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The background features a dark blue globe with a network of white and light blue lines and dots overlaid on it, suggesting a global network or digital connectivity.

**Conference on the Future  
of Europe: A Futile Exercise  
or an Opportunity for the  
Radical Left?**

# Conference on the Future of Europe: A Futile Exercise or an Opportunity for the Radical Left?

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**Pedro Chaves Giraldo** | Currently coordinator of the Spanish edition of *Le Monde diplomatique* and Researcher and lecturer in the European Union module at the IELAT (University of Alcalá de Henares). He has worked as a political advisor in the European Parliament in the GUE/NGL Group, developed his activity in the Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) and Economy (ECON) Committees during the 2014-2019 legislature; Professor of Political Science at the Carlos III University of Madrid during the period 2001-2014.

Visiting Research Professor at the European Institute of the Free University of Brussels in 2013 and at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra in 2011. Researcher in projects related to the culture of legality; quality of democratic processes in organisations and political participation in several municipalities in Spain.

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The Conference on the Future of Europe formally began its work on 9 May 2021. The declared expectations on its importance and scope were high and ambitious. In her opening speech at the Conference, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stated: “...*(But) I do believe that this Conference is a real opportunity to bring Europeans together and to rally around a common ambition for our future, just as as previous generations did. (...). This is an opportunity for Europeans to help find the right balance. For some, Europe is too institutional and mechanical in the way that it works*”<sup>1</sup>.

The President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, also expressed high level of hope for the Conference: “We are at a time, when citizens want to take responsibility, they want to have a say in the policies that affect their daily lives, their future, the future of the planet. It is time to open up to involve citizens more in public life, and that is the aim of this Conference”, he said.

In general, and according to what has been expressed by the spokespersons of the European institutions, the tone and expectations of the Conference will seek several simultaneous objectives: an open and unconditional exercise of listening to the diversity of opinions of European citizens; a deliberative practice with the aim of gathering opinions and proposals from these citizens; an effort to ensure that the very practice of debate and discussion contributes to advancing a European public space; and a method of articulating the bottom-up debate aiming at addressing citizens’ mistrust and unease with regards to politics in general and European politics in particular.

Moreover, the Conference will take place in, what seems to be, the last phase of the Coronavirus pandemic and its disastrous economic and social effects.

The management of the pandemic has highlighted both the EU’s institutional weakness and its resilience (Chopin, 2021). The health, social and economic crises have made evident EU’s institutional fragility in dealing with global crises and EU’s difficulties in dealing with situations that require planning, preparation and decision-making in record time. As comparison, it took seventeen months for EU to implement the Next Generation Plan, while it took the US government barely two months to implement its own. And yet, we could add the solidarity fractures observed between EU countries, both in the initial phase of the crisis and during the debate on this Plan<sup>2</sup>.

On the other hand, it is also worth noting the resilience of the European Union, which in an adverse context has been able to find, at least for the time being, a proposal for economic recovery aid representing, in fact, the biggest leap in the integration process in decades.

Moreover, the Conference will take place after several simultaneous crises that have put the integration process, European institutions and aims to the test. From the words and texts that the institutions have produced in relation to the Conference, we can deduce that there is an awareness of this diffuse unrest and of the need for political action order to link European citizens with the integration project and its institutions.

In this Policy paper we seek to address the relationship between expectations of what could or should be done and the organisation and functioning of the Conference, in order to anticipate whether (or not) the Conference is in a position to meet such expectations and desires. On the other hand, we also want to answer the question of whether the expectations regarding the Conference are similarly shared by the European institutions and how the Conference fits

1 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_2403](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2403) The lectures of the opening session of the Future of Europe Conference can be followed at this link. The references in the text can be found at this link.

2 Let us recall the pressure from the so-called “frugal countries” (the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Sweden) to modify the amounts between loans and aid and to tighten the conditions of access to funds by establishing conditions and limitations.

in the economic and political scenario that the EU is going through, not only in the context of the pandemic and but also taking into account the effects - present and persistent - of the poly-crisis situation that the EU has been going through since 2008.

