

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## Introduction

A popular quote that came as a paraphrase of and discussion on Charles Darwin's *"Origin of Species"* suggests that *"It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself"* (see Darwin..., 2022).

This evolutionary provision could be applied just as much to the living world of species as to the organism of institutions: they either adapt or become irrelevant. Over time, that deduction has proven axiomatic, with a myriad of examples of thriving civilizations, empires that once stretched over continents and institutions that were destined to only remain a lesson from the pages of history books, because they refused to realize the changing realities and adjust to them.

This is precisely why the discussion on the Future of Europe is important.

It is also why the liberal-centrists group at the European parliament adopted as one of its core priorities at the beginning of the current legislative mandate that *"Renew Europe will prioritise the Conference on the Future of Europe, which will create a European wide conversation on the future of Europe by bringing all the relevant actors to the table; the EU Institutions, civil society and, most importantly, citizens. Together finding a way forward from the current disconnect of EU institutions and citizens"* (Renew Europe, 2019). The Renew Europe group spearheaded the battle of holding this conversation with the citizens, as at a time of significant changes and challenges, the Conference was meant to give Europeans the opportunity to express their expectations of the European Union to adapt it to the future.

Arguably, the design of the Conference of the Future of Europe outlined by the European Commission was from the moment of its conception fearful of straightforward Treaty changes.

Indeed, one of the most painful aspects of institutional work is that the EU operates in the XXI century with XX-century tools and mechanisms. EU institutions have not undergone major reforms since the Treaty of Lisbon, more than a decade ago, with the result, that action often has to be taken in the form of extraordinary measures outside the EU Treaties, to adapt the Union's response to new realities. This was evident during the 2008 financial crisis, the 2014 migration crisis, Brexit in 2016, the response to the COVID pandemic in 2020 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The management of each of these crises has shown that individual national approaches lead to a chronic inability to take collective decisions on strategic issues and that this cannot be the future of a swiftly adaptive and geo-politically oriented Europe. And while there is no – even until today – unanimity in the views of the main European institutions as to what action should follow the Conference, in one form or another, change, revision and renewal are needed, and should be done through an open debate on our way forward.

The Future of Europe Conference thus offered the opportunity for the European institutions to rethink the relationship with Europe's citizens, giving the public a direct voice

through innovative participation in the democratic process. But we cannot allow ourselves to stop there, and leave it be a mere listening exercise. Modern digital democracy offers enormous opportunities, so Europe must develop a permanent effective mechanism capable of capturing the most relevant and promising proposals coming from citizens, which will not replace representative democracy but will feed into the daily decision making in the EU with the participation of active free citizens.

The next step is using those tools and the momentum around the conversation of Europe of tomorrow that had started with the Conference of the future of Europe to adapt the Union and its institutions to the necessities of the modern-day world.

I believe that as European citizens, we need a strong European Union, capable of acting swiftly in a wide range of policy areas, from health and fiscal policy, energy procurement, and climate, to foreign affairs and defence. We need a powerful Europe on the global stage, able to keep its promises to those that aspire to become part of it. A Europe that can tackle new security and defence threats, and foreign interference and that can set new global standards for a clean environment while fighting unfair industrial competition. A Union that stands up for rule of law and develops a responsive approach to migration.

In the paragraphs below I will outline the key pillars that I am convinced we need to renovate the infrastructure to deliver a stronger Europe for our shared future.

## Europe in the world

The EU's foreign policy is a complex and evolving field, shaped mainly by three elements: the EU's strategic interests, the foreign policies of its member states, and the international environment. The EU faces several foreign policy challenges and is often criticised for its lack of unity and effectiveness, particularly on the issue of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. It is known that European citizens want the EU to do more in the world, but it is often member states that are keen on keeping that core competence in their national capitals.

At the same time, the EU has made incredible progress in just a matter of months. Whilst things tend to normalise quickly in times of conflict, it is important to realise how quickly the EU, not only NATO, has mobilised billion of euros of weaponry for Ukraine. Through the European Peace Facility (EPF) member states have been able to send weapons to Ukraine and replace such equipment with European funds, to the tune of 2.2 billion euros (European Council, 2022).

The EPF is designed to provide financial support to non-EU countries and international organizations that are contributing to peace and security operations, such as peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and post-conflict stabilization. It was conceived with possible conflicts arising in Africa but quickly adapted to the European reality of war on our own continent. This is why its fiscal ceiling was increased by a further 2 billion euros in 2023. This development would have been unimaginable just months before it happened.

