



Conférence européenne des **Présidentes et Présidents de Parlement** European Conference of **Presidents of Parliament**

Athènes, 21-22 octobre 2021 / Athens, 21-22 October 2021



The common future of all European citizens

Background document for the theme 3 - revised

1. The future is coming and is coming very fast. Covid-19 is exposing human vulnerability, shattering certainties, redistributing wealth, recasting priorities, disrupting the way in which people live, work and interact, affecting the way public institutions deliver governance and the way in which States co-operate with one another. Once Covid-19 is over, our societies may look very different from before. In fact, the pandemic may be helping to propel the world into a different age altogether.
2. Change was already under way: in the past two decades globalisation led to greater economic interdependence while exacerbating economic inequalities; poverty, war and environmental disasters fuelled migratory flows; digital transformation promised to herald a fourth industrial revolution, transforming social relations, media and the concept of the public sphere; traditional political actors and mechanisms lost traction while new ways of doing politics and engaging in public life emerged. The Covid-19 pandemic is amplifying the shockwave caused by these fast-moving and interrelated processes.
3. It is in periods of momentous change such as the one we are experiencing that the foundations of a new balance are laid down. Here and now, Europeans should be given the voice and the means to shape their future, to ensure it is in line with their aspirations, expectations, needs, values and principles. The Conference of Presidents of Parliament, bringing together national parliaments representing 830 million Europeans, provides a platform to help develop a new vision for the common future of all European citizens.

Our common European home, our values

4. In 1949, the Council of Europe's 10 founding members came together in the conviction that respecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law was the best way to avert a new war and ensure peace and prosperity. In the '*common European home*', as Michael Gorbachev called it in a historical speech before the Parliamentary Assembly in 1989, currently live 830 million Europeans, from different walks of life: different ethnic groups, religions, languages, political affiliations. Despite this great variety, what has made the Council of Europe a beacon for unity in diversity are the common values of its people and the conviction that human rights, democracy and the rule of law are the best way to achieve peace and prosperity.
5. And yet, increasingly in the past few years, the walls of the European home are showing cracks. Common values are being challenged and arguments based on national specificities or pre-eminence are being advanced to justify departures from Council of Europe standards. The Council of Europe should not shy away from a broad and inclusive debate on common European values, with the involvement of all stakeholders, be they governments, parliaments or ordinary citizens.
6. Whether the Council of Europe is able to continue to carry out its mission in the future depends on its capacity to focus on what unites its member States rather than what divides them. At the foundations of our common European home lies the European Convention on Human Rights, which is the ultimate shelter for everyone in Europe seeking protection from human rights violations. In this sense, the accession of the European Union to the Convention would contribute to reasserting, legally and politically, the solidity and unity of purpose of the European project.
7. United by the values enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and more than 220 Council of Europe conventions, the citizens of Europe, through Parliaments and Governments, should focus – together – on the challenges democratic institutions and our political systems are facing. Rather than challenges, these should be seen as opportunities to make democracies more resilient and adapted to

modern times. The Council of Europe is in an ideal position to accompany and lead this process, more specifically in the following areas.

A renewal of democracy

8. Democracy is in constant evolution and the speed of change seems to have accelerated. Democratic standards are backsliding. Although signs were already visible over the past few years, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this trend, with a number of countries curtailing the rights and liberties of individuals on the grounds that this is necessary to protect public health. Similarly, parliamentary oversight of the executive has been weakened and the need for the majority to engage with the opposition to reach commonly agreed solutions has become of secondary importance.

9. It would be misleading, however, to draw an entirely negative picture. The past few years have seen the emergence of a new generation of rights: the right to a healthy environment, the right to cybersecurity and the right to information as opposed to fake news. Democracy is at a turning point. To reverse the current trend towards backsliding, a renewal of democracy is necessary. But how can it be achieved?

Citizens to have a greater say

10. Empowering citizens to have a greater say on decisions that will have an impact on them is a possible way forward. It can lead to better informed policies and guarantee greater support for their implementation. Awareness of this has been rising in the past few years, with public institutions launching consultations and setting up participation and deliberation mechanisms to directly involve citizens and the public in decision-making processes. Similarly, political parties have increasingly had recourse to digital platforms with a view to tapping into common wisdom to frame their policies and even decide how they should vote in parliament.

11. Participatory and deliberative democracy can potentially deal with any topic. Typical examples include citizen assemblies on global challenges such as the environment and climate change, but also major societal issues such as gender equality. All levels of governance are concerned: from the local one, with participatory budgeting initiatives spawning all over Europe, to the supranational level, the best-known example being the *Conference on the Future of Europe* recently launched by the European Union.