## Poly-crisis, legitimacy crisis and resilience in the European integration project

Until now, it has been common currency to accept that the European construction grew and consolidated through crises and “exceptional summits” in which, by stopping the clocks, EU governments would find an agonising way out that would allow them to continue moving forward. And the truth is that the EU has been able to overcome difficult trials tests that have generally led to an increase in the levels of integration and supranational decision-making capacity.

Without going back to the origins, let us recall the Treaty of Nice (2003), which should have prepared the institutional structure of the European Union for future enlargements to the Central and Eastern of Europe and which turned out to be a fiasco; or the failed European Constitution (2005), which was rejected by the people in France and the Netherlands and, later, became the Treaty of Lisbon (also initially rejected by Ireland). This Treaty included some significant changes in the functioning of the EU, but did not solve the recurrent problem of the democratic deficit and the growing distrust of citizens towards the integration process.

In fact, the failure of the European Constitution revealed the end of what has been called “the permissive consensus”, an expression coined by Lindberg and Sheingold (1970), and which refers to a passive legitimacy of the European citizenry towards the integration project. From this implicit consensus, which can be explained both by the depoliticisation of the integration process and by the appearance of a one-sum game (in which all actors win), we have moved on to what is called “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks, 2008), which has emerged as a result of a growing politicisation of the integration process and an increase in the unease about its consequences. This dissensus refers to the EU no longer being seen as a solution to problems, but as part of them (Tsoukalis, 2016: 8).

Finally, we would like to share some reflections on possible scenarios related to the Conference, and the options and opportunities for the radical left.

To a large extent this has to do with the increase in the EU’s areas of competence and, therefore, the greater impact and visibility of its decisions. The result has been the normal outcome on these occasions: increased politicisation around the integration process. This process has shown that the EU has become economically a more liberal project and a substantial part of the current globalisation process (Tsoukalis, 2016: 34).

The relevant question in relation to the crisis concerns its nature, impact and duration. This approach should give us a better understanding of the challenges facing the integration process and whether solutions are thinkable within the framework of the current treaties. Basically, whether it is possible to go on with “business as usual”, so that minor tweaks can continue to keep the situation under control.

Our view is that the simultaneity and magnitude of the recurrent crises that the EU experienced (and is still experiencing) since 2008 call for qualitative changes in the integration process, in its institutional architecture, in its relationship with European citizenship and in the role of member states. Our aim is to situate the Conference on the Future of Europe in relation to this diagnosis and tackle the challenges that arise from this analysis.

First, never before have we spoken of “a decade of crisis”. Since the financial crisis burst in 2008, the EU has experienced a succession of simultaneous crises that not only have affected virtually all areas of this “stateless political system”, as it has often been characterised, but also its supposed values, its identity and citizens’ perceptions of the very process of integration, its belonging and usefulness, have been called into question.

We could speak of at least seven different crises: A) **the 2008 financial crisis and its economic and social consequences. The management of the crisis produced a deep shock in the countries subject to Memoranda of Understanding** in order to receive aid from the EU. These were veritable vassalage contracts (Varoufakis, 2017) that imposed unprecedented political-economic control on democratic countries by a politically irresponsible body - the Troika -, and revealed the existence of a North-South divide as well as evidence of a, to say the least, very fragile European solidarity. The governance of the economic crisis gave greater prominence to the Council of the Union (the meeting of heads of state and governments), which managed the crisis by bypassing the European Parliament and turning the Commission into a highly qualified political secretariat (Chaves, 2017). Finally, the crisis management exacerbated the trend of the previous decade of increasing inequality and growing weakness of welfare states.

B) **The 2015 so-called "Migration Crisis" has profoundly affected several areas of EU action, but also its values and self-perception. The arrival of just over a million refugees and migrants at our borders produced a major crisis, the consequences of which have not disappeared. On the one hand, the disengagement of most European governments from what was happening in countries such as Italy, Greece or Spain in relation to the arrival of migrants and its local and national impact highlighted the ineffectiveness of the Dublin visa system. The Commission's timorous - to say the least - proposal to redistribute 170,000 refugees among the 28 EU countries and the rejection of some Central and Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria) highlighted the lack of willingness to share a complex situation and seek solutions based on solidarity and common agreement.** But it also revealed the growing hostility of some countries towards the integration process and the (lack of) capacities of the European Commission. The security and police solution to the crisis and the shameful agreement with Turkey<sup>3</sup> put into question EU as a welcoming, tolerant and respectful of human rights space. In the sphere of the symbolic, Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen's first international trip was to Africa in an attempt to make

visible Europe's interest in the continent and its future but, at least for the moment, this gesture has not been translated into concrete public policies.

