

Speech by Vice-President Suica the LXV COSAC Plenary meeting

Thank you Chair Capoulas Santos, Dear Luis,

And thank you, MEP Tajani, Dear Antonio,

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to join you to discuss the Conference on the Future of Europe. I recently addressed a conference entitled “Delivering a legacy of an ever-closer Union”. I believe that an ever-closer Union must be one that can reflect the hopes and dreams of its citizens for the future. For this to happen, we need everyone’s input at the local, regional, national and European level. Politics has changed in the European Union. It is no longer only politicians who are shaping the future. We are bringing citizens into the heart of EU policy-making. Citizens can now deliberate and discuss the kind of future European Union they want to build, both with each other and with their elected representatives. This is key to strengthening our representative democracy, making it more responsive. Democracy, must never be taken for granted. We must find new and innovative ways to nurture and protect it. Why are we having the Conference on the Future of Europe? I would say that it is necessary, not least, because our democracy faces multiple challenges.

Conference on the Future of Europe – setting the scene

Recent Eurobarometer results show that citizens see democracy as the Union’s most important asset. The Commission is taking various actions to support our member states in reinforcing our democracy. The Conference on the Future of Europe is one of them and it is notable that we are doing this all together: European Parliament, Council of Ministers, European Commission, as well as the national parliaments. Democracy itself is not static and evolves constantly. We politicians must also evolve to ensure our representative democracy is “Fit for the Future”. Citizens are eager to have a greater say in democracy, beyond their

participation in elections. This of course is crucial, but we need to offer more. We need a creative re-imagining of democracy with the courage to deliver differently, to ensure that our representative democracy is stronger and in tune with the needs of our times. The Conference is part of our response to this challenge. Indeed, the involvement of citizens is a clear demand from several National Parliaments, as highlighted in the most recent Bi-Annual COSAC-report. The Conference is not a panacea for all ills, but I believe that engaging directly with citizens on an equal footing and following-up on their input is a good place to start.

The Conference is unlike anything we have ever tried before at the EU level. We are structurally embedding citizen engagement in the European Union. This innovative process is conceived for citizens and depends on them. Elected representatives have their chambers in which to deliberate the future of Europe. Ministers have their councils of government. I sit in the College of Commissioners. This Conference is designed for the citizens, providing a space for them to deliberate among themselves and with their elected representatives as equals. And based on the input of citizens, the Conference will make proposals to build the kind of Europe that citizens want in the future. A robust feedback mechanism will ensure that citizens' input will result in concrete recommendations for EU action. When the Conference draws its conclusions in the Spring of 2022, the work does not stop. The EU institutions will reflect on what the citizens have deliberated and on how we can best follow-up on it. Commission President von der Leyen has committed to this and I intend to see it through. And let us not forget, that we too are all citizens and so we should celebrate this unique opportunity that is being created.

We are also joined in this endeavour by regional and local authorities as well as civil society and social partners. I want to be clear, the Conference does not and cannot replace representative democracy. It is intended to reinforce it.

With my co-chair colleagues and the Executive Board, you can see that the Conference is gaining in momentum. Since its launch on the 19th of April, the Conference's multilingual digital platform has already received more than 560.000 visits, with 1.5 million pages viewed. This is citizen engagement in a

pandemic. The Conference's platform is innovative and unprecedented in terms of scale, interactivity and transparency. It is instrumental in providing a virtual space for citizens to shape Europe's future. I am curious to find out what ideas citizens will come up with. Looking to the future, as lockdown conditions start to ease, I trust that in-person events will be able to start soon. I wish the same for COSAC meetings.

Now EU institutions, Member States, local and regional authorities and the wider stakeholder community must focus on communication to ensure that we spread the word on the Conference, and that it reaches citizens from all backgrounds and in all corners of the Union. The Conference's inaugural event on Europe Day kicked this off. However, communication is a shared responsibility and it is vital we all ensure maximal participation and that we follow up on citizens' ideas and proposals. Participation in the Conference cannot only be about the role in the Executive Board or the number of seats in the Plenary: you also have a role to play in communicating and spreading the word.

The Executive Board has come to an agreement on provisions for the Conference's other two main pillars: the European Citizens' Panels and the Plenaries. This completes the Conference's overall set-up. We are working on making these other two strands operational as soon as possible. The Executive Board meeting last Wednesday approved the calendar of plenaries and European citizen panels. The Board approved a hybrid Citizens' Event in Lisbon on 17th of June and an inaugural, hybrid Conference Plenary will take place in Strasbourg on 19th of June.

I encourage all of you to consider organising citizens' panels at national and other levels. The key principles that we have applied at the European level can be transferred to the local and regional levels too; in fact we can share guidance on how these panels could be set up. As the member of the College responsible for the recent Child Rights Strategy, I am very pleased that young people, meaning anyone aged between 16 to 25, will make up one-third of each European panel. I urge national politicians and Member States to reach out to young people when promoting the Conference and organising events.

The European citizens' panels will be composed of randomly selected citizens. They will be representative of the EU's diversity, in terms of geographic origin, gender, age, socioeconomic background and level of education. Each of the four European citizen panels is comprised of two hundred citizens. At least one female and one male citizen per Member State is included.

The third part is the Conference Plenaries, where citizens will be joined by regional, national and European representatives and civil society. The Conference Plenary shall be composed of 108 representatives from the European Parliament, 54 from the Council and 3 from the European Commission. There will be 108 representatives from all national Parliaments. Citizens must be present too. 80 representatives from European Citizens' Panels will join the plenary, of which at least one third shall be younger than 25. The President of the European Youth Forum and 27 representatives of national events or national Citizens' Panels will also participate. Representatives of regional and local authorities as well as civil society and social partners will also be present. We have introduced a rule that the composition of the Conference Plenary shall respect gender balance.

I take this opportunity to urge you all to make sure that this is fully respected when you are nominating your representatives to the Plenary. I take no pleasure in noting that so far in the Executive Board meetings, COSAC has always been represented only by men.

Overall, we have worked to ensure that national Parliaments' priorities are catered for and that you participate as fully as possible. You are involved in the Conference's governance structure, through the COSAC Presidential Troika as permanent observers. 108 members of national parliaments will be full members of the plenary. And you have the opportunity to organise your own events .

CONCLUSION (OF INTRODUCTORY REMARKS)

From day one as Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for Democracy and Demography, indeed since my days as mayor of Dubrovnik, I have invested all my energy in citizen empowerment and engagement, because

this enhances the legitimacy of our democratic institutions. I will work hard to ensure that the institutions reflect and follow-up on what the citizens have deliberated. It is vital that people can see the impact of their input. Shaping a better future together is perhaps the most precious legacy of an ever-closer Union.

Thank you.