



European Committee  
of the Regions



Conference  
on the **Future**  
of Europe



# Workplace Europe: Mind the Gap!

Local dialogues



## Event type

Local event

## Date

01.07.2021

## Initialising member

Wilma Delissen-  
van Tongerlo

## Audience

Policy makers, civil society, academics

## Organiser

Studio Europa Maastricht

European Committee of the Regions

## Themes

Conference on the Future of Europe, good policy making, priorities of academics and civil society.



## Speakers

- Wilma Delissen van Tongerlo, CoR Member
- Niccolo Milanese, European alternatives
- Alvaro Olaert, Maastricht University
- Wolfgang Petzold, Deputy Director, Directorate for Communications, European Committee of the Regions
- Beatriz Rios, moderator



## Key messages

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity for citizens to engage with EU politics and efforts must be made to encourage deliberation on EU issues at the national level. The European citizen panels composing the Conference will decide for themselves what they wish to debate and draw up their own conclusions. Citizens will not be talked at – they will decide who they want to listen to. Experts can advise them on specialist topics and facilitators will ensure all participate but the citizens themselves will decide. Citizens' decisions will be cross checked legally and elected parliamentarians will then express whether they adopt them. If they chose not to, they will have to express why. The Conference on the Future of Europe must lay blueprints for embedding citizen participation in EU decision making in a structured and systematic way.

Europe matters in all the places that make up the EU: its climate, pandemics, borders. These are issues which are everywhere. Being together is an added value in itself. A European Republic with social policies and representative democracy would respond to key challenges. Countries would not vanish but more integration would be good for the planet.

A local government is the eyes and ears of that region. Local governments are best placed to organise the issues on the ground. They must be given the resources to do so.



## Press/Social media coverage

### Media coverage

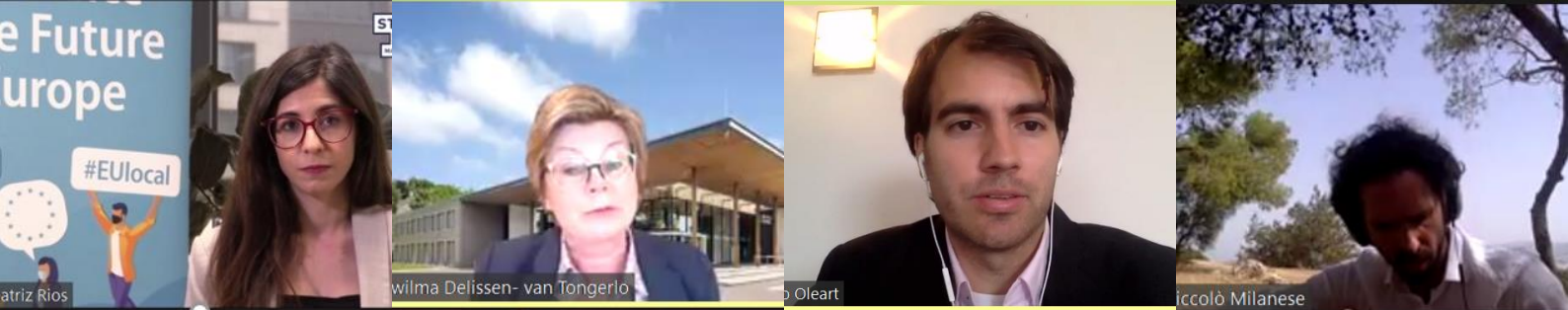
[COR Press Release](#)

### Website

[FutureofEurope](#)

### Social Media

[#EU\\_CoR](#)



## How can regions and their institutions claim a seat at the table of the Conference on the Future of Europe?

On 1<sup>st</sup> July, Studio Europa Maastricht co-organised a local dialogue with the CoR reflecting on the inputs and possible outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Using innovative videoconference software, participants moved between facilitated discussion rooms and contributed to collaborative documents developing key priorities for civil society, policy making and academia to focus on.

The event began with a panel discussion between all speakers about the shortfalls but also opportunities of the Conference. Niccolò Milanese expressed his surprise at the lack of consultation with civil society associations in the preparatory phase and the opacity in the final decision making process. He stressed the importance of not waiting for top down change but to organise at local level in response to the challenges lived. 'European alternatives' is organising a transnational citizen dialogue in Palermo at the same time as the Assembly of Mayors so as to compare the outputs from the official panels. A meeting also took place in Palermo to address migration policy as many cities are taking the lead in implementing migration policies appropriate to their situation on the ground. He said that the Conference is an experiment and hopefully its lessons can be learnt quicker than the EU institutions learnt the lessons of the financial crisis of 2008.

Niccolò Milanese asserted that « populist strategies should not be adopted at EU level ». Democracy is also about divergences and people not being totally unified. This should be insisted on and it is the opposite of populism. Emphasis should instead be placed on the human virtues: it is a lot more pleasant to be cooperative than being involved in shouting matches.

CoR Member Wilma Delissen highlighted the importance of conveying accessible information about both local and EU levels. She is for more accessible information to EU citizens and that "the beautiful, content rich websites of the EU institutions remain known to still too few". For her, there is no need for new institutions but rather further integration and collaboration of the existing ones. Furthermore, we should remind ourselves that we are all citizens and can contribute to the betterment of society.

Alvaro Oleart, a political economy researcher at Maastricht University, described how some countries have already tried to "undermine the process from the beginning" by signing a letter saying there should be no treaty change in the Conference's recommendations. He held that some "autocratic" national governments are taking an activist approach and getting involved in the Conference. This is not to be dismissed however and "euroskeptic participation is still participation" and national governments will play a role in the process. For him, efforts should be made to engage as many people as possible and push for a more European dimension in national political debates.

Details of the Conference's organization were explained by Wolfgang Petzold who stressed the impressive feat that European Citizen Panels are in themselves: they will be speaking in 23 languages or more and split into groups with expert moderators. They will not be talked at. They – the citizens – decide whom they want to listen to. He explained that this is an experiment, and they sometimes go wrong but mistakes allow for even greater learning curves. Now that everything is transparent with all three institutions heavily invested in the process, they would be "badly advised to go against it".

During the breakout room sessions, participants could put themselves in rooms discussing civil society, academia or policy making. The civil society discussion focused on the value of celebrating and encouraging broader place-based identities: it is possible to have an EU and multiple national/local identities. The group discussing policy making highlighted the importance of informing sub-national politicians of EU policy, otherwise they will not be able to contribute or reap benefits. For example, the Netherlands is the only country which has not submitted Next Generation EU plans, which is unfortunate because the regions would have benefitted from this money. The workshop about academia addressed the lack of incentives for academics to participate in local, public discussion as they regularly move between universities and are under pressure to publish articles. Epidemiologists have played an important role in the organisation of society lately, academics working on democracy should be invited to do so as well.

In conclusion, participants expressed the need for a European public sphere where citizens can encounter each other, whether online or physically. This will create a more robust democratic culture within the EU.