At the same time, we must recognise the EU's ground is shifting beneath its feet. Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed Europe's political geography, and the political centre of gravity is moving towards the East. As Ivan Krastev rightly points out, Central and Eastern Europe have regained importance. This is mostly due to the fact "the moral legitimacy of the Franco-German couple that has been questioned" as a result of Russia's brutal war of aggression (Krastev, 2022). The gravest task Brussels faces once the war is over is consolidating peace and democracy in what used to be Russia's sphere of influence, i.e., Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans as part of our common security policy.

Whilst progress has been slow, I believe that the EU is now on a path where defence and foreign policy are spoken of in the same room and at the same time. Europe has become accustomed to using the language of war, understanding it must have hard power for its soft power to work. Wars often break taboos. This is why you see my political group in the European Parliament, the Renew Europe Group, call for the delivery of the German-made Leopard tanks for Ukraine. An action that was unimaginable just a year ago.

Stepping up our geopolitical role and strengthening our united voice in the international scene is, unarguably, the only meaningful way forward. Not only it is the way to support the democratic order, export our values and build alliances, but also to tackle several key issues, such as climate matters, supporting developing countries and ensuring humane treatment to those fleeing war or unjustified persecution with a shared global diplomatic effort.

## **Green Europe**

The EU has been a strong leader in the global fight against climate change for the last decades and continues to lead the way in this direction. In the period 1990 to 2018, considerable progress has been made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 23% while having a 61% increase in the GDP of the EU (European Commission, 2019/a). Tackling climate change and reversing environmental degradation is a key priority for the EU and its citizens, with 77% of Europeans feeling a personal responsibility to act to limit climate change, and a vast majority supporting the direction of a green transition that leaves no one behind (Eurobarometer, 2022).

Recognizing that this is an urgent challenge, already in 2019 the European Commission laid the ground for even more ambitious objectives to address climate change by presenting the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019/b). The EU is committed to providing a sustainable, long-term solution across all sectors of the economy, with the main overarching goal of becoming the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 (Ibid.). Among other things, the Green Deal set out to decarbonise the energy sector, transition the industry to a resilient and circular economy, and invest in technological innovations. Ursula von der Leyen appointed Vice-President Frans Timmermans to lead the work of the Commission on the Green Deal, and outlined the necessity of protecting our environment from pollution, preserving biodiversity, developing technologies for an inclusive and clean transition, fostering sustainability and competitiveness, all while creating opportunities

for economic growth (European Commission, 2019/c). In 2020, the “European Climate Law” was presented in order to mainstream this long-term strategy in all policy fields. The Climate Law aims to ensure that the objectives of the Green Deal are cemented in legislation and all sectors of the economy move towards a climate-neutral future (European Commission, 2020/a). In line with that, the “Fit for 55” package was also put in place to revise and update legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021).

The European Green Deal introduced a range of other significant initiatives that highly contribute to the achievement of Europe's climate objectives. To name a few: The “Farm to Fork” strategy is intended to strengthen the sustainable food policy cycle by looking at the best ways of reducing environmental impact in the different stages of the food chain (European Commission, 2019/b); The “EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030” envisages active and targeted steps to protect and restore biodiversity and make the EU more resilient to address future challenges (Ibid.); The “REPowerEU” plan was aimed at reducing energy dependence and diversifying the energy supply (European Commission, 2022/b).

Additionally, the Green Deal is committed to reducing energy costs and increasing efficiency through building and renovating in line with the circular economy. This effort will contribute to more sustainable and climate-friendly buildings, all the while creating local employment opportunities. Moreover, in an effort to cut greenhouse gas emissions further, the EU plans to invest in smart mobility and make it more affordable and accessible (European Commission, 2019/b).

The EU is committed to making a global impact on climate change and it does so through its internal policies and initiatives that have a wider impact, as well as through bilateral, multilateral, and international cooperation. The goals are clear, but they need to consistently be more ambitious and take into account the scientific data and the fast-paced changes happening around us. Climate diplomacy is essential to advance and reach the targets set out by the EU. The EU actively participates in climate negotiations within the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and other international fora such as the G8 and G20 (European Commission, 2022/a). However, a great effort is necessary to ensure a sustainable future. And that a great deal depends on the ability of the EU to work together with non-EU countries and build strategic alliances to encourage the implementation of international climate agreements, share expertise, and involve active citizen participation and mainstream environmental policies into its bilateral trade relations. It is necessary to keep the dialogue open on the global scene to come up with constructive, long-term initiatives that will work towards a common goal.

