

**ASSEMBLY OF EUROPEAN REGIONS
RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE**

In view of the recently signed joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe on 10 March 2021, AER has outlined the following recommendations for an inclusive and participatory Conference on the Future of Europe, in which regional authorities play a key role.

1. *Local and Regional Authorities should be viewed as equal partners in the Conference on the Future of Europe;*

Whilst we welcome the recognition of the role of Local and Regional Authorities in ensuring that the Conference reaches every corner of the Union, given their uniquely close relationship with citizens on the ground, we believe they should be viewed as equal partners. In this regard, the Conference on the Future of Europe should meaningfully involve local and regional authorities in the inter-institutional discussions and in the preparation of the local dialogues with citizens. This means to have a seat guaranteed in the *Conference Plenary* together with national Parliaments, and the EU institutions, as well as to participate as observers in the Executive Board of the Conference. The AER is, therefore, determined to continue working to ensure the perspectives of European regions are an integral part of the Conference's discussions.

2. *A citizens-led Conference that reaches all corners of Europe, not only of the Union;*

As stated in the joint declaration, this *Conference will open a new space for debate with citizens to address Europe's challenges and priorities*; however, we consider that citizens from all parts of Europe, including neighbouring countries with accession status, should be involved in these dialogues. At AER we believe that although candidate countries are not members of the European Union yet, they are part of Europe, hence they share the same or similar challenges and priorities, and one day they will be part of the future of the EU. Therefore, we would regret not seeing them participating in the Conference, and we recommend extending the invitation to citizens and regional authorities from outside the Union.

3. *The highest standards of inclusiveness both in participation and facilitation methods must be ensured throughout all the process;*

The Assembly of European Regions is a network as diverse as Europe itself. Our goal is to make sure that citizens in all regions, rural and urban, have the chance to give their input on the Conference and how they want Europe to be; this means engaging citizens from a wide geographic origin, age, level of education, gender, or socioeconomic background. This demands a citizen-led approach starting in Europe's towns, villages and cities, and a strong role for local and regional authorities as key facilitators for citizens' ideas and aspirations.

4. *Democratic legitimacy must be respected through the establishment of an open mandate for clear proposals and structured involvement of citizens in the discussions at all phases, and at all levels – local and regional;*

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a unique opportunity for citizens to shape the European Union's priorities. For it to be successful, it is essential that citizens feel their feedback counts. The Assembly of European Regions welcomes the consideration in the joint declaration of establishing a feedback mechanism, although it acknowledges the lack of a specific clear structure. The AER recommends the Conference Joint Presidency committing to an open mandate which delivers legislative and policy recommendations to tackle all the issues of relevant importance raised by the citizens during the Conference, including those proposals which require treaty changes.

The AER considers that without an open mandate for clear proposals and structured involvement of citizens and other stakeholders, the Conference is likely to replicate existing forms of citizen engagement, for instance, the European Commission's Citizens' Dialogues.

5. *Continuity of the Conference and establishment of an EU permanent structured consultation.*

The COVID-19 pandemic postponed the launch of the Conference for over a year, however, this has not had an impact on the ending date of this process, which will be concluding in Spring 2022. The AER believes that in order to have the desired impact as specified in the Joint Declaration and as expected by all stakeholders involved, it should be a two-year process as originally planned.

Moreover, AER considers that this Conference should be the precursor of a permanent mechanism of citizen engagement and consultation in the EU. Regional and local authorities must be meaningfully involved in the EU structures of decision-making, especially in view of the post-COVID-19 recovery. In this regard, the Conference on the Future of Europe comes as a unique opportunity for regions to advocate for institutional reforms: For enhancing the EU architecture in a way that it truly delivers on the principles of subsidiarity, partnership and multi-level governance; and for an EU architecture that gives a stronger voice to regional authorities and its citizens by properly engaging them in the EU decision-making process through the establishment of a permanent structured consultation.