YOUNG EUROPEANS TAKE FEDERAL UNION INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

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As the Conference on the Future of Europe gains momentum, young Europeans immersed themselves in a simulation of federal European structures. The project “Y-FED: Europe is what you make of it” implemented a new bloc constitution written by European youth in 2017, a dry run of a possible new Union, with federal institutions.

EURACTIV takes a closer look at the future of federalism within the EU, whether the idea holds relevance in today’s political climate and whether the Conference is likelier to drive or hinder the movement.
EU federalist chief: Far-right declaration on Europe’s future ‘hilarious’

Conference on bloc future could give new purpose to federalists in European Parliament

We are struggling to get out of bed, but we still demand a seat at the table
EU federalist chief: Far-right declaration on Europe’s future ‘hilarious’

By Vlagyiszlav Makszimov | EURACTIV.com

In an interview with EURACTIV, federalist MEP Sandro Gozi dismissed as “hilarious” calls by the European conservative and far-right parties for a deep reform of the EU in view of the debate on the future of Europe, saying the demands reflect the bloc as it already exists.

Gozi, who heads the Union of European Federalists (UEF), was referring to a joint statement issued on 2 July by far-right parties from 16 EU countries, including France’s Rassemblement National, Poland’s PiS, Hungary’s Fidesz, and Italy’s Lega, proposing a meeting in September.

According to Gozi, the declaration, which he described as “pure communication action,” was strongly pushed by Le Pen and Orbán, who are both facing tough national elections next year.

Emphasising that these political actors want to preserve decision-making based on consensus, he said “they want a Europe of status quo.”

“So we don’t understand why they are so against Europe, they should be thrilled with the Europe we have,” he added.

Instead, Gozi said that federalists have to build a different alliance

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within the conference, where he’s “sure we are a large majority.”

He said that the current global crisis increased awareness what “the disappearance of Europe” means in practice, with border closures and export controls directly touching citizens.

He said it’s the “perfect moment” for federalist solutions.

In his view, Europeans’ complaints about the EU come not because they are seeking less integration but because the bloc lacks muscle.

“They’ll be complaining because Europe didn’t do enough, didn’t have enough power, didn’t go far enough,” he said.

Offering the health crisis as an example, where the EU had little legal competence, the former Italian under-secretary for European affairs said: “It is clear that a sovereign and democratic Europe, a Europe which is able to take back control on these transnational issues, which go beyond the capacity of action of nation states [...] is a good answer to many of these questions.”

The president of the coalition uniting 23 national federally-minded organisations said the only issue of the movement is “semantic” as people confuse federalism with a centralised super-state, which absorbs power and identity.

“This is exactly the opposite of federalism. Federalism is a protection of national identity, protection of minorities in an effort to always find the best level of government,” be that local, regional, national or European, the liberal MEP from the Renew group in the European Parliament said.

“It is a very balanced and democratic distribution of power and competence, where we do together only what we really have to do together to be more effective,” he explained.

“I think these are all elements, which blow the wind towards the right direction. It is clear that as a navigator it is not enough that there is a good wind, you need to have your sail, and you have to catch the wind,” he said.

To achieve this, the federalists proposals include the creation of a stronger European budget, riddance of the unanimity requirement within migration, security and defence issues and grant the European Parliament right to propose legislation, currently an exclusive privilege of the European Commission.

“If we have to call it the Europe of Mickey Mouse, let’s call it the Europe of Mickey Mouse, what is important that it is able to act,” Gozi said, seemingly in reference to former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s alleged comments dismissing the European Parliament as a “Mickey Mouse” institution.

Europeans’ trust in European projects has risen in recent years, with latest data showing 49% percent of people tend towards trusting the EU. Nevertheless, trust remains well below pre-2008 financial crisis levels, at 57% in 2007.

Gozi puts this “distance, disaffection, fatigue of the citizens towards politics” down to politics being ineffective, adding that a Europe of concrete, effective solutions “can help to regain the confidence and the trust of the citizens.”