## **Independent Europe**

The EU's international cooperation however needs to focus as well on safeguarding its own independence. The COVID pandemic with its follow-up production shortages as well as the Russian invasion and the sanctions for it clearly displayed the outstanding dependencies

of the European Union on critical commodities from a few unreliable suppliers. Thus, one of the important paths ahead of Europe in the future would be to secure its industrial and production independence, while at the same time refusing to revert to protectionism and safeguarding free, fair and sustainable international trade. As argued by the study *“On the path to ‘strategic autonomy’”* conducted within the European Parliamentary Research Service, *“Building European strategic autonomy on a horizontal – cross-policy basis – is expected to strengthen EU multilateral action, reduce dependence on external actors, and make the EU less vulnerable in areas such as energy, disinformation and digital technology... Potentially, this could lead to economic gains which could prove opportune at a time when the EU’s share of global GDP is expected to continue declining up to 2030. Changes in the global gas market also enable the EU to achieve greater strategic autonomy. Preserving and developing technological know-how through an assertive EU industrial and economic policy, aware of European companies’ – particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – potential and strategic value, is key to achieving strategic autonomy. Similarly, strengthening the internal market, completing banking union and consolidating the euro can help the EU keep pace with global competition at a time of geopolitical rivalry”* (Anghel et al., 2020: I).

Indeed, the need to step up Europe’s fight for strategic autonomy and to strengthen its production and business appeal became even more evident after one of our key allies, the USA announced the adoption of the \$369 billion “Inflation Reduction Act”. Albeit in questionable compliance with the rules of the WTO, it is clear that neither engaging in a trade war nor reverting to simple protectionism could be the answer for the Union. Yet, in order to avoid the relocation of production and services of European companies, we need to provide a European response, securing an attractive business environment, reducing red tape and supporting SMEs, while strengthening the EU’s social market economy, the internal market and our industrial and technological firepower.

A positive step in that direction was the announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her 2022 speech on the State of the Union’s intention to set up a “European Sovereignty Fund”. The two big questions as regards the projected success of the fund would be - what matters should receive investment through the fund and how should the fund be incorporated in the budget of the European Union. The view of the Renew Europe group, which I share, is that we need to use the fund to provide targeted financing for significantly reducing Europe’s dependencies on third countries.

That would mean in the first place reducing the structural dependency on the energy supply - through diversifying the energy supply, increasing energy efficiency, improving infrastructures and interconnections and replacing fossil fuels consumption with investments in hydrogen, solar and wind energy, bioenergy, heat pumps, hydropower, fusion energy, energy storage, smart grids, nuclear energy.

It would necessitate secondly, increasing our autonomy in strategic sectors and activities. We need to ensure food security, removing the possibilities for disrupting food production, reducing the production gap and diversifying the supply chains as regards critical products

such as pharmaceuticals and strategic industrial components - for batteries, chips, quantum technologies, photovoltaic panels, microelectronics, raw materials and chemicals. To that end, Europe will have to consider sourcing its own supply of rare-earth metals inside its own borders, as well as forging new partnerships and international trade agreements aimed at mutual sustainable development.

None of the above-mentioned ways to reduce Europe's dependencies is a quick fix, instead, all of them will require a long-term investment. That is why the Fund should be programmed to correspond to the next multiannual financial framework, covering up to the year 2034. Recognizing the structural limits of the EU budget, the Renew Europe Group makes the case for creating a "strategic reserve" that would allow the EU to release funds to strike any newly identified specific dependency. On the other hand, the infrastructure of the fund should seek to avoid overlaps with existing EU instruments. Lastly, ALDE's strategic paper *"A European Sovereignty Fund"* points out that we do *"not expect public funding to cover all the related costs, coming from the EU or national levels. The financing scheme rather requires a well-crafted budget engineering and must involve a blending of funding sources at the EU and national levels: public grants, loans, guarantees, equity, fiscal incentives, and temporary flexibility in state aid rules – provided that this does not distort the level-playing field within the internal market – and, last but not least, private investment."*

## From "Fortress Europe" to Europe of talents

An equally long-overdue renovation of the Union infrastructure is necessary in order to ensure fair and orderly access of migrants to Europe.

