

# Maastricht and beyond: EU in the World at CoFoE

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Following a Covid-induced postponement, 200 citizens from all corners of the Union will arrive in Maastricht on 11 February 2022 for a final weekend of deliberations on the EU's role in the world and on migration. Forming part of the one-year participatory democracy exercise called the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), this weekend will produce the citizens' final recommendations on these two topics.

## Future of Europe under discussion

Under CoFoE's elaborate model, citizen input is foreseen through three distinct channels. First, a series of events taking place in the Member States, organised by national governments, decentralised authorities, and civil society actors. Secondly, a multilingual digital platform where citizens can propose and discuss their ideas along the lines of pre-defined topic areas. Finally, the four thematically organised European Citizens' Panels (ECP), each bringing together 200 randomly selected, but demographically representative, Europeans. Over the course of three sessions, citizens have been asked to identify issues and progressively work towards recommendations for the EU's future direction in different topics.

Ahead of the session in Maastricht, this briefing frames the discussions on 'EU in the world' as they can be observed in the three channels of the CoFoE, it contextualises the most discussed themes, and attempts to assess the challenges and opportunities for the Conference Plenary and beyond. We first make some observations on the three channels, before turning to four topics which we believe will be central in the citizens'

recommendations formulated over the weekend, as well as in the wider scheme of the CoFoE.

## 'EU in the world' in the three CoFoE channels

The three channels have been designed to facilitate and maximise citizen participation in the process. Input from these channels is fed into the work of the Conference Plenary, consisting of 449 representatives at regional, national, and EU level, as well as representatives of the ECPs and civil society, which is tasked with formulating proposals. As a last step, these proposals will be considered by the Executive Board, made up of Commission, European Parliament, and Council representatives, who will conclude the exercise with the publication of a report.

Through a closer examination of the three different channels in the CoFoE, we can see a range of issues coming through, as well as peculiarities specific to each channel. This briefing does not aspire to present a comprehensive analysis of discussions in each channel.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is an observation of the most salient subjects that are likely to mark the rest of the process.

## Multilingual digital platform

The multilingual digital platform overcomes the language barrier, which plays a crucial role in the organisation of cross-border events and hinders more open discussions in the ECPs. While the platform's contributions are not representative of European citizens, the amount of contributions, what we know about the contributors, and the topics considered nevertheless allow us to draw some conclusions.

There is a significant difference in activity per Member State of contributors' residence, with Malta registering nearly 13 times as many contributions per capita as Poland.

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<sup>1</sup> Comprehensive reports on all three channels can be found on the website of the Conference on the

Luxembourgish and Belgian contributions per capita come second and third, allowing for speculation that the 'Brussels bubble' has contributed disproportionately. However, Austrian and Finnish contributions lie only marginally behind.

'EU in the world' is the seventh most discussed topic, out of ten pre-organised topics. Far from the top of contributors' concerns, it nonetheless marked a surge in contributions following August's events in Afghanistan, with many calling for a more united, capable, visible and autonomous EU role in the world. More concretely, many ideas touch on values and tools (most prominently the idea of creating a European army) and ways of taking decisions. The open and non-moderated nature of the platform allows for some divergence from the other channels' patterns. Most notably, we see more space dedicated to the questions of enlargement and the role of the European Parliament in decision-making procedures, perhaps giving some justice to the 'Brussels bubble' speculation.

### *Events organised across the EU*

The main characteristic of events organised at national level and below is the variety in practices. While the organisation of some sort of conference by national or regional authorities emerged as a uniform practice, some Member States went as far as organising full-blown citizens' consultations. A number of transnational events also took place, not only between neighbouring states, but also in less-expected combinations, such as between Lithuania and Italy, or Croatia and Spain.

In addition to governmental initiatives, universities and civil society organisations were particularly active in organising events around CoFoE. Although public discourse in many countries was dominated by issues other than external action, we nonetheless see diverse issues being discussed around the EU, mirroring national interest in different issues and regional priorities. As such, Spanish discussions addressed EU-Latin America relations, as those in Greece highlighted Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, while French

citizens largely focused on EU defence structures, and citizens in the German consultation identified sustainability in trade as a top concern in EU external action. However, one main challenge common to most events organised at the level of the Member States is their format: with most of them being panel discussions of experts and/or politicians, there is little space for (effective) citizen input.