C) A geopolitical crisis in several directions. The most obvious is the shift of the economic and geopolitical center of gravity towards Asia. The emergence of China and India has substantially modified the global balance of forces and everything suggests that their importance will be greater in the coming decades. China in particular has already become the second largest power in terms of GDP, being overpassed only by the United States.

Europe is losing relevance in all indicators: GDP, trade, leading sectors, etc. (Stiglitz, 2021). On the other hand, Trump's turbulent presidency showed a variant that was as unexpected as it was disturbing for the EU at the global level: the US mistreated its traditional allies, openly confronted China and sought for a new type of relationship with Russia. In this scenario, the EU played a completely subsidiary and minor role. The literature regarding European soft power and its status as an emerging champion in a world moving towards "soft" forms of interrelationships has been overtaken by reality.

D) The terrorism crisis. Europe has been hard hit by terrorism - mainly of the jihadist type - and, since 2015, a series of measures have been implemented in several directions: improving collaboration between police forces at the European level; improving the level of information on terrorist networks; preventing radicalisation at source; toughening criminal codes and increasing securitarian rhetoric; collaboration in military actions with the aim of liquidating the so-called "Islamic Caliphate" established in Syria and Iraq since 2014 (and defeated in 2019). Although the increase in terrorism is due to various causes, including Europe's collaboration in the destabilisation of countries such as Libya and Syria, what has attracted attention within our societies has been the participation of European citizens, children of second- or third-generation immigrants, as suicide bombers in many cases. This has highlighted the failure of the integration policies pursued by European societies since the early 1960s and the need to redefine them. It has also

3 From the beginning of the agreement, Turkey will receive 10 billion euros for acting as the EU's border guard until 2024. In return, EU hands over the money and asks no questions. As for the EU's regard for Erdogan, let us recall the famous "sofa incident" (7 April 2021) in which Ursula von Leyer was relegated to a sofa while Erdogan and Charles Michel (EU President) sat on the protocol chairs at such meetings.

been an opportunity for far right-wing organisations and parties to focus on the “migration issue” from the perspective of fear and mistrust of a culturally different “other”. A good share of the debates on the European identity have revolved around this issue.

E) The Brexit crisis. The United Kingdom’s exit from the EU was a severe blow to the European project. Her Majesty’s subjects democratically decided to divorce from the EU marriage and attempt to move forward alone. The triggering of Article 50 TEU made it clear that this was a mechanism that was never thought to be used. Initially, Brexit was seen by far-right forces as an opportunity to break the integration process. But the truth is that the negotiation between the EU and the UK revealed several aspects that were not evident at the beginning of the process: the levels of economic interdependence between EU countries are very high and the economic and social interconnectedness makes it practically impossible to clearly ‘separate’ competences and resources. Thus, it has become visible that separating has opportunity costs but also costs in terms of trust. On the other hand, the EU, led by Michel Barnier, has conducted a successful negotiation producing unexpected political results. A particularly striking one is the reconversion of far right parties from organisations openly in favor of leaving the EU, see Rassemblement National in France, to calling for a “profound reform of the EU”. The meeting of the far right in France on 2 July 2021 is a milestone in this continental coordination on a strategy of change in relation to the EU.<sup>4</sup>