Following the influx of refugees after the wars in former Yugoslavia, work began on establishing a pan-European set of rules, starting with the establishment of minimum protection standards and a system of common and uniform standards for protection, which form the body of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). A centrepiece in the CEAS is the so-called Dublin Regulation, establishing rules on the country responsible for asylum applications and the Temporary protection directive (European Council, 2001), providing for a tool to respond to future unprecedented migrant movements.

However, following the migration wave of 2015, it became clear that the existing rules in the Dublin Regulation, under which the first Member State of arrival is responsible for processing applications and granting asylum, led to a distorted system, with countries at external borders under pressure, breaching their obligations by letting migrants through to other Member States.

As a result, in 2016, the Commission proposed a CEAS reform package. It aimed to adjust the Dublin criteria by adding to the existing rules a "corrective allocation mechanism". This mechanism was supposed to *"be triggered automatically were a Member State (is) faced with disproportionate numbers of asylum-seekers. If a Member State decided not to accept the allocation of asylum-seekers from another one under pressure, a 'solidarity contribution' per applicant would have to be made instead"* (Radjenovic, 2019). A "reference key" based



on two criteria with equal weighting: the size of the population and the total gross domestic product (GDP) of a Member State was supposed to be used to determine when a country is under disproportionate asylum pressure. The CEAS reform package was further proposing changes to clarify and shorten asylum procedures, to achieve greater convergence of recognition rates and forms of protection, to revise the standards for the reception of applicants for international protection, to revise the Eurodac asylum fingerprint database, to establish a fully-fledged EU Agency for Asylum, and establish a Union Resettlement Framework.

In 2018, the European Parliament and the Council presidency reached a provisional agreement on five of the legislative proposals, but while the Member States supported in principle the solidary sharing of responsibility, the amendments of the Dublin regulation and the Asylum Procedures regulation led to the lack of support from the Member States. Recognising the clear lack of will in this direction, the great disparities in the asylum system, with different treatment of applications and the highly variable outcome in the Member States, the European Commission made a new proposal in September 2020. The Communication on the *“New pact on migration and asylum”* pointed out that *“The Commission will therefore withdraw its 2016 proposal amending the Dublin Regulation to be replaced by a new, broader instrument for a common framework for asylum and migration management – the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation”* (European Commission, 2020/b). The new legislative package aimed at being a comprehensive proposal bridging migration, asylum, integration and border management policies, revising the existing legislative proposals on asylum procedures and Eurodac, while introducing three new ones – a regulation on screening third-country nationals at the external borders, an asylum and migration management regulation, and a crisis and force majeure regulation.

To complement the legislative proposals, the Commission also provided a migration preparedness and crisis blueprint, a blueprint on resettlement, search and rescue operations by private vessels, guidance on the Facilitators’ directive, as well as new action plans/strategies on integration and inclusion, on voluntary returns and reintegration, migrant smuggling, and skills and talent. In addition, in 2021, the Commission proposed a revision of the Schengen Border Code, and a proposal to ensure that the Schengen area can cope in case of the instrumentalisation of migrants at the EU’s external borders, following the situation on the EU-Belarusian borders.

In June 2022, the Council adopted a negotiation mandate on the proposed screening regulation and the recast EURODAC Regulation, as well as a general approach to the revision of the Schengen Borders Code. In addition, 18 Member States, as well as Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein endorsed a political Declaration on a voluntary solidarity mechanism intended to provide a concrete response to the migratory difficulties faced by the Member States of first entry.

Further, in September 2022, the European Parliament and the upcoming Council Presidencies signed a Joint Roadmap (2022) committing themselves to make the necessary efforts and work together in a spirit of sincere cooperation, towards the adoption of the



legislative proposals before the end of the 2019-2024 legislative period, concluding the legislative reform of the Asylum and Migration framework by February 2024. This step-by-step timeline commitment produced indeed a major step forward, with the agreement on three of the CEAS building blocks – the Reception Conditions Directive, the Resettlement Framework Regulation, were agreed upon and the Qualification Regulation endorsed by Council in December 2022.

