

Research Briefing
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The Conference on the Future of Europe: proposals and next steps

Summary	1
1 Launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe	3
2 How did the Conference work?	4
3 What did the Conference propose?	5
4 Response to Conference and next steps	6
5 The EU treaty revision process	8

Summary

The Conference on the Future of Europe concluded its work on 9 May 2022, making proposals for significant reforms of the EU. This briefing paper outlines the work of the conference, what it proposed and possible next steps.

What was the Conference on the Future of Europe?

The Conference on the Future of Europe [ran from April 2021 to May 2022](#). It was [established jointly by the European Commission, European Parliament and the Council of the EU](#) (representatives of EU Member State Governments).

The Conference [involved a set of events](#), including EU-wide randomly selected citizens' panels. Contributions from the panels and an [online digital platform](#) were [considered by conference plenaries](#). The conference plenaries [brought together representatives](#) of the EU institutions, national parliaments, civil society organisations and representatives of the citizens' panels.

What did the Conference propose?

The final conference plenary on 29-30 April 2022 [adopted proposals covering 49 different policy objectives](#). These included proposals to move to qualified majority voting for almost all EU decisions, including taxation and common foreign and security policy.

It also called for regular use of citizens' assemblies, possible EU-wide referendums and greater say for citizens in electing the European Commission President. Other proposals included strengthened common defence, asylum, environmental, social, education and health policies.

What happens next?

It will be up to the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and European Commission to examine how to follow up the Conference proposals. The Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has [promised to set out initial follow-up proposals](#) in September 2022. In their responses to the Conference, both the European Parliament and President Macron called for a [European Convention to be established to consider reforms](#) to the EU treaties.

President Macron also made proposals [for a multi-speed Europe](#) which could include an integrated core group as well as a broader "political community" which could include Ukraine, Western Balkan countries and the UK.

Any proposals for EU treaty reform would need to be agreed by all Member States of the EU. In most cases this would also require ratification by national parliaments and referendums in some EU Member States. However, several EU Member States have said they oppose ["unconsidered and premature attempts to launch a process towards Treaty change"](#).

1 Launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, initially proposed a conference to set out a roadmap for the EU's future in March 2019. He said this would bring together the EU institutions, Member States, civil society representatives and EU citizens to review the way the EU worked and possibly propose EU treaty revisions.¹ This idea was then picked up by Ursula von der Leyen when she was put forward as a candidate to be President of the European Commission, the EU's executive body², following the 2019 European elections.³ Her plan also envisaged a lead role for the European Parliament, which welcomed the conference idea.

The Commission and the European Parliament further elaborated the plan following von der Leyen's confirmation as European Commission President.⁴ The Parliament's [proposals for the scope and organisation of the conference](#) were set out in a resolution in January 2020. It called on all participants to be committed to genuine follow-up.⁵

The Conference was originally planned to run from 2020 to 2022 but was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic and discussions between the EU institutions regarding the scope of the Conference and who should chair it.⁶

European Council (EU heads of state or government) conclusions in December 2019 stated that there should be shared ownership by EU institutions and Member States, including national parliaments.⁷ Member States representatives in the Council of the EU gave formal endorsement to the Conference proposal in June 2020, adopting a position on how the Conference should work. This restated the need for shared ownership of the exercise.⁸

¹ La Libre, [La tribune d'Emmanuel Macron aux citoyens européens](#), 4 March 2019. See also Politico, [Macron calls for big EU changes in 'European Renaissance'](#), 4 March 2019.

² [Article 17 \(7\) of the Treaty on European Union](#) (TEU) provides that the Commission President is proposed by the European Council (EU heads of state or government) to the European Parliament and then "elected" by the European Parliament.

³ Ursula von der Leyen, [Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024](#) (pdf), undated.

⁴ See European Parliamentary Research Service briefing, [Preparing the Conference on the Future of Europe](#) (pdf), PE 644.202 – December 2019

⁵ European Parliament, [European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 15 January 2020.

⁶ Politico, [Conference on EU's future derailed by leadership fight](#), 21 September 2020. See also [Politico, What is the Conference on the Future of Europe?](#), 4 March 2021.