F) The challenge of far-right forces. This is a fundamental challenge in terms of values and identity of the EU itself. As this policy brief goes to press, Slovenia takes over the rotating presidency of the European Council. At the inauguration ceremony, the President of the European Commission warns Slovenian President Janez Janša on the attacks on the rule of law and freedom of the press<sup>5</sup>. The start of the Slovenian presidency comes in the context of an EU offensive against the Hungarian state<sup>6</sup> for its homophobic laws,

in particular the latest law that prevents, through fines and prison sentences, the discussion of non-heteronormative forms of sexual relations in the presence of minors. This means that only heteronormative sexual relations are considered “correct” and appropriate. But the challenge of the self-styled “illiberal democracies” goes beyond the fight against feminism or against what they call “gender ideology” (Chaves, Pardo and De las Heras, 2021), proposing a non-liberal structuring of democratic institutions and a new social pact based on a homogeneous and excluding idea of nation, on an updated version of old family values and on a critique of the political mainstream, which includes traditional parties and organisations of the classical party systems (and this encompasses both the right and the left traditional parties). Considering this global approach, the challenge to the European Union is enormous: in terms of democratic identity, inclusive and tolerant society, respect for diversity, ensuring space for civil and political rights, etc.

All these crises have posed a real challenge to the EU policies. For the first time, we have not spoken of a “crisis” in the singular and limited in time, but rather of a “decade of crisis”, a formulation that speaks of bears a long, unfinished and multifaceted episode in time. Can we think that we are facing yet another crisis among those that have marked the history of integration since its origins? Our answer is “No”. This is a different crisis, with greater implications and consequences, and where key issues of the European integration process are affected (Brack and Gürkan, 2021). Moreover, the crisis has unleashed and sharpened pre-existing centrifugal tendencies to a hitherto unknown extent (Coman and Crespy, 2020).

The reasons for this special condition can be explained by a number of concurrent factors. First, its multidimensional nature. The different crises have affected different countries, regions, issues and public policies with different levels of integration: migration policy, economic policy, foreign and security policy, the EU’s borders, the relations between

4 [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/07/03/l-extreme-droite-europeenne-signe-une-declaration-commune-autour-d-orban-salvini-et-le-pen-mais-sans-s-unir-au-parlement\\_6086815\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/07/03/l-extreme-droite-europeenne-signe-une-declaration-commune-autour-d-orban-salvini-et-le-pen-mais-sans-s-unir-au-parlement_6086815_3210.html)

5 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-01/bruselas-exige-a-eslovenia-respeto-a-los-medios-de-comunicacion-en-el-arraque-de-su-presidencia-de-la-ue.html>

6 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-07-08/el-parlamento-europeo-exige-la-retirada-de-fondos-a-hungria-como-castigo-a-sus-leyes-homofobas.html>

institutions and their role in the institutional mechanism, etc.

Secondly, for the first time and simultaneously, key areas of the integration process have been affected: the common currency, the European identity, its values and its status as the umbrella for democracy and rights.

Third, the duration of the crisis is not a minor issue and should be highlighted. The fact that successive crises have been going on for a decade has put the EU and its resilience to the test. It can be said, however, that the EU has weathered the situation reasonably well, even though these are processes that had costs and modified the integration project itself, and some key elements of the foundational imaginary and rhetoric of integration: Europeanisation, democratisation, welfare, integration. In fact, this period has put additional stress on the different political actors and European elites, making it very difficult to avoid the “contagion effect”, i.e. the fact that the different crises multiply their effects on a cumulative and overlapping basis.

Fourth, the crises have forced the EU into the spotlight and, consequently, its decisions have acquired a more visible public dimension. The political nature of the European project, its liberal content and functionality vis-à-vis globalisation, and its deregulatory impact have become more evident. As Tsoukalis notes: ‘In its most recent phase, European integration has become an integral part of the globalisation process in an era of neoliberalism’ (2016: 54). This situation has affected the legitimacy of EU decision-making process, mostly because the governance model that emerged from the economic crisis has increased the illegibility of the European integration model, its opacity and lack of control.

Fifthly, two myths about the process of European construction have been shattered, which feed back into the malaise and disenchantment in certain countries and among social sectors that are less favoured in economic terms or in terms of cultural capital. On the one hand, statistical evidence shows that the process of European integration is not moving in the direction of a “Europe for all”, i.e. an inclusive and incremental process that would not leave no one behind and whose dynamics would be reinforced by the observation of real economic convergence between the EU countries (Stiglitz, 2021) (Marty and Lentile, 2021).

Yet, economic divergences have grown between and within countries, while inequality between the richest and least advantaged sectors has increased.