The ongoing developments of the Common European Asylum System come to show us that, while there is no silver bullet as regards migration, meaningful proposals drawn from past experiences are on the table. It is now a matter of political will, and tackling populist rhetoric on the future of migration in Europe, to ensure we dispose of flexible and efficient tools to quickly respond to humanitarian crises around the world while making sure that people arrive in an orderly and dignified way, and that those that do not have the right to stay are efficiently returned. It is also a matter of thinking of the future, that we secure meaningful integration policies and easier access to work opportunities in Europe that do not necessitate the risk of lives. Ultimately, in the emotional discussion over keeping Europe a fortress, or making it a continent that pulls talent, we should also keep in mind that, as pointed out by the data in Eurostat *“... the proportion of people of working age in the EU is shrinking, while the number of older people is expanding; this pattern will continue in the next couple of decades, as the post-war baby-boom generation completes its move into retirement. Such developments are likely to have profound implications, not only for individuals but also for governments, businesses and civil society, impacting, among others: health and social care systems, labour markets, public finances and pension entitlements (each of which is covered by subsequent chapters in this publication)”* (Eurostat, 2020).

## Europe of the Rule of Law

The concept of the EU as a “community of law” (*rechtsgemeinschaft*) was introduced by Walter Hallstein, the first President of the European Commission in 1962, and the rule of law was identified as a fundamental common value for all Member States as early as the Declaration on European Identity, adopted by the Heads of State or Government in 1973. The concept was also reflected by the European Court of Justice, which in 1986 with the *Parti écologiste “Les Verts” vs European Parliament* judgment (European Court Report, 1986) held that *“...the European Economic Community is a community based on the rule of law, inasmuch as neither its member states nor its institutions can avoid a review of the question whether the measures adopted by them are in conformity with the basic constitutional charter, the Treaty.”*

The European Court of Justice in fact does not set out a comprehensive legal definition of the principle of the rule of law, despite outlining the principle’s various components in its jurisprudence. The Court rather treats it as an overarching principle, often applied in practice as interpretive guidance, or as suggested by scholars, construes it *“as a ‘meta-principle’ which provides the foundation for an independent and effective judiciary and*

*essentially describes and justifies the subjection of public power to formal and substantive legal constraints to guarantee the primacy of the individual and its protection against the arbitrary or unlawful exercise of public power”* (Pech, 2010: 360).

On the basis of the established case law and a shared constitutional understanding among the Member States, a significant number of the recognised general principles of law subsequently became part of the written primary law of the Union. The provision that lays down the fundamental principles guiding the EU – Article 2 of the TEU – entered into force in 2009 with the Lisbon Treaty and reproduces the language of Article I-2 of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the ratification of which did not succeed. A number of the 1992 amendments to the Maastricht Treaty also refer directly to the rule of law, followed by provisions in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, in 1997. The Treaty of Amsterdam continued this trend by adding a list of principles common to the Member States, introducing as well an innovation in this respect: a clause on the suspension of rights deriving from membership of the Union, as an expression of the importance that the Member States attached to respect for the enumerated fundamental European principles. Article 49, establishing respect for the general principles as a condition for EU accession, also complemented their relevance in addition to the newly introduced Article 7.

Despite their intended significance, however, it became clear in the latest decade that the clauses in case of breach of the principles of the rule of law have limited potency.

So far, the suspension of EU membership rights under Article 7(2) has never been invoked. The preventive procedure under Article 7(1) has been triggered in respect of Poland by the European Commission and respect of Hungary by the European Parliament. But aside from the discussion on when a violation qualifies as “serious” and what constitutes a “clear risk” of a violation, it should be pointed out that the procedure under Article 7(1) TEU is almost entirely at the discretion of the Council. The Council needs to hear the Member State concerned but there is no requirement that the hearing is organised as a one-off process; in addition, the provision stipulates an opportunity – not an obligation – for recommendations to be made to the State concerned, and again an opportunity – not an obligation – for the hearings held to result in a vote on the matter. It is precisely these features of the institutional design and the signals of a lack of political will for Member States’ representatives to actively oppose their colleagues that lead to the assessment that the mechanism under Article 7 TEU is ineffective.

Thus, outside of the Article 7 TEU procedure several additional instruments were proposed to monitor and prevent violations of EU values. The first such monitoring mechanism is the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), established by agreement between the EC and Bulgaria and Romania at the time of accession, an instrument that has been under criticism for its limited topical and fragmented geographical application, leading to the perception of discriminatory treatment. In 2013, the first EU Justice Scoreboard was published, complementing the European Semester. A year later, the European Commission established the Rule of Law Framework, a mechanism aimed at preventing the escalation

of threats to the rule of law to the point of triggering Article 7, through dialogue with the country concerned, which was however regarded by some analysts as a “façade of action” (Kochenov and Pech, 2015; Oliver and Stefanelli, 2016).