⁷ [European Council conclusions, 12 December 2019](#)

⁸ Council of the EU, [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 24 June 2020

Following further discussions between the EU institutions, the Conference was formally launched in Brussels on 10 March 2022.⁹ The Presidents of the European Commission and European Parliament and the Prime Minister of Portugal António Costa (representing the rotating Council Presidency¹⁰) signed a [joint declaration on the Conference](#) which outlined how the Conference would work and committed the EU institutions to following up its recommendations.¹¹

2 How did the Conference work?

The Conference [involved a set of events](#), including EU-wide citizens' panels, national events and specific events for young people. It was overseen by an [Executive Board, co-chaired by representatives](#) of the three EU institutions. These would be Guy Verhofstadt for the European Parliament, Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission, and a representative of whichever Member State held the Council Presidency.¹²

[Four citizens' panels were set up](#), each comprising 200 EU citizens. An external provider [randomly contacted potential participants](#) to take part. The selection was aimed at reflecting the diversity of EU citizens in terms of geographic origin (nationality and urban/rural), gender, age, socioeconomic background and level of education. Each panel included at least one female and one male citizen per Member State. Young people (aged 16 – 25) made up a third of each panel.

The four panels each discussed a particular thematic area. These were grouped around: i) economic and social issues; ii) EU democracy and values; iii) climate change; and iv) migration and global issues). Each panel held three sessions and made a set of recommendations.

Conference plenaries [brought together representatives](#) of the EU institutions, national parliaments, civil society organisations and representatives of the citizens' panels. Nine thematic working groups were set up within the plenaries. Submissions via an [online digital platform](#) were also encouraged. National events included [national citizens' panels](#) set up in six EU Member States. These were Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and The Netherlands.

⁹ Politico, [EU finally approves Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 10 March 2020.

¹⁰ The Presidency of the Council of the EU rotates among Member States of the EU every six months.

¹¹ [Joint Declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the Conference on the Future of Europe, Engaging with citizens for democracy – Building a more resilient Europe](#), 10 March 2021.

¹² Portugal for the first half of 2021, Slovenia for the second half of 2021, and France for the first half of 2022.

Contributions from the digital platform and recommendations from the citizens' panels were collated and then [debated by the conference plenaries](#).

Overall, seven conference plenaries were held, 652,532 people participated in conference events and 52,346 people participated in the digital platform.¹³

3 What did the Conference propose?

The final Conference plenary in Strasbourg on 29-30 April 2022 adopted proposals covering 49 different policy objectives, grouped across nine themes. The report on the final outcome of the Conference setting out these proposals and detailing the work undertaken was [presented to the EU institutions at the European Parliament](#) in Strasbourg on 9 May.

Among the proposals were the following:

- Moving to qualified majority voting for all EU decisions, including taxation and common foreign and security policy. Exceptions would be on admission of new Member States to the EU and changes to EU fundamental principles or the Charter of EU Fundamental Rights where unanimity (allowing national vetoes) would be retained.
- Making the EU decision-making process more understandable, for example by renaming the Council of the EU as the Senate of the EU and the European Commission as the Executive Commission of the EU. Ways of giving national and regional parliaments more of a say would also be considered.
- Regular use of citizens' assemblies to inform EU decision-making and possible EU-wide referendums in exceptional cases.
- Harmonised rules for European Parliament elections across EU states. These would also involve some MEPs being elected on transnational EU-wide lists.
- Greater say for citizens in electing the European Commission President. This would be either through the direct election of the President, or a system where the candidate of the leading party in the Parliament elections becomes President.
- New measures to punish breaches of the rule of law by EU Member States, including through EU treaty changes.

¹³ See European Commission Factsheet, Conference on the Future of Europe, [Report on the final outcome](#), 9 May 2022.

- Improving the effectiveness of common security and defence policy, based on the recently endorsed strategic compass.¹⁴ Defence capabilities would be strengthened to ensure Member States can provide “mutual assistance” where one is the victim of armed aggression, as provided for under [Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#). Joint EU armed forces could be deployed for self-defence and in crisis management, and externally under UN mandates, but duplication with NATO would be avoided.
- Strengthening the ethical dimension of external trade relations, for example through ensuring level playing field social and environmental standards in trade agreements. This would also involve placing restrictions on trade in products from countries that allow forced and child labour.
- Harmonising of policies to prevent tax evasion and avoidance and to avoid tax havens.
- EU action to speed up the green transition by promoting climate friendly agriculture and investment in renewable energy. This would come alongside action to reduce external energy dependency.
- Full implementation of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). This would involve establishing common frameworks for minimum income levels and minimum wage protections in each Member State, and affordable and accessible quality childcare across the EU.
- Establishing common minimum healthcare standards at the EU level.
- Establishing a European Education Area within which all citizens have equal access to quality education and life-long learning. This would involve creating closer links between education systems, working towards core minimum standards, and strengthened mutual recognition of qualifications.
- Reform of the EU asylum system, including common rules for processing asylum applications and sharing of responsibility by redistributing migrants among Member States. Minimum standards for reception of asylum seekers would include allowing them to work.¹⁵

4 Response to Conference and next steps

It will be up to the Council of the EU, the European Parliament and European Commission to examine how to follow up the Conference proposals. At the

¹⁴ See Council of the EU, [A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade](#), 21 March 2022.