On the other hand, the various crises and the increased visibility of the EU and its political action have made it clearer that the integration process has winners and losers. The political malaise produced has generated two simultaneous and related effects: on the one hand, Eurobarometers report an increase in polarisation regarding the evolution of public opinion, but also a growing nuanced and complex opinion regarding EU activity, with respondents approving a greater commitment of the Union in some public policies but not in others, or combining a critical opinion regarding some general issues together with explicit demands for greater EU commitment in some areas (Moland, 2021) (Van Ingelgom, 2012) (European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2021).

The second effect has to do with a malaise expressed at the ballot box and represented by the growing share of votes on far right parties. This vote highlights the rejection of the consequences of decades of liberalisation and privatisation, with the EU appearing as a driving force and protagonist in this process. Some authors (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) interpret the revolt as a response to the processes of privatisation and liberalisation of “places that do not matter” and not of “people that do not matter”, valuing the impact of the industrial decline and associated way of living of the populations. It is the sum of industrial decline, low levels of education and the lack of employment and opportunities at the local level that would explain this intense malaise in our societies, which is felt both by the middle classes and popular sectors. The novelty, and the surprise, is that the social response has come from the ballot paper; it has been the rebellion in and from the ballot box that has made the unrest visible.

The loss of significance and the loss of the sense of community produced by neoliberalism should also be given a role, and this also helps to explain the return of proposals linked to the resurgence of the idea of a “meaningful life” associated to a homogenous concept of nation and a vindication of the heteronormative family and its traditionally associated values (Rodríguez Palop, 2019).

In short, the decade-long crisis that began in 2008 and has been compounded by the Coronavirus crisis in 2020 has globally affected the EU. The crisis as a whole has affected all countries and regions (to a greater or lesser extent), politicised the EU's action highlighting the high decision-making capacity of the EU's political system, while simultaneously making it unintelligible, complex and politically unaccountable; it has impacted all the EU's policies, including the euro, highlighting the difficulties of the institutional system to respond democratically, legitimately and swiftly to the requirements of the various crisis processes; the crises have aggravated some of the EU's centripetal tendencies and consolidated two distinct axes of confrontation: North-South and East-West; the Coronavirus crisis has had a paradoxical effect in relation to the articulation of the national and the supranational: on the one hand it has reinvigorated the role and legitimacy of national states; on the other, it has made it evident that without the European Union the management and exit of

the crisis would be much more complicated and, for some countries, probably impossible; finally, and despite the situations produced during these years of crisis, the EU has shown remarkable resilience and survival, which must be taken into consideration.

In any case, the Conference on the Future of Europe takes place in a context, that Stiglitz (2021: 3) defines as "small political reforms do not solve problems". This idea of a profound need for reform seems to be the most obvious conclusion of the severity of the poly-crisis situation in the European Union. However one phrases it, the EU needs at least two things: first, it cannot settle into inaction, business as usual. Given the nature, simultaneity, complexity and comprehensiveness of the different crises, business as usual is not an option. Secondly, the EU needs to undertake a period of significant change if it is to respond to the challenges it faces and become a project at the service of the majorities.

## The need for profound reforms and the end of the old model of integration

The awareness and need for changes became particularly evident after Brexit. For the first time in its history, EU faced a member state withdrawal process when recovering from the other crises that questioned and challenged it. At the Bratislava European Council (September 2016), the Heads of state and government were working together to offer an attractive and exciting project to all European citizens. In its declaration, the Council stated: 'In Bratislava we committed ourselves to offer our citizens in the coming months a vision of an attractive EU that can inspire their trust and win their support' (EU Council, 2016).

The proposal was oriented towards favouring concrete political action in an effort to regain the legitimacy that seemed to have worked so well for decades. Thus, the Council aimed to prioritise public policies in the areas of immigration, internal and external security, economic and social development with a special focus on young people, and single market and trade policy.

For its part, the European Commission responded to this desire for reform by launching a roadmap with the publication of a *White Paper on the future of Europe and several discussion papers*<sup>7</sup> aimed at debating the main issues on the European agenda. These discussion papers addressed issues such as the social dimension, the deepening of EMU, the future of European finances, globalisation and European defense.

