



By: Janis A. Emmanouilidis

Renewing the European project needs political courage



In her latest **State of the Union address**, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reached back almost 80 years for inspiration, invoking the 1948 Congress of Europe, which brought together political leaders, intellectuals, and civil-society representatives to debate how a devastated continent could build a peaceful European future.

On that model, she wants to convene a new Congress of Europe next year to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome (which created the European Economic Community, the precursor to the European Union).

The goal of convening Europe's "most brilliant minds" to "produce a vision that can inspire the new generation and recapture the European imagination" is worth pursuing.

What Europe really needs, however, is not another grand vision, but a concrete plan for weathering this era of structural disruption.

War and power politics have returned, economic interdependence is increasingly being weaponized, multilateralism is under severe strain, and technological innovation is reshaping economies and societies worldwide. Liberal democracy and European integration are under growing pressure from illiberal forces, and EU enlargement has become both more difficult and more imperative than ever.

European minds have produced no shortage of analyses, strategies, and reports concerning Europe's future.

Yet the EU and its member states struggle to follow up with **concrete reforms**. Given this long-standing pattern, the proposed Congress's primary objective should be to develop realistic, actionable proposals.

Yes, Europe needs more imagination; but without political delivery it will remain imaginative.

The Congress must explain not merely what Europe should aspire to become, but how it

can be made more adaptable and crisis-proof.

That means addressing difficult questions that Europeans have long avoided.

What kind of political framework do we need to defend our interests in a radically uncertain and hostile environment? How far should European integration go, and, relatedly, where do Europeans need to exercise greater sovereignty together? How should a larger, more diverse EU make decisions and finance common priorities? How can democratic legitimacy be strengthened? And what happens when not everyone wants to move in the same direction at the same time?

Strategic choices

To answer these and other fundamental questions, the Congress should identify the strategic choices that will shape European cooperation, and explain how its recommendations will be put into practice. But to do that, the Congress itself must be properly designed.

One priority is to give the Congress a broad mandate to identify strategic choices, develop proposals, and show how ambitious reforms can be implemented.

Participants should be free—indeed, encouraged—to think beyond existing political red lines, rather than holding back because they are anticipating what governments will or will not accept.

The Congress needs strong and independent leadership

Second, the Congress needs strong and independent leadership. An eminent European figure with political authority, intellectual independence, and a deep understanding of European integration should steer the process.

This person should not only preside over the Congress and lead the drafting of its final report, but also chair a small independent

“**Wise Wo|Men Group**” tasked with preparing the ground for the Congress’s deliberations.

The latter would provide a candid assessment of the state of Europe and its changing geopolitical environment; identify the fundamental questions to be addressed; and develop strategic options for Europe’s future, as well as concrete proposals through which to pursue them.

Rethinking the Union’s current structure

Third, participation in the Congress must extend beyond the usual circles. Young people and grassroots civil-society organizations deserve a stronger voice, and the Congress should build on the work already done by the citizens and organizations involved in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

It should also think in terms of **enlargement** by involving participants from countries aspiring to join the EU.

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Finally, the Congress should be committed to European integration and the EU’s fundamental liberal-democratic values, but also open to rethinking the Union’s current construction.

Both the Wise Wo|Men Group and the Congress must be prepared to question existing arrangements and identify where fundamental structural changes are needed.

Renewing the European project

In today’s world, being pro-European means showing a willingness to reform Europe when

the circumstances demand it.

Rather than merely producing a blueprint that governments would be expected to sign, the Congress should expand the realm of the possible by challenging taboos, exposing deficiencies, elaborating strategic choices, and developing concrete reform proposals.

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At the same time, the Congress must avoid the fate of previous European soul-searching exercises.

That means offering both new ideas as well as

a credible pathway from recommendations to political follow-through and implementation.

A focus on the last mile was part of what made the original Congress of Europe a success.

It did not simply imagine a different Europe; its ideas served as the basis for real-world institution-building. The new Congress should set itself a similarly high bar.

Europe does not need another report destined to end up in a file drawer. It needs the political courage to reconsider how European cooperation should work, and the political will to turn that thinking into concrete choices.

If pro-European forces are serious about renewing the European project, the new Congress must be designed to see its own recommendations through.

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