He added that the current debate on the future of EU is also an opportunity to “catch the attention” of citizens who do not understand how Brussels functions. If his federalist movement “wins the battle” against nationalists it will also bolster support for Europe, he added.
Conference on bloc future could give new purpose to federalists in European Parliament

By Vlagyiszlav Makszimov | EURACTIV.com

The EU-wide exercise on the future of the bloc could give new impetus to the federalist-minded group in the European Parliament who have been struggling in the past years to connect with young Europeans.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has so far received widespread criticism for its potential to turn into a largely futile exercise of the Brussels elite speaking to itself.

"I'm a bit concerned that it would be just a communication tool and not a tool that really allows citizens to be involved and people everywhere to really embrace the European sphere", Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield told EURACTIV. She is part of the Spinelli Group gathering federally-minded lawmakers in the European Parliament.

To involve real people in the discussion the EU institutions will organise citizens’ panels gathering 200 randomly selected Europeans while reflecting the EU’s diversity. However, many fear this will not be enough.

Delbos-Corfield expressed scepticism about the ability of the conference to advance the European agenda.

For the Spinelli Group, the challenge is for the conference to not become “a chat between MEPs who live in the Brussels bubble, don’t get out of it and convince themselves of things that they are already convinced of”, the green MEP added.

Delbos-Corfield described one of the first meetings of the Spinelli
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Group in the current parliamentary mandate, in 2019, which was supposed to make the transition between the older and newer members as very "concerning". This was due to a lack of younger lawmakers of the previous generation, long and boring speeches as well as gender imbalance.

"I felt it was my duty to go to the Spinelli group, but I wasn't that enthusiastic, to be honest," she told this website.

In her view, the conference can give a new purpose to the group, which for years was a "bit of federalist think tank next to the Brussels bubble".

"What I can say is today, we have new energy on the age point of view, there has been real renewal," she added, stressing, however, that "we are still not there."

The change is reflected in the composition of the group's board. A quarter of its 16 members are women, four are aged under 37. In comparison, only one MEP was under 37 in the previous parliamentary mandate.

That one young MEP was a social democrat from Italy, Brando Benifei, who now chairs the Spinelli group.

For Benifei, nationalists want to reduce the debate on the future of Europe to a discussion where we seek the "least common denominator".

In contrast, he said, his group needs to show an alternative to citizens and open a "real conflict" of ideas, allowing Europeans to choose a path forward.

According to him, one way forward is to usher in the age of more enhanced cooperation, which would see a coalition of willing member states integrate further in areas where there is a will to move forward, which is seen in many but not all EU countries.

Asked if this could lead to more fragmentation, he said "we already have a multi-speed Europe" with many exemptions and opt-outs and the bloc cannot afford to wait for a consensus on all issues.

**YOUNG EUROPEANS TAKE CHARGE**

Meanwhile, while Brussels is trying to involve citizens in the debate on the future of the bloc, some Europeans took matters into their own hands.

Last month, a group of European youth travelled to a simulation in Brussels that implemented a new bloc constitution written by their peers for a dry run of a possible new Union, with federal institutions.

"I was not that engaged with federalism, but I wanted to see how it works," said Anaïs Faucher, a European law student who helped to organise the event and took part in it as president of the lower chamber of parliament.

Describing the simulations as the "greatest experience of my life", she remained sombre about the likelihood of achieving federated European institutions in the near future.

"I think it's very utopian right now because people see federalism as a loss of nationality and community," she told EURACTIV.

Nevertheless, she said, a federated union could be even more effective at protecting national minorities because a more general structure could represent "little scales" better than states, which tend to leave minorities "blurred out".

Lamenting the power member states still wield, she said federalism is ultimately about decision-making. "It's not about just everyone being the same, it's about acting together way stronger," she said.
While the coronavirus pandemic has left a scar on an entire generation of young people’s mental health; a youth-led political simulation game has exposed the failure of governments to support its young people.

Rebecca Gaff is a Project Assistant at the Young European Federalists (JEF Europe).

As part of the 22-month long youth-led project ‘Y-FED: Europe is what we make of it’, currently being implemented by the Young European Federalists (JEF Europe), the simulation game of a large-scale model European federation is the largest and most ambitious event of the project.

The simulation game requires young participants from all over the world to take an active role in the political decision-making process of a large-scale model European federation.

PROMOTED CONTENT

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We are struggling to get out of bed, but we still demand a seat at the table.

