

CSO BRAINSTORMING

FOR THE “CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE”

MINUTES OF THE CSO BRAINSTORMING MEETING FOR THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE – 10 October 2019

The meeting begins at 12:43. Participants are members representing the following organizations:

*AECEE / European Students Forum
Assembly of European Regions
Assembly of European Regions
Civil Society Europe
COMECE | Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU
DGB-Bundesvorstand Verbindungsstelle Europapolitik
European Citizen Action Service
European Youth Forum
Foundation Euractiv
Foundation Euractiv
JEF (Young European Federalists)
Re-Imagine Europa (RIE)
UEF (Union of European Federalists)
Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*

Paolo Vacca, UEF's secretary general, opens the meeting and presents himself and briefs on the objectives of the meeting. The main goal is to know what are the expectations and level of awareness of CSOs regarding the Conference on the future of Europe. Participants introduce themselves.

PAOLO – UEF starts by briefing on the background of the conference. He emphasizes the importance of the reflection on the level awareness about the conference taking place. He also briefs on what UEF/JEF formally know; noting that everything is still open in terms of content and shape. UEF/JEF contacts in the EP show interest for inputs and expectations from the organized civil society. There is therefore a space to influence the process.

CHRISTOPHER - JEF explains the scenarios in terms of (1) objectives of the conference and (2) the composition of the conference (*see scenarios in briefing note*). He notes that Von der Leyen might not have a clear idea of what she actually intends, when proposing such a conference. There is a lack of clarity also within MEPs, even within AFCD.

He stresses that it would be of great importance to avoid that in the composition of the conference national sovereignties (e.g. EU Member States) retain a big share of leverage. On the contrary, it would be positive to exert some pressure so that national interest mix with voices from citizens or organized civil society. However, it is important to bear in mind that increasing participation of Civil Society and CSOs, it might contribute to a greater visibility and participation; but there will be a lack of formal legitimization, and, in the case of citizens participation, also a lack of expertise. The process should however open to new participative dynamics (e.g. A randomly elected assembly of European citizens).

She throws some questions to the participants on: How do they see possible CSO involvement in the process? What should the composition of the conference be? Should civil society take part within the formal process or as an outside and parallel platform providing input to the convention/conference? What

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should the level of ambition be (A listening excursion – citizens’ dialogues 2.0 or the path to EU constitutional reform)?

ELISA - ECAS mentions a report which analyses other citizens’ consultations and proposes inviting Corina (expert) to this table. She mentions that ECAS had similar meetings; and explains their assessment found that, in the past, the problem was the lack of guidelines. The process was not homogeneous in the MSs, leading to inconsistencies. Elisa names (and explains) the case study of Iceland.

FRANÇOIS - EYF stresses the importance of innovation. While learning what didn’t work in the former processes in the early 2000s. We need to go beyond the Brussels base organizations, understanding what the citizens’ realities are. There is a higher risk in being a waste of time and money, if we are not able to reach the real electorate.

GABRIELA - Civil society Europe Stresses that organized civil society represents the citizens. She expresses that there is a need of reinforcing this message. The fact is, that there is a reality of representation and therefore legitimation in the role of an organized civil society. We need to think of a better way to communicate this nature of our organizations and its connection to citizens’.

CHRISTOPHER – JEF makes Gabriela a follow up question: What do you as CSO representative think of the possibility of having a random elected citizens’ assembly? Would such assembly undermine the role of CSOs?

GABRIELA - Civil society Europe Replies that she thinks both the assembly and the role of CSO can come hand in hand. But she highlights that although we shouldn’t oppose it, she sees some difficulties in bringing people to the decision making process, who lack the background knowledge’s of the processes.

MILOSH - JEF Role of CSO should be to connect citizens with the policy makers.

MARKUS - COMECE shares his experience of previous citizens’ consultations and stresses the importance to strike the balance between the different levels of knowledge of participants during the conversations; participants need to speak the same language. HE proposes being inclusive with citizens of Eastern Europe, to avoid cleavage between “new comers” and “old EU MSs”.

VERA – Eastern Partnership CSF believes that it could be enriching to add the perspective of other regions and integrate the views and experience of the Eastern countries, which in the past went successfully through deep institutional reform. The key might be to integrate, in a comprehensive debate, all constituents, parts and sensitivities of the Union.

GABRIELA - Civil society Europe refers to the study case of Finland to explain there are different to be innovative. (e.g., In Finland the consultations are organized in phases. 1Firstly, a broad question is shared with everyone, people can join and share their concerns on different issues. In the second phase, one continues integrating experts and random citizens. The process continues until policy makers narrow the policy options. However it is essential that the compromise to take those opinions on account is respected).

She makes the point of the importance of keeping these expectations. For Euroscepticism could only grow, if after the process citizens do not have the feeling that they were heard.

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Daniël- AEGEE: Stresses that it is difficult to have a simple fundamental question. He believes, one of the major challenges is that there is a lack of understanding within the citizens. He remarks the dichotomy between making something too simple and making it not valuable anymore.

