



Conference
on the **Future**
of **Europe**

European Committee
of the Regions

Launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe



Event type

Digital local
dialogue

Date

9 May 2021

Initialising member

President
Tzitzikostas

Audience

European citizens and politicians, European
associations, local and regional administration

Organiser

European Committee of the
Regions, City of Strasbourg and
Eurometropolis of Strasbourg

Partners

Regions of France,
Assembly of French
Departments, Associations
of Mayors of France

Themes

Conference on the Future of Europe, European
democracy, local dialogues, post-pandemic recovery



Speakers

- **Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, President of the CoR, Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia, Greece
- **Jeanne Barseghian**, Mayor of Strasbourg and 1st Vice-President of the Eurometropolis of Strasbourg
- **André Viola**, President of the French delegation to the CoR, Member of the Aude Departmental Council
- **Dubravka Šuica**, Vice-President of the European Commission, Commissioner for Democracy and Demography
- **Ana Paula Zacarias**, Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs
- **Joël Giraud**, Minister of State for Rural Affairs
- **Jean Rottner**, President of the Grand Est Region, Representative of the French Regions
- **Frédéric Bierry**, President of the European Collectivity of Alsace
- **François Baroin**, President of the Association of Mayors of France, Mayor of Troyes
- **Stefano Bonaccini**, President of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), President of the Emilia Romagna region
- **Eva Maydell**, President of the International European Movement, Member of the European Parliament
- **Silja Markkula**, President of the European Youth Forum
- **Olgierd Geblewicz**, President of the EPP Group in the CoR, President of the Western Pomerania Region
- **Christophe Rouillon**, President of the PES Group in the CoR, Mayor of Coulaines
- **François Decoster**, President of the Renew Europe Group in the CoR, Mayor of Saint-Omer
- **Władysław Ortyl**, President of the ECR Group in the CoR, President of the Podkarpackie Region
- **Kieran McCarthy**, President of the EA Group in the CoR, Member of Cork City Council
- **Satu Haapanen**, Co-Chair of the Greens Group in the CoR, Member of Oulu City Council



Press/Social media coverage

Media coverage

[COR Press Release](#)

Website

[FutureofEurope](#)

Social Media

[#EU_CoR](#)

[Europe Day 2021](#)



Key messages

The Conference on the Future of Europe must give citizens in the EU's regions, cities and villages a platform to voice their concerns, aspirations and ideas. The formal recognition of local and regional governments' importance and added value to policy making is needed for a sustainable and resilient recovery into a post-pandemic world. The Conference is an opportunity to reflect on European democracy, strengthen its functioning and increase its legitimacy. It will also lay the foundations for **perpetual citizen dialogues** into the future. A sure way to combat Euroscepticism and populism is through involving local communities. This will enable a shift away from the view that only national governments can participate in EU policy making. Local and Regional authorities are the best allies the Union could have because of their democratic nature and by their proximity to citizens. Regions, cities and villages hold the keys to Europe's future.

Background

The hybrid event « Launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe » was organised by the European Committee of the Regions in partnership with the French government, the City of Strasbourg and Eurometropolis of Strasbourg on 9 May 2021. Its aim was to **'territorialise' the Conference** and ensure the levels of government closest to citizens – the local and regional ones – are given prime of place. Participants endorsed an open letter addressed to all local leaders inviting them to organise local dialogues and join a network of Regional and Local EU Councillors launched by the CoR.

The event was followed live by 2 000 people on Europe by Satellite and Facebook Live and has since received over **3 500 views**. Six of the speakers were on site in the City of Strasbourg's historic 'Grand Salon' and the event was premiced by the 46 person university orchestra playing the Ode to Joy and a ceremonial unfolding of the European flag.

Engaging in local dialogue with citizens for a more resilient Europe

A resounding call was emitted by participants of the event to urge local and regional politicians to engage with the opportunity the Conference presents. The million local politicians across the EU are best placed to mobilise citizens and express to national and European policy makers what is most pressing in people's daily lives. The President of the European Committee of the Regions, **Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, said: "We need to relaunch the European project by enhancing its democratic functioning. I see our 'House of European Democracy' as having solid foundations - the regional and local authorities - strong walls - the member states - and a protective roof - the EU." It was expressed that the legitimacy of the EU depends on deeper citizen involvement, something sub-national authorities are ready to support with. This view was given credence by Vice-President Šuica who said: "Through the European Committee of the Regions, we see how local and regional authorities are strengthening our democracy" and that "regions, mayors and cities are closest to citizens" and hence "key to making the Conference on the Future of Europe a success."

The Mayor of Strasbourg, **Jeanne Barseghian**, who hosted the event in the City Hall, reminded viewers that Strasbourg already has a history of in-depth citizen participation through its Agoras, municipal councils, participatory budget, citizen conferences. She stressed that citizens' voices should not just be consultative and that a clear definition of participatory processes will grant it legitimacy and value.

The Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs, **Ana Paula Zacarias** said: "As Alexis de Tocqueville once said: "Local assemblies (...) constitute the strength of free nations." This shows the relevance of bringing regional and local authorities to the core of the Conference on the Future of Europe." She stressed that this level of government can provide access to citizens who "normally do not participate and express their opinions".

