

August 2020

Preliminary results of an online survey

How Brussels sees the future of Europe after COVID-19

On 1 July this year, Germany took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), at a time when the EU's future hinges upon an apt European response to the COVID-19 crisis. What are the Brussels community's main concerns and expectations of the German Presidency in light of the current situation and with respect to the EU's long-term future?

The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the European Policy Centre (EPC), and ifok conducted an online survey that sheds light on this question. 224 individuals from 29 countries responded to the survey, with Germans being slightly overrepresented (33%). The pool of respondents includes a high number of members of European institutions (30%) and think tanks (21%), as well as business representatives (38%), plus a smaller proportion of diplomats, NGOs, journalists, and academics. The majority (68%) of those surveyed indicate that they carry a substantial degree of job responsibility.

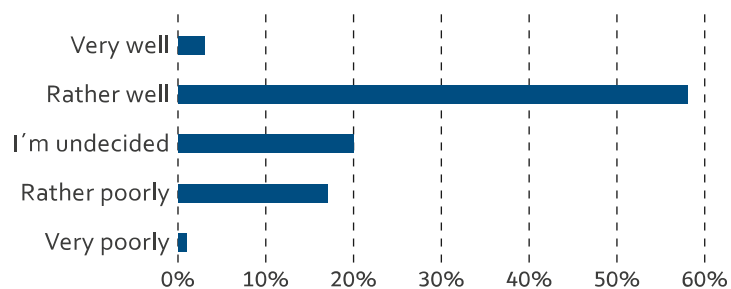
The survey questions revolve around three thematic blocks: (1) the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the EU; (2) the expectations of the Brussels community towards the German Council Presidency; and (3) the views of Brussels-based stakeholders on the set-up and content of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and the future of the Union more generally. Although the survey is not representative in a statistical sense, it provides a reliable indication of Brussels-based stakeholders' opinion on all these issues.

This preliminary paper highlights four main findings of the survey and will be followed in late September by a more detailed analysis of the results. Whereas the present report derives its data exclusively from the online survey, the final paper will also incorporate findings from semi-structured interviews.

1. Despite a bumpy start, Brussels-based stakeholders are, overall, satisfied with the management of the coronavirus outbreak at the EU level

Almost 60% of respondents say they are satisfied (“rather well”) with the way the EU has handled the coronavirus pandemic. Negative responses (“rather poorly”) only amount to 17%. The respondents who have a more positive view argue that despite the poorly coordinated and nationally-driven response at the start of the crisis, over time, the EU has managed to substantially improve its collective reaction.

Fig. 1: How do you rate the current handling of the coronavirus pandemic at the European level?

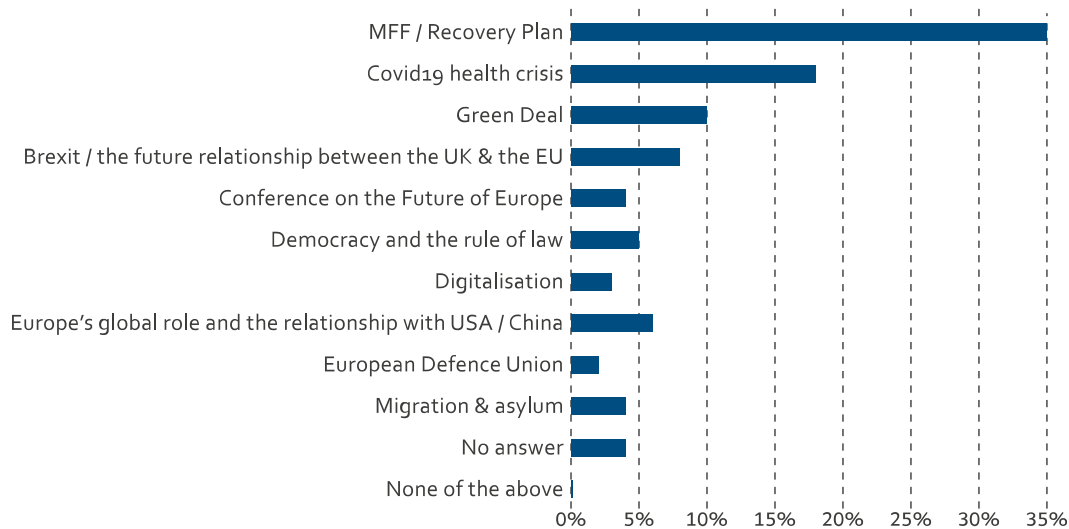


2. Notwithstanding urgent short-term challenges, Brussels-based stakeholders hold that the Green Deal should be a top priority for the German Presidency

The Green Deal is repeatedly chosen by respondents as a strategic imperative for the German Council Presidency. In pre-pandemic times, this result would not have come as a surprise, given that the Commission has singled out the Green Deal and a digital Europe as top priorities. But now, the urgency of dealing with the COVID-19 health crisis and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)/Recovery Plan is paramount to the Presidency.

This is reflected in the survey, where these two issues rank first in the answer to the question about the most pressing issues for the German Presidency. Nevertheless, the Green Deal remains within the top three of most pressing issues for Germany's six months at the helm of the Council.

