

# Future of Europe: calls for a stronger local voice in a more inclusive and participatory Europe



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Members of the European Committee of the Regions express satisfaction with the Conference on the Future of Europe as recommendations take shape.

European citizens' call for "more transparency, inclusiveness, and participation" can be partially answered by involving local and regional politicians more in the work of the European Union, the president of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) said on 8 April.

President Apostolos Tzitzikostas, governor of Central Macedonia, was speaking at a plenary session of the Conference on the Future of Europe, a citizen-focused process that, since its launch in May 2021, has seen citizens, representatives of civil society and business discuss ideas on how to develop the EU's activities in nine critical areas with European, national, regional and local politicians discuss. The two-day gathering in Strasbourg, on 8-9 April, saw members of the Conference consolidate proposals gathered through citizens' panels, national panels and a digital platform. The recommendations, ranging from a reduction to the voting age to how the EU agrees its foreign policy, will be considered for approval at the last plenary session of the Conference, on 29-30 April. A final report will then be finalised, for presentation to the presidents of the EU institutions on 9 May, Europe Day.

The CoR has been represented by 18 members, who have put forward positions articulated in a 12-point manifesto adopted on 4 March at the European Summit of Regions and Cities by the CoR and by territorial associations.

Speaking in a session devoted to European democracy, President Tzitzikostas said that locally and regionally elected politicians serve

as a “bridge” between citizens and national governments and – through the European Committee of the Regions – European politics. He called for “a more structured implication of local and regional authorities in EU affairs, including through a stronger Committee of the Regions” as one means of answering “the main request put forward by citizens: namely: better involvement and closing the gap between them and the institutions”.

François Decoster (FR/Renew Europe) of the Regional Council of Hauts-de-France likened the process of the Conference to the daily work of local politicians. “Citizens here in the hemicycle, with elected officials, ...were saying that this is a new democracy. No,” he said: “This is democracy in and of itself. It is the democracy that we in local affairs, in local authorities, in municipalities, in our regional assemblies, we do every single day. And we have to continue that, to make sure that the future of Europe exists via its local authorities.” A member of the working group on education, youth and sport, Mr Decoster, who is the president of the Renew Europe group in the CoR, said that “we do want the European identity to be something that is called for only when we have a crisis, when war is knocking on our door; we want a European identity to be felt every single day, every single week, month, year.”

Members of the Conference are drawing up recommendations on how to protect European democracy, as well as how to deepen it. Muhterem Aras (DE/Greens), president of the State Parliament of Baden-Württemberg, praised the work of the working group on values, rights and security', saying: “We need to defend our standards and our values, and we need to be more effective in this. It is high time for the Commission to introduce proceedings against Hungary”. The European Commission announced in early April that it will launch a process that could see the EU withhold funds for Hungary for failing to meet EU rule-of-law standards.

Several themes of the Conference overlap with the CoR's political priority to help build resilient local communities. Describing the work of the group on climate change as “really great”, Olgierd Geblewicz (PL/EPP), president of the region of West Pomerania, said that “the green great change is possible”, and noting that, in his region, “more than 74% of energy comes from renewable energy”. A green transition, he argued, requires “taking fully on-board local and regional authorities”. There is, a “pressing need to speed up the green

transition, including through more investment in renewable energy. For this to happen, local and regional authorities need direct access to funds, [so as] not to delay implementation of the Green Deal by lengthy and complex administrative procedures". Mr Geblewicz is president of the EPP, the largest group in the CoR.

The lessons of the major challenge to the resilience of the EU in the past two years – the COVID-19 pandemic – were addressed in recommendations from the working group on health. Speaking for the CoR, Kieran McCarthy (IE/EA), member of Cork County Council, said that "many of the points with the working group's revised proposals do align with the work and priorities of local and regional authorities." Mr McCarthy, who is also the president of the European Alliance group in the CoR, said that the CoR welcomed "the call to deepen EU competences in the field of health, thus building an inclusive European health union", and said there should be a clearer role for local and regional authorities" and the "development of more cross-border health-care collaborations".

The pandemic had also highlighted challenges in the EU's digitalisation efforts. In comments on proposals from the working group on 'digital transformation', Jelena Drenjanin (SE/EPP), member of Huddinge Municipal Council, focused on the need to address "one of the larger problems that we have on the job market – the mismatch with what unemployed people have in their competence toolbox and what skills companies need". Overall, she concluded, "the digitalisation measures suggested will empower and strengthen and equip citizens with the 21st-century skills".

Yoomi Renström (SE/PES), member of Ovanåker Municipal Council, described discussions on a traditionally contentious topic – migration – as "very fruitful and consensual" and expressed happiness at the result. Speaking for the CoR, she said "we were very happy that the group has taken on board our considerations and also from civil society and social partners". She urged the recommendations to be taken up, saying that "if the Commission and the Council does not see the treaty changes and regulation changes that are needed, this conference will not be a success and with all the good work that has been done, I do think that we need this and want it to be a big success for the future."

Recordings of the plenary sessions by topic are available on the

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