The White Paper (European Commission, 2017: 6) echoed the doubts on the integration project: "many Europeans feel that the Union is too distant or interferes too much in their daily lives. Others doubt its added value and wonder how Europe improves their standard of living. For too many people, the EU failed to live up to their expectations as it faced the worst financial, economic and social crisis in its history since the post-war period". And it pointed to the real risk that, for the first time since World War II, '...the current generation of young adults will end up with worse living conditions than their parents' (2017:9).

7 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/future-europe/white-paper-future-europe\\_es](https://ec.europa.eu/info/future-europe/white-paper-future-europe_es)



In the Chapter of Intentions, the then President of the European Commission, Claude Juncker, proposed ambitious intentions for the new phase that was opening up: “This White Paper is the European Commission’s contribution to this new chapter of the European project. We want to launch a process in which Europe decides its own path. We want to define the challenges and opportunities ahead and set out the options available to us to respond collectively” (2017:3).

In proposal terms, the paper put five possible scenarios on the table, ranging from business as usual to higher degrees of integration.

The roadmap designed gave particular importance to social Europe, with a summit on the subject to be held in Gothenburg (Sweden) in 2018 and ending with the European elections in 2019. For the Commission, this was envisioned as a moment of reflection and debate oriented towards the political elites and the European institutions themselves. A classic example of an attempt to shape the political agenda at a moment when rising concerns about the future of the European project were evident.

The White Paper and the Reflection Papers had little impact and no political effect. The “centrality” of social pol-

icy sought through the Gothenburg summit has not given rise to any new dynamics and, in fact, the pressure on welfare states went on being exerted in terms of “reforms and modernisation”, i.e., a decrease in public spending, especially pensions, unemployment, education and health systems. Moreover, the incorporation of social indicators in the European Semester has accentuated the subordination of social policy to the imperatives of competitiveness and fiscal discipline (Crespy, 2020: 205).

Naturally, the prospect of the White Paper and the Reflection Papers opening a broad debate in European society did not occur, and reform ambitions were abandoned with the end of the last term.

This failure highlighted the exhaustion of the top-down model of European integration that has been, and continues to be, the dominant model to date. The coalition of European and national elites in a depoliticised process, relatively untouched by the citizenry, has exhausted its driving force for quite sometime now, and this White Paper, and its silent exit from the public arena, is a sound example of this fact. By the beginning of the current term in 2019, the assertion that things simply could not go on as they had been in the integration process was self-evident.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to connect the past and current situation of the European Union and its consequences, with the expectations and functioning of the Conference on the Future of Europe, in order to assess the correspondence between ambitions and possibilities. We intend that this diagnosis can be used to assess the situation of the EU and its reform needs, so we can have a more global and complex view on the needs, realities and expectations relative to the current demands from the EU and what the Conference is actually in a position to deliver.

Our diagnosis is that the decade of crisis that began with the financial collapse and is still goes on with the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic (and we do not know if it will be the last) is unparalleled in the history of the integration

process and must be assessed as an exceptional event with important implications at all levels.

We have seen how the consequences of this poly-crisis have affected the institutions, their relationship, the legitimacy of the EU’s action as political system, and not only EU main policies, but also its values and principles.

The political and economic governance of this turbulent period has revealed the malfunctioning of the institutional structure in terms of efficiency, capacity to manage unforeseen situations and the illegitimacy of the process for the majority of citizens. At the same time, this has been a period of increasing politicisation of the integration process. The increased visibility of the EU, for example in the context of the management of the 2008 crisis, has raised enor-

mous concerns about its democratic and legitimacy deficits and, importantly, about the neoliberal orientation of its main policies and the pressure on welfare states to reduce their provisions and services (Baier, 2021). Moreover, citizens have seen the inexplicable growth of social inequalities and the deterioration of regions and cities, leading to a growing sense of abandonment and, regarding the EU, of experiencing a integration process whose benefits are only at the reach of a privileged minority of people.

Austerity policies and rhetoric are ill-suited to a reality of deteriorating welfare states, growing inequality within societies and growing economic differentiation between countries.

