

Policy Position

If not now, when?

The German government should seize the opportunity that the Conference on the Future of Europe provides

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Last week, the Conference on the Future of Europe was concluded. Now far-reaching reform proposals are on the table. However, there is a great risk of these proposals petering out. The Russian war of aggression shows how urgently the EU needs reforms. The German government should therefore seize the opportunity presented by the Conference. First, it should take its own European policy ambitions seriously and join forces with France to push for treaty changes. Second, it must find pragmatic steps in the short term to develop a constructive agenda from the Conference proposals, even below the threshold of treaty change.

With quite a bombastic and at times [slightly weird](#) plenary, the Conference on the Future of Europe officially ended last week. For one year, 800 randomly selected citizens had discussed necessary reforms for the EU. Now they are calling for changes, some of them far-reaching, such as the end of the unanimity principle in EU foreign and security policy, more financial resources for the EU, and a stronger role for the European Parliament.¹

The Conference has thus succeeded in initiating a discussion. The European Parliament already called for a constitutional convention to implement the ideas of the citizens. The Italian Prime Minister has pledged his support to parts of the agenda. Emmanuel Macron, at whose behest the Conference was launched a year ago, also supports treaty changes and the German chancellor signaled openness, at least in principle, last Monday.

¹ This text was first published by Europe.Table. on 16 May 2022: <https://table.media/europe/en/opinion/when-if-not-now/>

Admittedly, there is much to suggest that these fireworks could end up as a flash in the pan. The Conference looked ill-fated from the beginning. Due to the pandemic and a power struggle between the European institutions, the project was unable to begin for a long time, and was eventually shortened from two years to twelve months. In March 2021, before the official start of the Conference, 12 member states announced that they would not commit to the results under any circumstances. After that, the Conference, overshadowed by pandemic and war, remained largely under the public radar. Now, at the end of the Conference, there is renewed resistance to its proposals, with 13 member states having explicitly spoken out against treaty changes on Monday. This may not look like a good starting point, particularly in light of the geopolitical situation, leading many to wonder whether the EU does not have more urgent tasks at hand than implementing grassroots democratic experiments.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to declare the results of the Conference to be merely a collection of speaking points for European-policy sermons in the years to come. First, the Russian war of aggression shows how urgently the EU needs reform to act effectively: Comprehensive sanctions against Russia are currently failing due to the veto of individual member states. To quickly become independent from Russian energy exports, the EU would need joint investments in infrastructure and the energy industry. However, there is still a lack of funding for this at the European level. In addition, it does not take a military strategist to see that arming 27 member states in parallel is waste of financial resources and will lead to logistical problems. None of these problems is new, but the Conference points out issues that currently seem to hit especially close to home.

Secondly, the framework conditions for reform steps currently are more favorable than they have been a very long time. The reelection of Emmanuel Macron means that France will for the foreseeable future remain governed by a president whose political standing also hinges on his European policy successes. In Italy, the former president of the European Central Bank is governing with a clearly pro-European course and so far has succeeded in outcompeting most anti-EU challengers. The latest election results in the Czech Republic and Slovenia, the clearly more integration-friendly course of the new Dutch government, and the growing isolation of Victor Orbán all show that reforms for deeper unity seem to be in actual reach.

Despite all its weaknesses, the Conference therefore opens a window of opportunity. The German government should have the courage to seize it. Two things are necessary for this: First, the EU needs treaty changes. Real capacity to act in common security and foreign policy or a right of initiative for the European Parliament cannot be implemented within the current treaties. After years of stalemate, the Convention that has been called for, and the support of the French president finally offer an opportunity to make real progress in this area.

In response to the Conference the German Chancellor has so far merely stated that he would not stand in the way of treaty changes. If that remains the attitude, it would be quite underwhelming. All governing parties have been calling for treaty changes for a very long time. In the current coalition agreement, they have also decided to actively work toward them. If the German government wants to live up to its own European policy ambitions, it cannot simply cheer from the sidelines. If the Ampelkoalition is serious about Europe, it must now use all its weight to convince sceptics in other member states.

Secondly, as important as these treaty changes are, it is also clear that they will take time. There is a real danger that this will lead the EU and its member states to get lost in principled debates with little reforms progress in the short-run. That must not happen. In parallel with the Convention, the German government should therefore start to develop a constructive agenda for the continent based on those proposals of the Conference on the

Future of Europe that do not require treaty changes. There are plenty of options for doing so.

In recent years, for example, better funding of the EU budget has often failed, not because of the treaties, but primarily because of resistance from the member states, not least that of Germany. In view of the urgent need for more investment, funds could be raised quickly with the necessary political will. Similarly, a strengthening of European democracy through a reform of EU electoral law and the introduction of transnational lists, as called for by the Conference, is already underway, following approval by the European Parliament in early May. Now it is up to the national governments to support and implement these reforms. Finally, the continent's security capabilities could also be strengthened through joint military projects and procurement, even before treaty changes.

Three years of the coronavirus pandemic and economic crisis, as well as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, have shown how much depends on an EU capable to act. There is currently a unique opportunity to strengthen this ability. For that, time is a decisive factor. This is why the German government should take up the impetus provided by the Conference. And it should do so before the political winds shift again.

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