Recognising the shortcomings of the existing EU mechanisms, in 2016 the European Parliament made recommendations in the form of an own-initiative report (European Parliament, 2016), calling on the Commission to present a legislative proposal to establish a EU mechanism for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in the form of an inter-institutional agreement that would bind the three institutions in a less cumbersome process with clear consequences. Despite the initial reluctance, the European Parliament continued insisting on a horizontal mechanism, which led to a Commission communication (European Commission, 2019/d) in 2019 paving the way forward in that regard and the publishing of the first Rule of Law report in September 2020 under the guidance of Commissioner Reynders.

As of January 2021, with the adoption of the so-called “conditionality regulation” (Regulation, 2020), the Union budget added an additional layer of protection in cases when breaches of the rule of law affect or risk affecting the EU financial interests.

It is precisely the intertwining of the yearly Commission Rule of Law Reports, bound with the conditionality regulation and removing the blocking veto of member states that present the only meaningful future of keeping all the member states accountable. The Commission Rule of Law reports are a meaningful tool in development - with the 2022 reports, the awaited country-by-country recommendations were added, making it a clear guidance on improving the rule of law situation in the countries. To its existing segments of observation, reporting and recommendations, in the future a component on safeguarding human and civil rights, and the rights of people belonging to minorities needs to be added, in order for the yearly Commission Rule of Law reports to fully correspond to the spirit of Article 2 TEU. Further, in case of severe rule of law backsliding, the Commission should act decisively and not shy away to make use of the measures of suspension of payments or financial corrections that were provided with the Conditionality regulation. Finally, we should make sure that the infrastructure of the future rules out the opportunity of one single government holding hostage the interests of the entire European Union, to avoid responsibility for its rule and law backsliding. The interests of the European Union, its credibility and the future of its enlargement would depend on that.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we should be under no illusion that the Conference for the future of Europe would create a seismic change, however, it opens up the conversation and provides the European institutions with a new tool to respond to public criticism and seek solutions to it. The first element of making this a successful exercise is that the conversation about our common future is held as openly as possible and not just in Brussels. To that end, at the State of the Union address in September 2022, President von der Leyen announced that the

Citizens' Panels will become a regular feature of Europe's democratic life. With a letter of intent to the President of the European Parliament and the Council Presidency, she further specified that Citizens' Panels will be included in the Commission policy-making toolbox so that they can make recommendations before certain key policy proposals, starting with the upcoming work on food waste. Among the objectives of the 2023 Commission Work Programme, the institution reported that 43 new initiatives are either directly or indirectly a follow-up of the proposals of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It would be of paramount importance, however, that indeed the voices of otherwise – not EU-policy-related citizens, following the demographic proportions to ensure fair representation are heard systematically, also using the digital opportunities that our current times provide us with.

The second and equally important element is to provide a meaningful follow-up to the citizen's concerns. With its Resolution on 4 May 2022 on the follow-up to the Conference, the European Parliament called for a convention to activate the procedure for the revision of the Treaties provided in Article 48 TEU (European Parliament, 2022/a), while a Resolution adopted on 9 June proposes a more concrete number of treaty changes (European Parliament, 2022/b). Commissioner President von der Leyen too declared that "the moment has arrived for a European Convention" with her state of the Union speech. All of this stems from the search for tangible solutions to respond to the vision and ideas of citizens and adapt the European institutions to the needs of the XXI century. While it is often said this action bears a risk, it is on the contrary – that stalling this process and burying it in procedures would bring the risk that the Conference for the Future of Europe becomes a temporary political outlet for civil resentment, only confirming the perception of a lack of representativeness and the dictating role of European elites.

But even more importantly, and going beyond responding to the Conference, Europe is above all an idea. It is an aspiration, and a dream for peace and prosperity in the old, conflict-ridden continent. Furthermore, it is vision of a better future. As such, we simply do not have the privilege of keeping it static, we need to develop and evolve the dream of Europe so that it can withstand the turbulence of the time. The argument that we cannot make big changes in the current times is one I cannot agree with. After all, the latest years have shown us that we live in the age of "*permacrisis*", which makes it mandatory for the European Union to respond faster and more decisively and flexibly to shocks.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair", wrote Charles Dickens in the mid-19th century (Dickens, 2015).

And it is precisely in such crossroads of conflicting times that we as Europeans must find the true *raison d'être* of Europe of the 21 century and forge it for the future.

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