On the other hand, the pandemic crisis has shattered the straitjacket of austerity policies and the Stability and Growth Pact. It has also revealed the inadequacy of an EU budget that barely reaches 1% of the region's GDP. And it is forcing us to rethink the relationship between the state and the supranational structure: without the EU the situation caused by the pandemic would have been even worse, but without the national states the management of the health and social crisis would have been impossible.

Although EU's resilience has been greater than probably expected, the damage caused to its architecture raises the need for major structural reform. It seems clear that the questions raised by this endless period of crisis require comprehensive responses and reforms that affect the whole building. The increasingly widespread basic consensus is that "business as usual" is no longer possible and, therefore, it is necessary to undertake in-depth reforms, taking into account that the logic of small reforms and the search for "in extremis" solutions puts the integration process, at least as we know it, at risk.

This is an important aspect to retain: we are living in what has been called a "Machiavellian momentum" (Magnette, 2019), a historical situation in which the political system cannot continue to operate in the same way and requires major changes. In this sense, the situation, not only and not so much the Conference itself, is an opportunity for the radical left.

The last White Paper on the future of Europe, proposed in 2017 by the European Commission, showed the exhaus-

tion of the model of debate and reform privileged by the European and national political and economic elites in relation to the EU: intergovernmental negotiations, pacts beyond the reach and monitoring of the citizens, disregard for national parliaments, etc. The elitist and depoliticised logic that has been dominant in the process of European construction has now become a problem for the integration process itself.

At this stage, the idea of a citizens' conference organised top-down and with a real will to facilitate the participation of the populations of European countries and an active listening attitude on the side of the institutions, sounded like a promising proposal. However, statements and prospects are far from being matched by a Conference that could meet these expectations.

The considerable differences between the various institutions show that Parliament, Council and Commission do not expect the same thing from the Conference. For the Council, and partly also for the Commission, the public debate is instrumental and constrained: it must serve to legitimise what already exists, it must stick to the strategic perspectives already designed by the institutions and, finally, any reform proposals must be in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, and cannot affect the Treaties. The Parliament offered an aspiration more in line with reform needs, proposing a bottom-up, inclusive model without any constraints on reform proposals. As we saw previously, the idea that this process could lead to a change in the Treaties was openly expressed in the initial proposal that Macron formulated in 2019.

The way in which the Conference has eventually been organised is closer to the expectations of the Council and the Commission than to those proposed by the Parliament. And although deliberative processes are open processes - in the sense that it is known how they begin but it is not possible to determine their end -, conditions for pushing to the limits the development of the Conference to the possibilities envisaged in the Joint Declaration of the three institutions do not seem to exist.

Finally, it seems that we will be, in the best case scenario, faced with an exercise of opinion in which the European institutions - particularly the Council - make a mild and not very precise commitment.

The truth is that if reduced to an exercise in opinion, the Conference is a rather repetitive and unnecessary event. The opinion of European citizens on the integration process in general and on more specific policies is sufficiently well known through Eurobarometer, in the first place, and through many other experiences of (limited) participation of European civil society on different issues. The problem is not so much not knowing what citizens think, but rather the political will to implement these demands and a roadmap to make them possible.

It could be that the Conference would give rise to a novel “political event”, namely in massively mobilising citizens in favor of a strategy for reform of the EU. We envisage significant participation in the Conference and a demand for reform from the Heads of state and government. But we believe that the conditions for such a mobilisation are not in place. On the one hand, European affairs continue to be seen as complex and distant by a large part of the public and, consequently, arouse little enthusiasm and interest. On the other hand, no such European space has been created to single out the debate on EU affairs. Political debates remain anchored at the national level, both in discursive and symbolic terms, so that the “EU agenda” is inserted into national conflicts, subordinated to the specific debates of national agendas.

At this point, it might seem reasonable to consider the Conference dead before it has even been born. But an approach that articulates the “Machiavellian momentum” referred to above with the opportunities that the Conference offers seems more productive.

There are options for the radical left to use this space to debate its own positions in relation to this moment, to use this resource as a moment to make bold proposals for change and reform of the integration process. By focusing on the moment rather than on the Conference itself, the radical left could put forward the idea of a Constituent Convention following the Conference, and include proposals and considerations that go beyond the narrow frameworks in which the Council and the Commission want to keep the Conference.

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