12. To have an added value, participatory and deliberative democracy should be representative and inclusive. Many citizens' assemblies, for instance, are randomly selected out of a pool of volunteers according to criteria such as age, gender, education and place of residence. In this way, they give voice to all social groups and to people whose views would be less likely to be considered in traditional decision-making processes. Moreover, giving children and young people the right to participate in policymaking enables them to grow into engaged citizens and to develop critical thinking.

More robust representative institutions

13. Ensuring that the legitimacy and trustworthiness of public institutions are beyond doubt is another way to revitalise democracy while rekindling Europeans' trust in the political system.

14. Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of representative democracy. Addressing the falling electoral turn-out, especially amongst some groups in society; ensuring that the electorate can freely form their opinion without manipulation; protecting the integrity of the electoral process from external interference; and guaranteeing full compliance with international electoral standards and best practice are crucial preconditions for the legitimacy of elected bodies.

15. Citizens' trust, however, does not depend only on how parliaments and officials are elected but also on how they work and behave. Representative institutions should be exemplary in embodying democratic cultures and values. They should respect each other's role, remit and prerogatives while adhering to the highest ethical standards.

A digital future

16. The future may be uncertain but one thing is sure: it will be digital. Digital technologies have become an integral part of the European way of life, and this trend is bound to increase.

17. Awareness of the impact of technology on public life and the functioning of democratic institutions has led many States and international organisations to push for the introduction of a set of legal, policy and ethical measures to harness its benefits while averting its risks. The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the concentration of data in the hands of a few public or private actors should be subjected to democratic oversight, as they pose a very concrete threat to democracy and its evolution.

18. At the same time, technology can be an invaluable ally in the effort to renew democracy: it can offer new channels for citizens, in particular young people, to take part in the public debate, to gather around ideas and causes, and to hold the authorities to account. From a top-down perspective, by embracing technology and innovation, public institutions can work more efficiently and effectively, ensuring greater transparency, openness, accountability and responsiveness to the citizens' needs.

19. In this regard, Covid-19 may have been a point of no-return in firmly setting the public administration onto the path to digital transformation. Addressing the digital divide and removing barriers to Internet access has increasingly become imperative to ensure that nobody is left behind in the democracy of the future. Similarly, digitalisation of the administrative machinery exposes it to new vulnerabilities that need to be taken into account to ensure the resilience of democracy against malevolent actors.

Multilateralism

20. Many of the challenges that confront European societies transcend national borders. The maintenance of peace and security, tackling climate change and providing environmental protection, reaping the benefits of digital transformation while addressing its risks, coming to grips with migration, growing inequalities and, as we have seen in the last two years, a worldwide pandemic are momentous challenges of global dimensions.

21. Responses can be found only by overcoming national particularisms. The common future of all European citizens will depend also on the resolve and the capacity of the international community to reshape multilateral institutions with a view to ensuring that they are fully representative, inclusive and can provide responses to global challenges that are timely, co-ordinated, rule-based, effective and durable. Multilateralism, membership in international organisations and active engagement in international fora should be promoted as a means of achieving durable solutions to global challenges and secure peace and stability through dialogue and solidarity.

22. All Europeans should be part of this debate. As their elected representatives, national parliaments have a key role to play in defining their countries' stance in this regard and formulate the way forward.

Questions for discussion

- *How can national parliaments contribute to a renewal of democracy?*
- *What can parliaments do to reinvigorate citizens' engagement with their common European values?*
- *What is your parliament doing to engage citizens in policy making?*
- *How can the younger generations feel more engaged and better represented in politics?*
- *What is the role of national parliaments in guaranteeing the centrality of the European Convention of Human Rights and promoting its effectiveness?*
- *How can the Parliamentary Assembly work hand in hand with national parliaments to promote new generation rights?*
- *Has your parliament introduced digital or other innovations during the Covid-19 pandemic which will be maintained once it is over?*
- *How can national parliaments promote multilateralism?*
- *How can the Parliamentary Assembly better contribute to promoting a value-based political dialogue between its member States?*
- *How can the Parliamentary Assembly work hand in hand with national parliaments to promote multilateralism?*

Background documents

Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Report on the state of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, [A democratic renewal for Europe](#), 2021

Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Annual report, [Multilateralism](#), 2020

[Assembly Resolution 2277 \(2019\) on Role and mission of the Parliamentary Assembly: main challenges for the future](#)

[Assembly Resolution 2341 \(2020\) on Need for democratic governance of artificial intelligence](#)

Report by Mr George Papandreou (Greece, SOC) on [More participatory democracy to tackle climate change](#), adopted by the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on 22 June 2021

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Verbatim of the [current affairs debate on The Western Balkans between democratic challenges and European aspirations: What role for the Council of Europe?](#), held on 30 September 2021