By Rebecca Gaff | JEF Europe (Young European Federalists)
Europe to step into the shoes of decision-makers, analysing legislative texts through the lens of their assigned political group and/or Member State. This makes for an interesting game: young people are pushed to think about a set of issues outside of their own worldview and, in the process, better understand the democratic machine into which legislative proposals enter.

This is what Y-Fed participant, Robert Schuppant, describes as ‘subtle-politics’, pointing out that “it does not matter as much whether you are able to concede and deliberate on the content of the bill, but rather ones’ strategic skill to bend the procedural rules to the best of their ability and to create the (from their opinion) best result”.

If the event served to show anything, it demonstrated that the ability to critically evaluate any given data through a variety of competing perspectives, to effectively communicate in a multicultural and multilingual space, and to exercise compassion and compromise is not a skill-set reserved only for adults with 30 years of experience under their belt. Yet, young people remain a portion of society which is rarely listened to, or actively ignored, especially when they are not yet at voting age.

According to the Youth Progress Report 2021, if the world were a country, 55.3% of young citizens would be underrepresented in politics and would face barriers in accessing their personal rights.

This age-bias within the decision-making process perpetuates a noxious cycle. Cyprien Bettini, another Y-FED participant, feels as though youth activists are shouting into the void, “for the last few years, I have seen more and more young people advocating for a better representation of their generation”, he continues “nowadays, politicians are telling that young people are lazy and do not care about politics. [...] And for many who tried, they quickly abandoned when they felt that their actions had no impact on society. In other words, the older generations are still reluctant to yield power to younger ones.”

**THE “PROPER MEANS” FOR YOUTH ACTIVISM**

Reflecting on what the model simulation taught him, Cyprien concludes that, if equipped with the right tools and support, young people can be the force society needs to prosper, “From my perspective, Y-FED participants have sent a clear message to policymakers: young people can still understand politics and produce change if they are given the proper means.”

Yet, the “proper means” have never been more compromised than in our current global context. Many young people no longer have the “proper means” to survive, never mind participate in politics.

The large-scale model simulation coincided with the publication of a new study by the European Youth Forum on the impact of the “pandemic scar”, a term used to describe the adverse socio-economic wound borne by the youth of today as a consequence of the global pandemic.

The study was divided into the three key areas where young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic: employment, education and mental health.

With youth unemployment on the rise, young people are struggling to support themselves during the pandemic and beyond. One young participant of the study observed, “students were the first to get fired because the owners were keener on firing young people than those who are in higher functions”. As the study points out, periods of inactivity, an inability to become financially independent or put a university degree to use, all produce a collateral “scarring effect” on young people that extends into later life.

One of the most concerning parts of the study is the pandemic-induced education loss on marginalised youth, who are already massively underrepresented in the decision-making process. With the shift to digital education, young people from immigrant heritage backgrounds highlighted that digital learning was not accessible for them. One young refugee remarked that many families from the refugee community cannot afford the transition to digital education, “with everything switched online, families with maybe five children or four children that are in school are hoping on or banking on, your Mum’s one phone that she has”.

The link between education loss and unemployment to mental health is bidirectional, meaning that poor mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic is also likely to worsen their employment and educational
prospects after it. The study showed that nearly two-thirds of young people are now affected by mental health issues. The so-called “laziness” of youth, then, is symptomatic of a much wider concern—declining mental health.

TOWARDS A YOUTH-INCLUSIVE RECOVERY

With rapidly deteriorating mental health, the ability for young people to build a fulfilling and secure future for themselves is forecast to be one that only a select and privileged few can bank on.

Concerningly, the European Youth Forum study identified no responses from national policy-makers to support young people’s mental health during and beyond the pandemic. In fact, only 12 of 1,283 policy measures identified across the EU-27 countries and the UK target young people in general.

This self-perpetuating cycle only disempowers youth more: the more the youth are excluded from politics, the more they bear the brunt of its negative consequences.

It is extremely clear that our governments need to act today to deliver a youth-inclusive recovery, paying particular attention to digital accessibility for marginalised youth, increased income support and social protection, and promoting a more holistic approach to mental health which takes socio-economic factors into serious consideration.

Young people may be struggling to find the motivation to get out of bed, but giving them a seat at the decision-making table is an alarm clock that demands to be heard.
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