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The future of the European Union

Introduction

The future of the European Union is shaped both by the decisions of individual Member States and by factors beyond their control. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression in Ukraine have highlighted that the Union must be prepared to respond flexibly to any future challenges. The Commission's [2021 Strategic Foresight Report](#) identified the factors that will shape the future of Europe. The challenges included in this report include climate change and other environmental challenges such as biodiversity loss. Other key global megatrends in the report include increasing digital hyperconnectivity and technological transformations, which are associated with, for example, job loss through automation. It also identifies pressure on democracy and values, as well as changes in shifts in the global order and demography, such as the growing world's population and the ageing population in the EU. The Union will have to address these and many other challenges.

According to the 2021 [Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe](#), EU citizens see climate change and environmental issues as top global challenges for the future of the EU (49%), followed by health risks (34%) and forced migration and displacement (30%). The survey also asked what EU citizens would consider most beneficial for the future of Europe. Respondents most frequently mentioned comparable living standards (31%), followed by a common health policy (22%), stronger solidarity among Member States (22%) and energy independence (20%).

Possible future scenarios for the EU

[The White paper on the future of Europe](#), presented by the Commission in March 2017, outlined possible scenarios for the Union in 2025. Although the European Council did not adopt any official conclusions on this document, the scenarios outlined may be relevant for the current discussion on the future of the EU. The first scenario envisaged EU sticking to its course. The second scenario considered the European Union gradually re-centring on the single market. In the third scenario, the European Union would allow willing Member States to do more together in specific areas. Under the fourth scenario, the European Union focuses on delivering more and faster in selected policy areas, while doing less elsewhere. The fifth scenario would see the European Union decide to do much more together across all policy areas.

The Conference on the Future of Europe also attempted to define the future shape of the Union and how citizens themselves see it. President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, committed to organising the Conference on the Future of Europe ("the Conference") in her [Opening Statement in the European Parliament Plenary Session](#) in Strasbourg on 16 July 2019. Subsequently, a [Joint Declaration](#) of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on the Conference on the Future of Europe was adopted on 10 March 2021, outlining the basic methods, objectives and principles of the Conference. An Executive Board was set up

to organise the conference. It consisted of an equal representation from the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. The presidential Troika of COSAC participated as observer.

The conference concluded one year after its opening, on 9 May 2022, with the delivery of the [Report on the Final Outcome](#) to the Presidents of the European Parliament, Commission and Council. As regards the implementation of the Conference conclusions, following the final report, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) of 9 June 2022 on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties. On 10 June 2022, the General Secretariat of the Council published a [preliminary technical assessment](#) of the proposals and related specific measures contained in the report on the final outcome of the Conference. The European Council subsequently commented on the outcome of the conference in its [conclusions](#) of the meeting held on 23 and 24 June 2022. In these conclusions, it stated that the competent authorities should ensure an effective follow-up to the submitted report. In June 2022, the Commission issued a [Communication](#) outlining the first steps to follow up on the outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Commission assesses in this Communication that it is already implementing initiatives which directly respond to the proposals in some areas or that it has already proposed or plans to propose relevant initiatives in other areas. However, some areas will require wholly new initiatives to be put forward.

The outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe, as well as the circumstances surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have raised the issue of possibly revising the Treaties, in particular a change from unanimity to qualified majority voting in certain areas. The unanimity of the Council's decision-making ensures that Member States must find a compromise solution on major issues that will suit all Member States. On the other hand, qualified majority voting allows for faster and more efficient decision-making, which is particularly important on issues that require the Union to act as soon as possible.

The European Parliament proposed two specific changes in the above-mentioned [resolution](#) of 9 June 2022. The first change concerned an amendment to Article 29 of the Treaty on European Union; the European Parliament believes that this Article should include the following provision "where a decision provides for the interruption or reduction, in part or completely, of economic and financial relations with one or more third countries, the Council shall act by a qualified majority". The second change proposed the European Council shall act by a qualified majority in decisions on the use of passerelle clauses. The European Parliament's proposals were [discussed](#) by the General Affairs Council on 18 October 2022. At this meeting, the Member States agreed not to submit to the European Council the proposals for amendments to the Treaties tabled by the European Parliament for the time being, as the European Parliament is expected to table further proposals for amendments to the Treaties.

As outlined in the White paper on the future of Europe, future developments also depend on whether Member States will be interested in extending the powers conferred on the Union by the Treaties. In terms of the future of the EU, there are other issues open for discussion, such as the role of the European Commission or the extension of the national parliaments' powers, which was also addressed by one of the COSAC working groups in the first half of 2022.