

The debate on the future of Europe has a German problem



GERMANY ([HTTPS://WWW.EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=233](https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=233)) / COMMENTARY

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The Conference on the Future of Europe can only lead to tangible results if Germany puts its full weight behind it – and fast. But with the upcoming federal elections and the change in government, there is a risk that Berlin will be too distracted.

After multiple delays, the [Conference on the Future of Europe](https://conference-observatory.eu/) (<https://conference-observatory.eu/>) has finally started. But the endeavour still faces numerous hurdles (<https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-Conference-on-the-Future-of-Europe-Mind-the-gaps~3c8fe8>). First, European citizens – who are meant to play a leading role in the upcoming European Citizens' Panels, national events and the Conference Plenary – are not aware that the Conference is taking place. Second, the complex process needs to gain speed, given that the Conference is supposed to come up with a Final Report in spring 2022. Third, the list of issues to be covered is extensive, even though experience suggests that exercises in citizen participation are most successful when they focus on particular topics and specific questions.

But all these challenges are overshadowed by the fact that EU institutions and national governments still disagree on the *raison d'être* of the Conference and its overall level of ambition. The European Parliament is pushing hard to ensure that the Conference puts political pressure on the (European) Council to implement long-overdue (institutional) reforms. But most national capitals remain sceptical or even outright opposed to the process, thereby undermining the prospects that the Conference will deliver any concrete results.

Berlin's potential absence

Like with many other major EU initiatives in the past, it will require the combined leadership of France and Germany to make a difference. French President Emmanuel Macron has been and will remain a staunch supporter of the Conference. The fact that it will conclude during the French

Council Presidency in the first half of 2022 – with President Macron himself then being part of the Conference's Joint Presidency – will enable Paris to play a crucial role in trying to make sure that the Conference does not end up becoming a *Fata Morgana* of participatory democracy.

But President Macron's engagement will not be enough. He cannot steer the Conference to success single-handedly without an ambitious German counterpart. The Conference can only lead to worthwhile results if the next German federal government and the successor of Angela Merkel (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/After-Merkel-Where-will-Germany-stand-in-Europe-4123c8>) back the process. And Paris and Berlin will have to push in the same direction if the recommendations from the Final Report are to be translated into concrete actions and reforms at the EU level.

However, there is a risk that Berlin will be absent from the process. With the upcoming German federal elections, the likelihood that the Conference will be relegated to a non-event is high. The current government already announced that it does not plan to hold any national citizens panels (<https://www.fdpbt.de/anfrage/kleine-anfrage-begleitung-konferenz-zur-zukunft-europas-durch-deutsche-bundesregierung>) for the time being – so nothing is likely to happen until a new government takes office. And with the European Citizens' Panels starting tomorrow and debates in the Conference Plenary scheduled to commence in October, the Conference will gain momentum while Germany is in full election mode. Political and media attention has been and will be absorbed by the elections and then by the process of forming a new federal government under a new Chancellor after 16 years of Angela Merkel. The political recalibration of German politics will thus take time – time the Conference does not have.

Merkel's departure as Chancellor complicates the situation further. In the past two years, Merkel and her advisors in the Chancellery took a prominent role in the European debate leading to and preparing for the Conference, especially during the German Council Presidency in the second half of 2020. Together with President Macron, Merkel has been one of the few EU leaders arguing that the Conference is a much-needed opportunity to conduct a citizens-led debate about the future of Europe. She made a strong plea that the exercise should lead to concrete proposals rather than ending up being "pie in the sky" (<https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/conference-on-future-of-europe-must-not-be-pie-in-the-sky-affair-warns-angela-merkel>).

No time to lose

To ensure that the next German government turns its attention to the Conference as quickly as possible, those who lead and support the Conference in Brussels and other capitals should step up their efforts to engage and coordinate with those likely to lead the Chancellery and the Federal Foreign Office. They should try to get them involved so that Berlin will be politically committed to the Conference and ready to co-lead the process once the new leadership assumes power in Berlin.

But so far, Europe does not play a role in the German election campaigns at all (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Uninspired-or-indifferent-EU-policy-in-the-2021-German-election-manif-416a18>) – a worrying sign, also with a view of the potential German leadership role in the Conference on the Future of Europe. As things stand, there is a good chance that the Greens will be part of the future German coalition government. The strong European convictions of Annalena Baerbock, whose party wants to use the Conference as the next phase towards a "Federal European Republic" (https://cms.gruene.de/uploads/documents/Vorlaeufiges-Wahlprogramm_GRUENE-Bundestagswahl-2021.pdf), are a good starting point.

However, calling for reforms and praising the potential of the Conference is not enough. The next German government will have to agree on and then promote concrete positions on the main issues and questions discussed in the framework of the Conference, all under severe time pressure. We can expect major divisions between and within the different EU institutions and political camps involved in the Conference to become (even more) evident once it enters its decisive phase in early 2022. At that point, the new German government will have to show leadership and readiness to co-steer the final phases of the Conference in close cooperation with its counterparts on the other side of the Rhine.

Becoming a driving force behind the Conference will be an early opportunity for the new German Chancellor and his/her government to show its commitment to European integration. It will provide a chance to step into Merkel's shoes and offer a clear narrative for Europe's renewal. But to do so, the new leadership will have to commit to the Conference and play a decisive role in implementing its core proposals into practice. In short: to make the process a success, the new

German government needs to take ownership of the Conference – and it needs to do so fast.

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