

Adding Ambition to Europe's Unity

By Herman Van Rompuy and Brigid Laffan

Published by Project Syndicate on 15 June 2022

The war in Ukraine has shown that only by acting together can the European Union hope to remain an effective player. At the June 23-24 EU summit, the European Council should agree to establish a “Wise Wo|men Group” tasked with identifying core policy priorities and governance reforms.

BRUSSELS – The European Union has reacted faster, more decisively, and with greater unity to Russia's invasion of Ukraine than to any previous crisis. Together with its allies, the EU and its member states have provided important military, economic, and humanitarian support to the Ukrainian government and put severe economic pressure on the Kremlin to stop its atrocities. But the difficulties the Union faced in imposing a [common oil embargo](#) against Russia reveal differences among national governments that also reflect diverging views on how to deal with the *Zeitenwende* we have been experiencing since February 24.

This is no moment for disunity. Russian President Vladimir Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine has opened a new chapter in Europe's seemingly permanent crisis and represents a structural break with the past, profoundly disrupting the continent's security architecture and undermining fundamental assumptions in most areas of EU policymaking.

EU leaders must have the political will and stamina to prepare the Union for a new era – with no taboos when it comes to implementing major policy innovations and establishing more effective governance structures. To do so, they should continue to demonstrate both unity and ambition along a concrete reform path.

At the June 23-24 [EU summit](#), therefore, the European Council should agree to establish a “Wise Wo|men Group” tasked with identifying core policy priorities and governance reforms that reflect current imperatives, as well as the outcome of the [Conference on the Future of Europe](#). Substantial measures require more than well-intended speeches and declarations. The European Parliament responded to the Conference by [calling](#) for a [European Convention](#). Now, EU governments also have to commit to specific reforms.

A Wise Wo|men Group – including both experienced political heavyweights and representatives of younger generations – would help EU leaders to agree on a list of urgent policy innovations, identify ways to improve the Union's governance structure, and forge an ambitious reform roadmap.

Several areas demand attention. For starters, there is the EU's approach toward its neighborhood and enlargement in light of the new situation after February 24, as well as the Union's role in defense investments and the scope of its [mutual-defense clause](#). There is also the need to redefine radically the EU's energy dependence and its efforts to counter climate change, which are related to the Union's economic resilience and strategic autonomy in core areas.

Then there are the institutional [reforms](#) needed to strengthen protection of basic values and principles such as the rule of law, and to improve decision-making capacity through extended use of [qualified majority voting](#). Finally, the Group should consider how to deepen EU democracy by balancing the benefits of representative institutions with the need to enhance citizens' participation in the Union's policymaking processes.

To link its work to the input provided by citizens during the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Wise Women Group should present and discuss its proposals with the “ambassadors” who represented the randomly selected members of the [European Citizens’ Panels](#) in the Conference Plenary. The Group should submit its final report in the second half of 2022 to the European Council and the European Parliament, which should then commit to a detailed follow-up process.

Many reform objectives can be accomplished under the existing EU treaties. But the Wise Women Group might conclude that some innovations will also require treaty amendments to ensure that the EU will be structurally able to respond swiftly to current and future challenges. In this case, the Group should compile a list of specific changes. Identifying such amendments could help ensure that future efforts to adapt the Union’s primary law will differ from the experience of the [Constitutional Convention in 2002-03](#), as these efforts would adhere to a more clearly defined mandate and limited timeframe.

For Europe merely to move toward some form of modification of the status quo ante would be not only naive, but also dangerous. We should avoid finding ourselves in a situation where we will regret not having acted earlier and more decisively, especially when issues of war and peace are at stake.

The crisis in Ukraine has shown that only by acting together can the EU hope to remain an effective player. But this is by no means a foregone conclusion. The EU27 must respond to today’s transformative times by paving the way for an ambitious joint future. That means showing the political readiness and determination needed for a substantial reform of EU policies and governance.

Signed by the Co-Chairs of the Conference Observatory’s High-Level Advisory Group.

Herman Van Rompuy

*President Emeritus, European Council,
and President of the European Policy
Centre (EPC)*

Brigid Laffan

*Emeritus Professor, Robert Schuman Centre,
European University Institute*

This Open Letter was written under the auspices of the Conference Observatory’s High-Level Advisory Group. The [Conference Observatory](#) is a joint initiative by an international consortium comprising the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the European Policy Centre, the King Baudouin Foundation, and the Stiftung Mercator. The Observatory aims to observe, critically analyse, and inspire deliberations on the Conference on the Future of Europe.

In addition to providing input, organising events, and communicating around Conference issues, the Observatory runs an independent [High-Level Advisory Group](#). Accompanying and seeking to shape the Conference process and outcomes, the Group makes recommendations on possible results and outcomes of the Conference. The Group brings together a small but diversified number of experts, policymakers, and civil society actors, capable of generating new ideas with regard to the future of Europe and communicating them effectively in the public debate.

This Open Letter has been co-signed by members of the High-Level Advisory Group of the Conference Observatory.

Herman VAN ROMPUY, President Emeritus, *European Council*; President, *European Policy Centre*

Brigid LAFFAN, Emeritus Professor, Robert Schuman Centre, *European University Institute*

Rosa BALFOUR, Director, *Carnegie Europe*

Cathryn CLÜVER ASHBROOK, Non-Resident Fellow, *Global Public Policy Institute*; Former Director and CEO, *German Council on Foreign Relations*

Marian CRAMERS, Director, *Democratic Society*

Janis A. EMMANOUILIDIS, Director of Studies and Deputy Chief Executive, *European Policy Centre*

Julia FERNÁNDEZ ARRIBAS, President, *Equipo Europa*

Lykke FRIIS, Director, *Think Tank Europa*; former Danish Minister of Climate and Energy and Minister for Gender Equality

Dominik HIERLEMANN, Senior Advisor, *Bertelsmann Stiftung*

Christophe HILLION, Professor of European law, *University of Oslo*; Research Professor, *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*; Senior researcher, *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*

Rem KORTEWEG, Senior Researcher, *Clingendael Institute*

Péter KRÉKO, Director, *Political Capital*

Milena LAZAREVIC, Programme Director, *European Policy Centre (CEP Belgrade)*

Viktória LILLA PATÓ, Associate Researcher, *EUSTRAT*

George PAGOULATOS, Director General, *Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)*

Wojciech PRZYBYLSKI, Editor in Chief, *Visegrad Insight*

Kristi RAIK, Director, *Estonian Foreign Policy Institute (EFPI)*

Georg RIEKELES, Associate Director, Head Of Europe's Political Economy, *European Policy Centre*

Daniela SCHWARZER, Executive Director for Europe and Eurasia, *Open Society Foundations*

Corina STRATULAT, Head of European Politics and Institutions Programme, Senior Policy Analyst, *European Policy Centre*

Monika SUS, Fellow, *Hertie School of Governance*; Associate Professor, *Polish Academy of Sciences*

Paweł ŚWIEBODA, Director General, *Human Brain Project*; former EU Advisor to the President of Poland

Nathalie TOCCI, Director, *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*

Georgina WRIGHT, Senior Fellow and Director, Europe Programme, *Institut Montaigne*