¹⁵ Conference on the Future of Europe, [Report on the final outcome](#), May 2022 (pdf).

closing event of the Conference on 9 May, the Conference outcome was [welcomed by the European Parliament](#), the [European Commission](#) and President Macron of France (representing the rotating Council Presidency).¹⁶

A feedback event will take place to update citizens in autumn 2022. In her speech at the closing event, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [promised to set out initial follow-up proposals](#) in September 2022. She said however that the European Commission was already delivering on some of the Conference policy proposals, for example on climate change and reducing energy dependency.¹⁷

In a [resolution on the Conference outcome](#) adopted on 4 May, the European Parliament said it was essential to properly follow up on the Conference proposals and called for a European convention to be convened to consider proposals to revise the EU treaties. It called on all EU institutions to commit to “a constructive and ambitious approach”. It called for specific reforms to make the EU more democratic and to deepen political integration, including through a right of legislative initiative for the European Parliament and the abolition of unanimity in the Council.¹⁸

In a statement at the closing event of the Conference, President Macron also supported calls for a European convention to consider EU treaty reforms (see below). In a speech to the European Parliament on 3 May 2022, the Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi had also called for a possible EU treaty revision, and proposed a move to generalised majority voting and better coordination of EU defence policy.¹⁹ The German Government has also indicated openness towards ideas for reform.²⁰

However, thirteen EU Member States, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia and Sweden, endorsed a statement to coincide with the closing event of the Conference which stated that they would not “support unconsidered and premature attempts to launch a process towards Treaty change”.²¹ All revisions to EU treaties require the unanimous support of Member States (see section 5).

4.1

Proposals from President Macron and reaction

In his speech at the closing event on 9 May, President Macron said he supported the European Parliament’s call for a convention. He called for

¹⁶ French Presidency of the Council of the EU, [Press Conference - The Conference on the Future of Europe concludes its work](#), 9 May 2022

¹⁷ European Commission, [Speech by the President: Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 9 May 2022

¹⁸ European Parliament, [The follow up of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 4 May 2022.

¹⁹ Politico, [Draghi: EU needs ‘pragmatic federalism,’ more integration](#), 3 May 2022.

²⁰ See Euractiv, [Scholz and Macron to reignite Franco-German engine on EU-integration](#), 10 May 2022 and Politico, [Macron floats European ‘community’ open to Ukraine and UK](#), 9 May 2022

²¹ Euractiv, [A third of EU countries oppose changing bloc’s treaties](#), 9 May 2022

institutional reforms to improve the effectiveness of EU decision-making. This would include continuing to generalise the use of qualified majority voting. He also revived calls for a “multi-speed Europe”, allowing Member States who wish to progress to deeper integration to do so.

Referring to the recent applications to join the EU by Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, President Macron suggested that the full accession process for joining the EU for these countries could take decades. However, he proposed the development of a broader “European political community” that these countries could join. This new organisation would be a space for political and security cooperation for democratic European countries that share EU values, including “those who have left the EU”. The proposed community would also allow for cooperation in areas such as energy, transport and free movement of persons. President Macron said he would seek to consult and work with other interested European governments on this plan.²²

Such proposals for a “multi-speed” or “variable geometry” Europe have been [made periodically over several decades](#).²³ In a press conference following the speech Macron specifically mentioned the possibility of including the UK as well, as the Western Balkan countries that have applied to join the EU, in a new European political community.²⁴

Macron’s proposal was not well received in Ukraine, with concerns raised that it was aimed at denying the country full EU membership. Ukraine’s Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba said “[no alternatives to the European integration of Ukraine will be acceptable](#)”. Oleksandr Merezhko, the chair of the Ukraine parliament’s foreign policy committee, also said the proposals were “unacceptable to Ukraine”.²⁵

5

The EU treaty revision process

Some of the policy proposals of the Conference, such as strengthening defence capabilities, promoting the green transition and reforming EU asylum rules, could be adopted under the existing EU treaty framework. However,

²² French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, [Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), 10 May 2022

²³ The leaders of France, Spain, Italy and Germany indicated support for a multi-speed Europe in 2017. See Euractiv, [Versailles: A summit to restore faith in Europe](#), 6 March 2017. For a discussion of previous proposals for a multi-speed Europe see also Irish Times, [Idea of core Europe on everyone's mind again](#), 6 January 2004.