### *European Citizen Panels*

In order to more effectively address the issues at hand, each topic within an ECP has been broken down into component issues called 'streams' and smaller working groups called 'sub-streams'. In the first session of ECP4, citizens identified three streams on EU in the world, which structured debates in the second session, when they produced 'orientations' in eight thematic sub-streams. On the basis of these orientations, citizens will be asked to prepare and vote on concrete recommendations in the Panel's final session in Maastricht. Here, it must be noted that sub-streams are not representative, each comprising about 10 citizens from a maximum of four countries. Such factors need to be taken into account when examining the orientations produced in the second session of ECP4, especially considering the different priorities observed in national contexts above. The next section will elaborate on key ideas raised in the three channels, with particular emphasis on ECP4.

### **Four issues to watch out for**

The breadth of issues considered reflects the variety of experiences and interests of European citizens. Despite varying degrees of salience based on the various channels, location and timing of discussions, we propose four major issues under the umbrella of 'EU in the world' to keep an eye on in the rest of this process: values-based external action, security and defence, decision-making and enlargement. In the following paragraphs we present the debates on these issues and

consider the bearing they might have on the remainder of the CoFoE.

### *Values-based external action*

Arguably the issue attracting the most attention across all channels is the question of values-based external action. Primarily encompassing debates on the EU's (commercial) relations with other actors, it more generally addresses the EU's global role as a normative power. A key point of this discussion is the reduction of dependence, which is seen not only as a goal in itself, but also as a way to assume a principled stance to external action.

Citizens seek to ensure that all steps of supply chains conform to environmental, human rights, and labour standards by binding the EU's trade practices to such norms. Ideas coming out of the second session of ECP4 include increased support for EU-based supply chains and businesses, using ethical considerations as a compass for commercial relations at the level of business and consumers but also by creating special tariffs for non-compliers, and tackling the environmental effects of activity in the EU on third countries (for example emissions and waste).<sup>2</sup> Such ideas are also echoed at national level and on the platform.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, citizens have also called out the EU and its Member States for not always adhering to the values they are preaching, which undermines credibility in external action.

We can expect these policy-level issues to have a central role in ECP4's recommendations and to find relatively fertile ground in Brussels as part of the EU's quest for strategic autonomy, a geopolitical role, and reinforced trade and foreign policy instruments.

### *Security and defence*

The idea of creating a common European army was posted on the multilingual digital platform even before the official launch of the Conference, and has generated the most endorsements under the topic and 200 comments in nine months. ECP4's sub-stream on security and defence echoed this sentiment in the Panel's second session, calling for a European army to supplement NATO structures and to allow the EU to 'pursue specific (European) security policy interests independent from NATO'. While interactions on the EU's security and defence on the platform and in ECP4 are dominated by the concept of an EU army, national events principally discuss global, regional, and neighbourhood security concerns more broadly.

The EU's security review, which has been conducted following the June 2020 tasking by the European Council under the label of 'Strategic Compass', has contributed to this heightened attention to the EU's security and defence. Amidst imminent threats to the European security order and conscious of the need for support for the ambitious plans ahead, EU and national politicians have widely discussed the European security architecture and European defence capabilities, further inducing media attention.

While Member States broadly support 'a high level of ambition for our security and defence agenda'<sup>4</sup> at 'the most dangerous moment of the post-Cold War period', in the words of HR Borrell,<sup>5</sup> there is a clear dissonance between calls for a European army in the context of the CoFoE on the one hand and the more limited ambition of the Strategic Compass to 'strengthen our security and defence policy'<sup>6</sup> on the other.

### *Decision-making in EU foreign policy*

Institutional questions as such are traditionally discussed in the closed circles of decision-makers and the expert community. However,

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<sup>2</sup> All orientations of ECP4 can be found in the Session 2 Report.

<sup>3</sup> See the Polish and [German](#) national panel reports and [this idea](#) on the platform.

<sup>4</sup> See Council document 13638/1/21 of 6 January 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Speech by Josep Borrell at '[Europe in Danger](#)' event on 25 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Council document 13638/1/21 of 6 January 2022.

the question of how the EU takes decisions in foreign policy has received significant attention in all three channels of the CoFoE. Concretely, the threshold required to adopt a common approach on a foreign policy matter in the Council (currently unanimity), as well as the role of the European Parliament, have been discussed, with the latter issue chiefly present on the platform.

