

## **Was the Conference of Presidents finally useful?**

Eduard Roig Molés  
Professor of Constitutional Law  
Universitat de Barcelona

The Conference of Presidents held on 17 January finished with the conclusion of 17 new agreements. The Conference proved it still has enough capacity for action despite the current relation between the Popular Party and the Socialist Party as well as the absence of the Presidents supporting regional nationalism. It is however important to carefully examine the agreements and the matters upon which no agreement was concluded.

- The agreements on employment, civil protection, education, gender violence, social health-care card, energy poverty or participation in EU affairs are not relevant. None of these seven agreements introduces new elements in the system, resolves conflicts or debating issues between the State and the regions, or incorporates substantive orientations as to what to do in the future. These agreements only revolve around truisms such as the steps taken in the modernization of the public employment service, generic debates (on the definition of “gender violence” or even on a broader concept such as “education”) or the resurrection of the waning Conference on EU-related Matters, although its members cannot even figure out for what purpose.
- Based on its name, the agreement on “sustainability of the welfare state and the reform of the regional finance system” looks promising. But the list of principles addressed to the Experts Commission (solidarity, sufficiency, equality, transparency, financial co-responsibility and the guarantee that all citizens have access to the public services according to their effective cost) clearly illustrates its futility, maximized when concepts such as “dependency” and “health expenditure” are only brought up for their “analysis” and update.
- Something was also mentioned as regards the agreement on development and implementation of the Law guaranteeing market unity, e-Administration and public employment. Not much can be drawn from the mention of market unity and good regulation, oft-repeated mantras in any irrelevant meeting held or legal text adopted in the last few years. But at least, as regards public employment, we can conclude the need for better consideration of sectors such as social services, education, health and security in the new job offers, as well as a more flexible approach as for the interim nature of their jobs.

- The most significant contribution to the Conference was the agreement on the national strategy to tackle the demographic challenge. This is a new topic in institutional discussions and will be addressed through a specific instrument based on three approaches that are the result of a concrete political option: ageing, rural depopulation and floating population.
- Finally, the agreement on the amendment of the Conference Regulation mentions two new perspectives that might be very useful... for the next meetings, as long as we do not have to wait for four more years. These two points are the follow-up of the agreements reached through a report addressed to the Conference and the coordination of sectoral conferences. Maybe this way the Conference will be able to confirm the effects of the agreements and most particularly boost the fields of action (or non-action) of the sectoral conferences that are in greater need.

If the agreements reached reveal the lack of interest raised by the Conference, the silence in other matters is much more significant. We ignore if other matters of (greater) interest for the citizenship were discussed: unlike in other similar institutions, no document is published by the Conference with the conclusions of the event which could reflect aspects to debate or introduce lines of action to work on in the future. The only source for finding out about the debate around financial competences among regions (except for the Basque Country and Navarra) has been the contributions of some of the participants to the Conference. However, no document has captured the aspects of this debate or the possible lines to discuss.

As said, this Conference has taken place in the most favorable context since it was created. Then why are results so limited? In my opinion, the answer is to be found in the conception of the Conference as an extraordinary event unexpectedly kept out of the day-to-day conflicts and work of the regional state and expected to exclusively bring about new agreements. A more ordinary Conference included in the system of sectoral conferences would imply more useful results. A Conference understood as a place for regular dialogue and partial agreements arising from a previous effort based on discussions and joint work. And these better results would be obtained even if the politically partisan context was less favorable. The reform of the Conference Regulation thus offers some hope for the future. However, it is important to remember that these same intents already arose in previous occasions (although no mention was made to the reform of the Regulation in those cases).

Three elements are key if we expect these intents to come true. Firstly, the Conference should be held more regularly – an institution meeting every four years cannot develop stable dynamics or act as a reference to the rest of cooperation institutions. This would reduce the usual levels of political stress. Secondly, the regions should not be the (more or less welcomed) guests but the owners of the Conference. This way they would not only react to the national initiatives but also propose those of their own interest. Finally, an efficient permanent

secretariat should be created that carries out the follow-up of the sectoral initiatives, determines aspects to be discussed and serves as a stable reference when specific matters need to be boosted or unblocked in the intergovernmental daily life. The members of the preparatory committee of the new Conference Regulation might arguably not be able to carry out this duty. A mix of the national and regional Presidents' cabinets and the competent ministry for territorial cooperation would be more appropriate.

Nevertheless, after the current stage of necessary visualization of the agreements reached, there exists the risk that the inertia of the Spanish system of intergovernmental relations (which lacks clear leadership) still prevails, the regions continue engrossed in their own thoughts, the Conference continues to be a pending formality that no one is interested in activating, and the lack of attendance does nothing but prove the omnipresent dynamics of an image without content or cost. God and the authors of this Blog willing, on 17 January of next year we will get back to the matter.