ELISA - ECAS believes that it can be done, but understand the difficulties.

VANIA – Assembly of European Regions expresses some differences, as organization of a different nature.

VERA – Eastern Partnership CSF shares some questions to the scenarios presented by Christopher. She also highlights and asks about information in terms of the budget. She believes understanding the budget could give some guidelines on the real level of ambition expectations.

CHRISTOPHER – JEF replies that the information that we currently have is little and that what it is known so far is that the EP leads the process (With Guy Verhofstadt taking the initiative with an agenda prioritizing institutions and treaty reform).

PAOLO – UEF believes that the inclusion of certain actors in the process could indicate the seriousness of the conference. Is also unclear who decides on the final ambition of the conference. He believes that if EP shows a strong position on how the conference should be, it would be a push for the conference. Which is why we have a window of opportunity to influence through the European Parliament. Paolo stresses the difficulties of the process and the difficulty of applying examples (Iceland or Finland) when the object of debate is as complex and as broad as the future of the European Union and its institutions.

LECLERQC- Euractive wanted to bring to the table the historical perspective with 3 main points: (1) regarding the goals, one thing heard is that the Commissions is expected to create a mid-term review of the legislation, an exercise that in 2,5 years could reshape the political priorities, as well as the budget. (2) Secondly, one should not forget what is further east and North West. The last major constitutional processes was the Giscard Plan. In this occasion there was a parallel civil society convention. We should debrief and ask people involved back then, e.g., the previous generation of ECAS was involved. (3) Finally, he believes that we need to integrate internet and technologies. He also states that, as federalists, we need to take a history perspective and we need to address the European public space. The key are the big platforms, as Facebook or Google. They need moderators (three types: government, civil society and media). It is important not forget the media sector.

In terms of agenda and proposal, he believes that we should first push for short time objectives, and prepare bigger proposals to be included in the political manifestos before the next election, to be implemented afterwards, if the public opinion accompanies.

GABRIELA - Civil society Europe believes in her experience the interest and initiative are coming from other actors and not from Verhofstadt.

PAOLO – UEF states that what we know is that Tajani wants AFCO and the EP as leaders in the Conference. And Guy Verhostadt wants a role for himself. There is the impression that everything is fluid.

FRANÇOIS - EYF expresses the need to avoid this internal “game of chairs” and calls on the need of showing unity.

DAVID - UEF Agrees with Leclercq and thinks that treaty reform is complex and we should lower ambition.

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SEBASTIANO - JEF The role of civil society shouldn't be to write the Constitution, but rather to give the inputs. He has some concern on the use of digital tools.

ALEJANDRO – UEF mentions that, (1) notwithstanding the EPs initiative, a first formal proposal on the conference should come from Commissioner-designate Suica. (2) Remarks that in AFCE and other fora, it seems that a cleavage between two positions is emerging: Between those who defend the necessity of reforming the institutions; and those who would rather prioritize a policy oriented approach, an EU of results for EU citizens. He believes this dichotomy will shape the content of the conference.

CHRISTOPHER - JEF – sums up and ask to the participants what should the next steps be? He believes, civil society should take a relevant start. The question is how to go forward? Chris proposes (for the last 15 minutes of meeting) to know what do the participant CSOs expect and whether they would like to commit in order to plan the next steps. He finally asks whether they consider this process of enough importance to consider temporary coalition or meetings on a regular basis.

PAOLO – UEF asks to the participants whether there is a core of compromise among the CSOs present.

FRANÇOIS – EYF after Sebastiano asks him on his precious coalition experience for the electoral campaign, he tells his experience. He expresses that it is important for the sake of working together to bear two principles in mind: (1) to know who is leading; And (2) to be loose and flexible. He proposes UEF to be leading the process. He also recommends doing the best of digital tools to go fast in coordination.

Markus – COMECE. Agrees in not formalizing the meetings and open the processes to other CSOs, and only to find other more formal ways of cooperating in a later stage.

PAOLO – UEF Understand it is an important element that many important CSOs are not present and it would be important to invite them and we can do that bilaterally, by using our respective networks.

Markus – COMECE proposes to Integrate and put in common all our networks.

Leclercq - EURACTIVE offers his support in the field of European public space.

Milosh- JEF believes it is a good moment to start, since we are still lacking information. Supports the idea that UEF and JEF develop a policy brief, as a starting point for the next meetings. And emphasizes the need to open consultation to other CSOs.

SEBASTIANO – JEF agrees with the policy document and proposes to have a longer meeting next tile. Also stresses that at some point, it might be useful to have a formal coalition.

PAOLO – UEF We might be at the begging of something big; or we might be at the beginning of something useless. Summary of to do things:

1. Prepare summary (minutes) of today.
2. Invite other organizations. Participant CSOs to also reach other CSOs within their networks.
3. Organize a on line consultation
4. Organize a new meeting after 2 weeks
5. Finally, another event with someone from the commission/EP

Daniël- AEGEE: proposes to stablish a mailing list

Meeting ends at 14:07.