

A Benelux contribution to the Conference on the Future of Europe

We want a better Europe.

At the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Rome in 2017, the countries of the Benelux – Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg - jointly identified the need to further build an EU that lives up to the expectations and ambitions of our citizens, and to strengthen the EU's abilities to perform. Against this background the Benelux countries welcome the initiative on establishing a Conference on the Future of Europe. This non-paper is a first contribution by the Benelux to this discussion, which will be further elaborated in the coming period.

The Benelux countries see potential in the conference to bring Europe closer to its citizens, with the aim of strengthening democratic legitimacy and accountability, and further build trust and confidence in the EU. The conference should build on the results of the citizens' consultations held in the run-up to the 2019 European elections. In addition, it can serve as a forum to consider ways to better realize our priorities, in line with the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 of the European Council¹, and the public support thereof, but also on the longer term. In general, with the challenges the EU is currently facing, our attention should go out towards delivering concrete results for the EU and its citizens.

At the same time, all institutions must be careful not to create expectations that cannot be fulfilled. In order to ensure fruitful outcomes, that are practical and can count on public support, the conference needs to be well-prepared and have clear objectives. Sufficient time should be taken in engaging constructively with the Commission and the European Parliament to consider the most suitable modalities: quality matters more than timing. The character of the conference should be an open forum to exchange thoughts. At this stage, we should therefore not prejudge the outcome or the follow-up of the conference.

How do we get to a better Europe?

The Benelux countries deem it important to agree on the aim and content of the conference, before laying down the organization, governance structure, and process. Form should follow function.

The conference should focus on topics that matter to our citizens and in which the EU has a role to play. It should not divert attention away from the implementation of the priorities set in the Strategic Agenda: protecting citizens and freedoms, developing a strong and vibrant economic base, building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europa, and promoting European interests and values on the global stage. However, it can contribute to the development of our policies in the medium and long term, in order to better tackle current and future challenges.

The Benelux countries also see the conference an opportunity to reflect on how the EU aims to achieve results in a number of policy areas, and how we can better ensure public support. The following topics inter alia could be addressed:

- The transparency of the decision-making process;
- Better regulation;
- The implementation and enforcement of the acquis;
- The involvement of national parliaments;
- The promotion of our shared values that govern the way our Union works, including fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law.

How should we organize that?

A light and lean structure in terms of the number of (governing) bodies and participants is appropriate. In line with our ambition for a greener EU and so as to minimize the ecological footprint of this conference, the Benelux countries propose to limit the frequency and size of meetings and make optimum use of representatives in Brussels as well as digital possibilities. Efforts should be made to minimize the administrative burden.

As regards the composition of the conference, it needs to be representative and safeguard the inter-institutional balance between the EU institutions. This implies a representation of the Council,

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>

European Parliament and Commission on equal footing in the conference itself as well as its governing bodies. Member states have to be equally involved at all stages within the conference. National parliaments should be actively involved in the conference. When it comes to citizens, it is important that the representativeness of the participants is guaranteed, for instance by making the conference easily accessible, enabling citizens with a diversity of backgrounds and opinions to participate. In considering the modalities to involve citizens, use should be made of existing instruments and consultation mechanisms. New initiatives to consult citizens should seek added value over recent consultations. The leadership of the conference is to be objective and independent. (S)he has the responsibility to ensure that the outcomes of the conference are practical, reflect the positions expressed by participants, and can count on public support.

It is important that the public be involved in the conference in terms of its organization and its outcome. It should make use of transparent and structured working methods, enabling all participants and the public to stay informed. For instance, all documents need to be proactively published and traceable online. To the extent possible, the organization should be efficient, modern, sober and cost-efficient, making as much use as possible of existing facilities and services.

27 January 2020