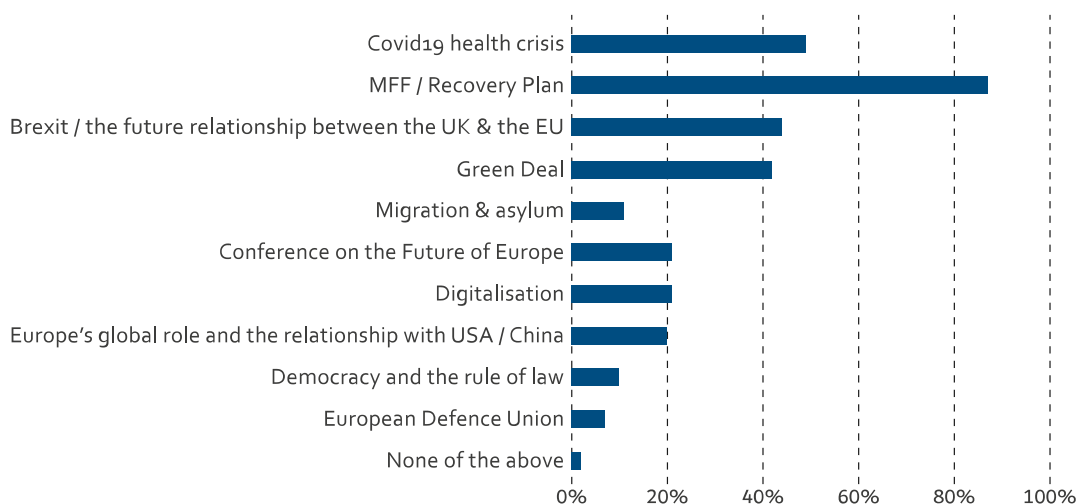
Fig. 2: In your opinion, what are the three most pressing issues the German Council Presidency should deal with (weighted and aggregated results)?



In a similar vein, the Green Deal scores high (42%, fourth place) on the question about the topics on which the German Presidency is expected to make significant progress. Again, given the Council's and Commission's understandable reshuffling of their policy priorities following the outbreak, respondents see facilitating EU cooperation and coordination in response to the COVID-19 crisis and finalising the MFF and Recovery Plan as the areas in which the Presidency will most likely be successful. Yet, the survey also reveals the hope of Brussels-based stakeholders that Berlin does not lose sight of the Green Deal, irrespective of other major issues linked to the pandemic.

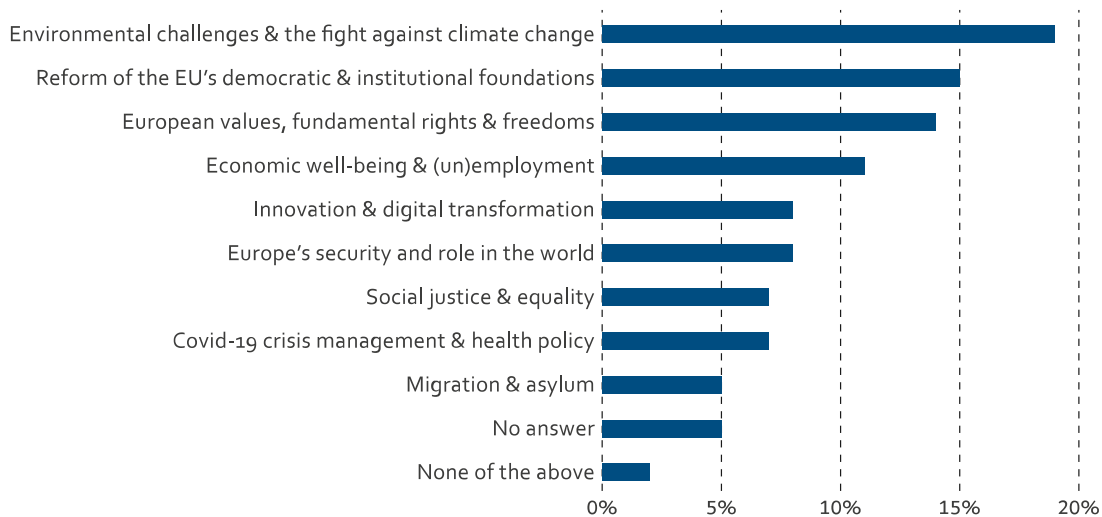
Although digitalisation is also a crucial strategic priority set by the Commission and the European Council, it is not regarded by respondents as a pressing issue or a success factor for the German Presidency.

Fig. 3: On which of the following topics do you think the German Council Presidency will make significant progress (multiple answers possible)



With respect to the agenda of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Green Deal leaves digitalisation far behind on the list of priorities. Addressing environmental challenges even ranks first among respondents' priorities for the Conference, ahead of institutional reform, values and fundamental rights or crisis-related and economic issues.