The event took place across two panels and both were accompanied by recorded **interventions of citizens** expressing what matters most to them. Youssef, an Erasmus student from Italy, said that "Europe embodies a sense of unity and belonging which goes beyond national borders". The key challenges for him are environmental and migration issues and coordinating the post-pandemic recovery. Andrea, a Romanian student living in Strasbourg, said that for her, Europe was about being able to vote in national elections in Romania and local elections in France. She said that Europe had succeeded in providing free movement and voting rights but now needed to address the climate crisis and ensure the provision of jobs for all.



André Viola, President of the French delegation to the CoR, evoked the importance of local authorities in applying EU policy, especially in the field of cohesion policy thus making them unavoidable partners in the legislative process.

French Minister of State for Rural Affairs, **Joël Giraud**, intervened from his home 15 km from the Italian border to raise the Lisbon Treaty's concept of "differentiation"; the capacity to distinguish between types of regions and provide for the specificities they call for.

Jean Rottner, the President of the Grand Est Region, said that in his region flanked by different countries, they are the seamen of Europe, negotiating cross-border life. He also reminded participants of what young people hope for and expect, that is to discover Europe through travel, study and work. **Frédéric Bierry**, President of the European Collectivity of Alsace described the multifaceted storm Europe finds itself in from Euroskeptics who seek to discredit it to the demographic and climate crises on the horizon. Europe he said, had erased borders but the health crises reinstated them. Significant cross-border cooperation is now being developed to better protect and reinforce life in these regions.

François Baroin, President of the association of the Mayors of France pointed to regions' rapid reaction to the pandemic, their protective strategies and support to citizens and businesses. Given that half of the French population live in territories of less than 2,500 inhabitants, policy invariably must cater for these rural and less populated areas.

Stefano Bonaccini, CEMR President, celebrated the coordinated success of the European vaccine roll out strategy and reminded participants that we would all be poorer outside of Europe and are far stronger together.

Strengthening democratic legitimacy: a Conference for and with citizens - the contribution of the European Committee of the Regions

The second panel was opened by further interventions of citizens reflecting on what Europe means for them and their aspirations for its future. Moga, a secondary school student said the three key factors for him were the environment, ecology and youth. Claire Audhuy, a dramaturge, said that for her, Europe is like a big family with its joys and difficulties, including those members with whom we get on less well but to whom we are united by something which is greater than us. **Eva Maydell**, MEP and President of European Movement International, raised the importance of listening to citizens like Moga and Claire. Upskilling citizens and presenting them with a new economic platform which links the peripheries to the centres are the themes most relevant to people's daily lives.

Meaningful follow up from the European institutions will be key to the Conference for **Silja Markkula**, the President of the European Youth Forum. The true weight and participation of citizens in the Conference's Plenary will also determine how much legitimacy citizens attribute to the process. She called for the EU to fulfil its vocation as a peace project and ensure quality education and employment opportunities.

Olgierd Geblewicz, President of the EPP Group in the CoR stressed the importance of giving Europe a face in all the EU's regions and allow citizens to decide which policies they intend to influence. The principle of subsidiarity is also about opening EU decisions to the regions. One of the EU's youngest institutions, the CoR, perhaps holds the keys to its future, Mr. Geblewicz said.

Christophe Rouillon, President of the CoR PES group, called for overcoming the intellectual blockages which prevent addressing topics considered taboo. Instead, it is crucial to widen the scope of participants in the Conference, instantiate permanent citizen dialogues and apply a tax on the large tech companies which made a killing during the pandemic.

François Decoster, on behalf of the Renew Europe family, expressed his wish that Europe be seen as a true strength to increase development in regions and bring forwards CoR initiatives. Each municipal council should have a « European correspondent » who would ensure a better distribution and dissemination of information.



Władysław Ortyl, President of the CoR's ECR Group explicated the importance of local authorities for democracy and that as many decisions as possible should be taken at municipal level before regional level and only then national or European level.

Kieran McCarthy, President of the EA Group in the CoR, explained that the CoR has always been focused on the future of Europe. He described the CoR's relentless work in connecting and empowering regions and citizens. The CoR's knowledge base and work programme has constantly been progressing and can proudly participate as a full partner in the Conference.

Satu Haapanen, Co-Chair of the CoR's Green Group asked what we want our home called Europe to look like. She defined "home" as a place where we can be who we are and receive what we need and that it is only a home once everyone feels they can belong there. Ms. Haapanen described her experience of "philoxenia" – the welcome and care of strangers to one's home with an open heart and mind – when she lived in Cyprus. She asked how Europe can discover its own philoxenia and protect its values of human rights and democracy, also beyond its borders. Ms. Haapanen encourages everyone to ask their children, parents and grandparents what the future of Europe means to them.

The closing words were given by CoR First Vice-President **Vasco Alves Cordeiro** who said : "The message of today's representatives of cities and regions is clear: we accept the challenge to help our Union to do better for our citizens. Europe is an ambitious project. Accountability and trust are key to achieving this objective. During and after the Conference on the Future of the Europe, we have to say what we are going to do with what people tell us they want. This Conference is not about EU institutions. It is about us, the people of Europe!"