The discussion in Brussels circles on a move towards qualified majority voting (QMV) in some areas of EU foreign policy has gathered momentum time and again in recent years. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed introducing QMV for decisions concerning human rights and sanctions,<sup>7</sup> while Mr Juncker's Commission also suggested abandoning unanimity for decisions on civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions.<sup>8</sup> Diplomats and politicians have also expressed their frustration over single countries blocking decisions.<sup>9</sup>

Increased interest in the subject also suggests that mediated occurrences of individual Member States blocking a common EU approach are leaving a mark among citizens. The discussions on how decisions are taken are clearly linked to calls for a more autonomous, capable, visible and united EU in the world, and display a seemingly universal view that unanimity in foreign policy should be abolished for all but 'some, few, essential and non-urgent matters.'

There is agreement among citizens that different decision-making thresholds should apply to different foreign policy issues, an idea which can be implemented within the current Treaty framework and which resonates with Brussels circles. In contrast, an orientation coming out of the second session of ECP4, which calls for a qualified majority vote for decisions on the accession of new countries, departs from the mainstream elite and expert discourse and also from the current Treaty provision requiring unanimity for accession.

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<sup>7</sup> [State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen to the European Parliament Plenary](#), 16 September 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Commission Communication A stronger global actor: a more efficient decision-making for EU

### *Enlargement*

The peculiarity of enlargement is the cleavage between the high levels of interest at national and civil society levels on the one hand, and the notable absence of meaningful discussions in ECP4 on the other. The organisation of events on EU policies involving young Balkan citizens in a number of Member States is an indication that further enlargement is taken as granted in many parts of the Union. Unsurprisingly, enlargement has also been widely discussed as a policy, with contributions on the platform and civil society events being overwhelmingly supportive of Western Balkan countries' accession,<sup>10</sup> although the Dutch public's view is that an EU expansion should only take place if it brings added value.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the ECP's activity on enlargement is rather disappointing: despite there being a dedicated sub-stream for neighbourhood and enlargement, the only orientation coming out of the second session was the aforementioned proposal to move to QMV in enlargement-related decisions. Considering the degree of politicisation of enlargement at national level and the use of unanimity as leverage against accession countries by some Member States, we do not expect the ECP's unconventional idea to be carried over to the next stages of the process.

### **Conclusions**

The discussions on 'EU in the world' in the three channels of the Conference display immense support for the EU to be a more autonomous, capable, visible and united actor and to develop tools and structures to achieve this. The proposals are both pragmatic and ambitious. Pragmatic in the sense that they concern concrete policy-level proposals cutting across different policies. Ambitious as they often go beyond what seems possible considering institutional preferences and

Common Foreign and Security Policy. COM(2018) 647 final, 12 September 2018.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. [Cyprus' veto on sanctions on Belarus](#) and [a series of recent vetoes by Hungary](#).

<sup>10</sup> See [this idea](#) on the platform.

<sup>11</sup> See the Dutch National Citizens' Panel [Report](#).

political constraints, two factors not accounted for in citizens' discussions. However, there is space for these factors in the final session, where citizens will work towards the formulation of concrete recommendations, which will have to be supported by a 70% majority of all 200 citizens, presenting the first test of support (and politics in action) in a more representative group than the small number in individual streams and sub-streams.

The experience of ECP2 and ECP3's third session, which took place in Florence and Warsaw respectively, shows that orientations develop into very concrete recommendations at the level of policy, occasionally containing elements which would require changes at institutional level or a change in the division of competences in the EU. It also shows that the vast majority of recommendations produced in sub-streams get approved. If these two panels are of any indication, recommendations developed in the course of ECP4 may provide a (draft) direction for a more 'communitarised' EU foreign policy. It is rather unlikely that the Conference Plenary will strictly remain on this course. In a bid to ensure its proposals are taken on by the Executive Board, we can expect political forces in the Conference Plenary to tone down the integrationist drive. Nevertheless, citizens can still include a diverging position in the Conference Plenary's proposal. This way, the more ambitious citizens-driven vision can remain on the table to be subjected to the processes of political fermentation at play in the next stages of the CoFoE.

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