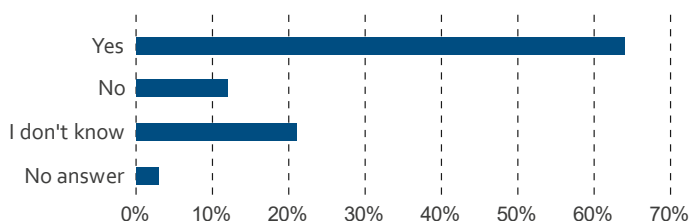
Fig. 4: What topics do you think should be addressed at the CoFoE (weighted and aggregated results)?



3. Brussels-based stakeholders have high expectations of the Conference on the Future of Europe but are sceptical of its outcomes

Respondents are torn between what they would like to see happening in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe and what they think is likely to occur. A majority (63%) of participants is in favour of the CoFoE possibly leading to an amendment of the current EU Treaties, if necessary. Yet, respondents are also highly sceptical about whether or not the Conference will yield substantial results. A mere 22% of those surveyed think that the outcome of the CoFoE will actually shape the future of Europe. A significant 42% are undecided and a third (32%) believes that the Conference is unlikely to lead to concrete results.

Fig. 5: In your view, should the CoFoE be open to lead to an amendment of the current EU Treaties?

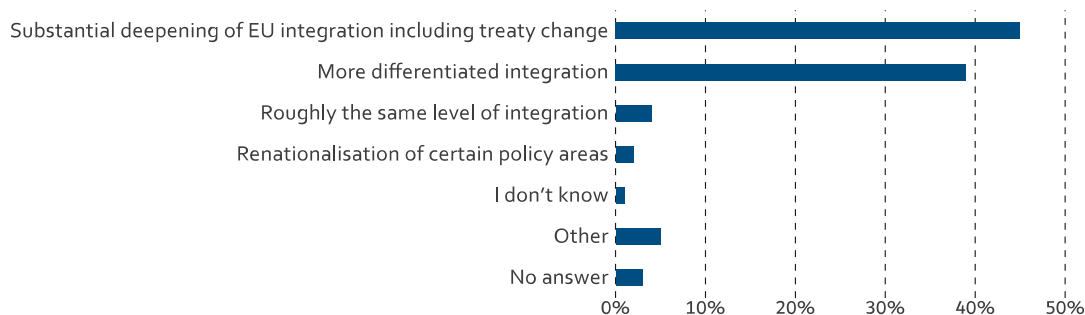


Despite widespread scepticism that the CoFoE can result in concrete policy and/or institutional reforms, respondents see value in other aspects of the initiative. To the question what the best possible outcome of the Conference would be, answers highlight the potential of the CoFoE to boost solidarity amongst European nations and citizens' awareness of the EU.

4. Deeper European integration is seen as necessary, but many Brussels-based stakeholders are uncertain of how far it will actually go

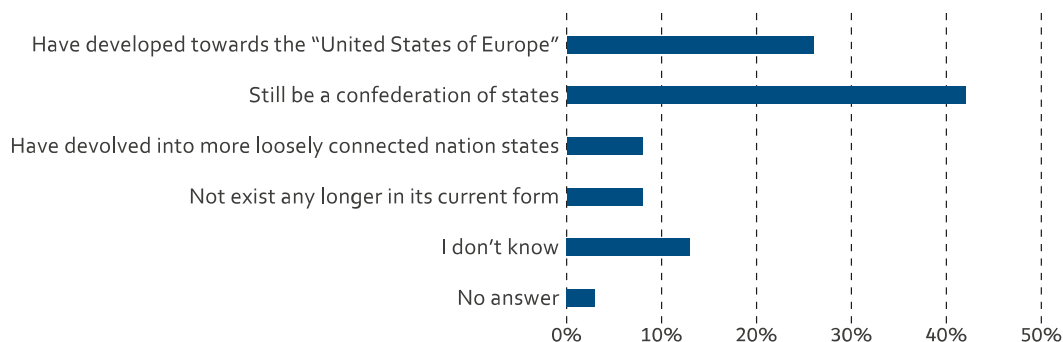
Regarding the future of the Union, respondents agree that further European integration is desirable. In reference to the development of the EU in the years ahead, the vast majority favours a substantially more integrated or differentiated EU. Yet, respondents disagree on how far European integration will progress.

Fig. 6: In your opinion, how should the European integration process develop in the years ahead?



When asked what Europe will look like in 2050, 42% expect the EU to continue to be a confederation of states, while only 26% believe that the Union will develop towards a deeply integrated 'United States of Europe'. A combined 16% have a more pessimistic view of Europe's future, almost evenly split between those who expect a more loosely connected union of nation states or even the end of the EU in its current form.

Fig. 7: In 2050, Europe will...?



Conclusion

Overall, the respondents' positive perception of the EU's management of the COVID-19 crisis and their openness towards a more deeply integrated European Union suggest that the Brussels community continues to value the EU integration process. Transitioning the Union into a 'greener' and more climate-friendly future remains a top priority despite the requirements of short-term crisis management in times of corona. Yet, scepticism remains about how far the European integration process can go and whether the Conference on the Future of Europe can lead the way towards a deeply integrated Union.

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