²⁴ French Embassy in London, [President Macron explains proposal for a European political community](#), 12 May 2022. See also Euronews, [What do we know about Macron's idea for a two-tier Europe?](#), 11 May 2022.

²⁵ Newsweek, [Macron Frustrates Ukraine With 'Unacceptable' EU Plan](#), 10 May 2022

many of the reforms of the EU's procedures would require changes to the EU treaties.

[Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union \(TEU\)](#) sets out the process for revising the EU treaties. There are different mechanisms to do this. But each would require the support of all Member States of the EU and, in most cases, ratification by Member States according to their own domestic constitutional procedures. Depending on the Member State this can mean approval by the national parliament or a national referendum on the treaty change.

5.1 Ordinary revision procedure

Under the ordinary revision procedure, the government of any Member State, the European Parliament or the Commission can submit proposals for EU treaty amendments to the Council of the EU. The proposals are then passed on to the European Council (the heads of state or government of each Member State) which can then, by a simple majority vote, decide to establish a convention to examine them. A convention would bring together representatives of national Parliaments, of Member State governments, of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The convention would then adopt recommendations that would need to be considered by an intergovernmental conference, composed of representatives of the Member State governments.

Alternatively, the European Council could decide by a majority vote to establish an intergovernmental conference without having a convention first. This would need the consent of the European Parliament.

Any proposals for reform would need to be agreed unanimously in the intergovernmental conference. For treaty changes to take effect they would then need to be ratified by all the Member States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.

5.2 Simplified revision procedure

Treaty changes in some policy areas can also be adopted by the European Council without the need for an intergovernmental conference.

The government of any Member State, the European Parliament or the Commission can submit to the European Council proposals for revising all or part of the provisions of [Part Three of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union \(TFEU\)](#) relating to the EU's internal policies. This for example covers rules relating to the internal market, the free movement of goods,

economic and monetary policy, environmental, social and employment policy, and immigration, asylum, policing and judicial cooperation.

The European Council may adopt a decision amending all or part of the Part Three TEU provisions. But any such decision cannot increase the competences of the EU. The decision would need to be agreed unanimously, after consulting the European Parliament and the Commission, and the European Central Bank in the case of institutional changes in the monetary area. The decision would then also need to be approved by the Member States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.

[Article 48 \(7\) of the TEU](#) also provides for the European Council to take a decision to move from decision-making by unanimity to qualified majority voting in any part of the TFEU or in [Title V of the TEU](#) which covers the EU's external actions and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The European Council would not however be able to take a decision to move from unanimity in relation to matters in the area of defence or with military implications. Any decision to move to qualified majority voting in the other areas specified would need to be taken by unanimity.

Where the TFEU provides for a special procedure to adopt legislation in a particular area, the European Council can also adopt a decision to move to the use of the [ordinary legislative procedure](#). The ordinary legislative procedure applies across most EU acts and provides that the Council of the EU and the European Parliament jointly adopt EU legislation.

Any decision to move to qualified majority voting or to the ordinary legislative procedure as outlined above could be blocked by a national parliament. Any initiative by the European Council to change the voting or legislative procedure would have to be notified to the national parliaments of the EU. If a national parliament makes known its opposition within six months of the notification then the change cannot be adopted.

5.3

Previous EU treaty reforms

There have been [five significant reforms of the EU treaties](#) since the original [Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community in 1957](#). These were the Single European Act agreed in 1985, the Maastricht Treaty/Treaty on European Union agreed in 1991, the Amsterdam Treaty agreed in 1997, the Nice Treaty agreed in 2002 and the Lisbon Treaty agreed in 2007.

The process of revising EU treaties has not always been smooth, with Member States taking differing positions and some ambitious proposals failing to gain the unanimous support required to effect a treaty revision. The most recent treaty reform was the culmination of a five year process which began with a European convention and involved the abandonment of one treaty text following its rejection in some Member States.

The [European convention held in 2002-03](#), adopted a proposal for an EU constitutional treaty, a modified version of which [was agreed by Member State governments in 2004](#). However, this was abandoned after it was rejected in referendums in France and The Netherlands.²⁶ Subsequently, the EU Member States established another intergovernmental conference in 2007. This [resulted in the Lisbon Treaty](#) which retained some but not all elements of the constitutional treaty. This came into force in 2009, revising the previous EU treaties.²⁷

²⁶ See European Parliament, Factsheets on the EU, [The Treaty of Nice and the Convention on the Future of Europe](#), undated (accessed 18 May 2022).

²⁷ See European Parliament, Factsheets on the EU, [The Treaty of Lisbon](#), undated (accessed 18 May 2022).

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