

# Conference on the Future of Europe

## What is next for EU climate policies?

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A decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of several overlapping triangles in shades of grey and blue, pointing towards the right.

### Key messages

- 1 The Conference on the Future of Europe closed with the adoption of **49 recommendations**, many of which address EU climate policies. Now, these are supposed to be transposed into policy action, but questions remain about the extent to which they can bring new momentum to the EU's climate agenda.
- 2 A few recommendations are concrete and could have a real impact. But **most recommendations are abstract and reiterate existing policies**.
- 3 To best transpose recommendations into policy action, the EU should **define priority areas**, **focus on the more concrete proposals** and **use the ideas of citizens to support planned EU climate action**.

## After the Conference on the Future of Europe

On 9 May 2022, Europe Day, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CFE) closed – **with the adoption of 49 recommendations**. This is not the end of the process but the beginning of new political action. In June, the Commission set out what is needed to bring the **proposals of the Conference** to life.<sup>1</sup> In September, the State of the Union Address will announce new proposals based on recommendations.

Responding to the CFE, the Commission will also speed up work that is already underway – for example on the European Green Deal. This entails accelerating negotiations on the Fit for 55 Package in an effort to boost renewables, save energy and finally wean ourselves off fossil fuels. The EU's accelerated progress also hinges on the elimination of the requirement for unanimity voting in certain policy areas, which, according to Ursula von der Leyen “simply no longer makes sense”.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Commission will propose that citizens' panels be given time and resources to make recommendations before key legislative proposals are presented.

Along similar lines, the European Parliament stated that it will focus on the CFE follow-up to accommodate citizens' requests. The Parliament calls for the summoning of a Convention according to Article 48 of the Treaty on European Union. It tabled concrete proposals for treaty changes.

Now, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the role of the CFE as a starting point for renewed discussions on important topics such as climate, energy policy and EU democracy has been reiterated.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many recommendations from the CFE address EU

climate policies – especially the ones prepared by its third citizens' panel on climate change, the environment and health.

How could the panels' recommendations improve EU climate policies? Where did the recommendations merely reiterate what is already there? And how could the EU best transpose proposals into policy action?

## What can recommendations bring to the EU climate agenda?

### A stronger voice in international climate negotiations

The CFE panels recommend to “reform the way the EU works”<sup>4</sup>. Proposals call for “extending the use of qualified majority decision-making on topics identified as being of ‘European interest’, such as environment”<sup>5</sup> – supporting von der Leyen's statement on the EU's way forward.

As a rule, legislation in the field of energy and climate in the EU follows the ordinary legislative procedure. The Council and the European Parliament act as co-legislators – and the former can decide by majority vote.

However, some crucial climate issues, i.e., energy taxation or spatial planning, are not adopted by ordinary legislative procedure but by special legislative procedures, which means that the Parliament is not an equal co-legislator and the Council decides by unanimous vote.<sup>6</sup> This gives countries the ability to veto laws and block decisions for all Member States.

Extending majority voting to such areas could help further strengthen EU foreign

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> European Parliament, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Velichkova, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> European Union, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> This recommendation of the European citizens' panels was taken from the national panels of France and the Netherlands.; European Union, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer-Ohlendorf et. al., 2019.

policy and lend more weight to its unanimous decisions on the international scene.<sup>7</sup>

## Better citizens' involvement in climate policy-making

The CFE recommended that the EU's decision-making process should be improved with "social partners and organised civil society [...] better included in the decision-making process, given their importance in the European democratic life"<sup>8</sup>.

As evidenced by national citizens' assemblies, such as the one in Ireland, as well as by the CFE itself, citizens' panels could produce recommendations that would ideally trigger specific action, drive policies forward and strengthen democracy.<sup>9</sup> A more inclusive process could enhance the function of citizens' assemblies as a tool for pushing through unpopular but necessary policies related to the climate crisis. As an example, the Irish assembly recommended higher taxation on fossil fuels.<sup>10</sup>

## Opportunities for concrete action

A few recommendations provide specific measures, contributing to environmental conservation and mitigation of the effects of climate change – for example, harmonised production standards, a labelling system for the environmental footprint of all products sold on the EU market, and an EU-wide packaging deposit return scheme. This specificity could prove beneficial for the follow-up of the CFE.

## What are the shortcomings of the recommendations?

All CFE recommendations consist of measures for specific objectives. Regarding climate change, these **objectives deal with complex and current climate-related issues – but most measures do not examine them and their possible solutions in-depth.**

For example, citizens recommend protecting water sources, improving energy security, and reducing dependence on oil and gas, but rarely go into detail about how this is to be achieved. They call for accelerating the green transition, introducing CO<sub>2</sub> filters for fossil fuel plants and eliminating fossil fuel subsidies "after a transition period"<sup>11</sup>. Similar **proposals miss out on providing concrete deadlines** – urgently needed to solve a deadlocked issue such as the phase-out of coal.

The process of the CFE also allowed for the most urgent climate issues to be emphasised and for the spotlight to be put on important gaps in EU climate policy. The unique format and legitimacy of the European citizens' panels created the opportunity to trigger a real transformation of EU climate policies.

However, some **recommendations are unlikely to inject new momentum into the debate as they repeat existing policies.** These recommendations include ongoing activities, such as investing in renewable energies and public transport, as well as measures outside the scope of the EU's competences - such as strengthening the role of municipalities in urban planning. Other proposals demonstrate uncertainty in the policies that citizens aim to push forward – and **an attempt to have it all, rather than**

<sup>7</sup> Meyer-Ohlendorf, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> European Union, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Schwab, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Schwab, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament, 2022.

**prioritise.** As an example, citizens propose “reducing subsidies for agricultural mass production where it does not contribute to a sustainable transition and redirect those resources to support an environmentally sustainable agriculture, whilst ensuring affordable food products”<sup>12</sup>.

## What should the EU consider when turning recommendations into concrete action?

### Setting priorities

The Commission has set off a motion to follow-up on the CFE and expedite climate action. As the process of bringing the CFE proposals to life is being engaged, the EU must first identify which recommendations require priority action. To this end, the EU should focus on the recommendations which call for tackling the most pressing climate-related issues and translate them into concrete policies. The EU has taken a good first step in this direction with its preliminary technical assessment<sup>13</sup> of the CFE proposals, which examines the extent to which the EU is already working on the measures addressed and the general feasibility of the proposals.

### Specific recommendations should result in specific climate policies

Many of the CFE recommendations are not concrete and may fall prey to interpretation when transformed into policies. The Commission has acknowledged this issue and the importance of sticking “to the spirit and the letter of what is proposed – without any re-interpretation or selection”<sup>14</sup>.

Nevertheless, there are some recommendations that could make a real difference. This

calls for a careful consideration of specific recommendations, especially since there should be little doubt about what policies they are intended to trigger. Implementing concrete proposals into policy should be the EU's first step toward delivering on the promises it made after the conclusion of the CFE.

### Reinforcing planned EU climate action

The proposed climate-related measures follow and build upon the EU's aim to achieve climate neutrality in the coming decades. Some of the panels' recommendations correspond to anticipated next steps that the EU has alluded to – for example, the end of unanimity voting in some policy areas. The Commission should focus on the parallels between actions already underway at the EU level and the recommendations of citizens. This way, the EU could both emphasise the importance of the legitimacy of citizens' assemblies and advance its climate agenda with renewed support.

<sup>12</sup> European Union, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Council of the European Union, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, 2022.

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