



**European Committee
of the Regions**

A new chapter for participatory democracy: Paving the way for the future

Date: 15 December 2023
Venue: JDE52 / Hybrid
Timing: 10:00 – 13:00
Languages: EN, FR, DE, IT

Strengthening the democratic foundation of the European Union has always been at the very core of the European Committee of Regions. Local and regional politicians are the closest link to the citizens and it is their duty to bring their voices to the European level in order to ensure policymaking that creates a difference on the ground. Effectively engaging citizens is necessary in order to adequately represent them and to develop tailored solutions that reflect the vast diversity of Europe. This is important now more than ever, against a backdrop of technological leaps and ahead of the European elections in 2024. This conference will tackle these issues and attempt to highlight a path towards the future of citizen participation.

Agenda

Moderation: *Silke Toenshoff, Head of Unit – Events and local dialogues, CoR*

10:00-10:30 Opening session

- **Vasco Cordeiro** (PT/PES), *President of the European Committee of the Regions (online)*
 - **Dubravka Šuica**, *Vice-President of the European Commission (tbc)*
 - **François Decoster** (FR/Renew), *Mayor of Saint-Omer and President of the CoR Renew group*
 - **Domènec Ruiz Devesa** (ES/S&D), *Member of the European Parliament, co-rapporteur on the European Elections 2024*
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10:30-11:15 Democracy in action: Reflecting on the progress made in citizen participation

- **Matteo Bianchi** (IT/ECR), *Member of the Local Assembly of Varese*
- **Joachim Ott**, *European Commission, Head of Unit for Representation & Communication in Member States - Citizens' Dialogues*
- **Ângela Guimarães Pereira**, *European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC)*
- **Elisa Vecchione**, *European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC)*

Democracy is at the heart of the EU – it is indispensable, but can also be fragile and must react to the needs of the citizens. Over the years, countries have tried to make progress in terms of access to democracy for all their citizens. It has become essential to put them at the very heart of decision-making. Participatory democracy seeks to create a more engaged and informed citizenry, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment within the political system. While participatory democracy can enhance civic engagement and accountability, it also comes with challenges, such as ensuring inclusivity, managing diverse opinions, and striking a balance between direct citizen involvement and the need for expertise in decision-making.

The Conference on the Future of Europe was an important milestone in this regard and the Recommendations adopted by the Conference showed the added value of a more structured citizens' participation in our democratic debate. Participatory democracy is a catalytic tool which can improve representative democracy: it works by complementing it, not taking its place.

This session will deal with questions such as:

- What still needs to be done to include all citizens into the democratic process? At which level of governance can the solutions, or parts of it, be found?
- How can participatory democracy supplement representative democracy? What are the success stories in involving citizens?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that citizens' voices are taken into account in participatory democracy? What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure a smooth transition between citizen participation and government decision-making?
- How can we restore trust and encourage participation in the democratic process through citizen engagement?

11:15-12:00 Harnessing the regional potential: Subnational authorities as the loudspeakers of citizens

- **José Manuel Ribeiro** (PT/PES), *Mayor of Valongo*
- **Hélène Ryckmans** (BE/Greens), *Member of the Parliament of Wallonia*
- **Declan McDonnell** (IE/EA), *Member of Galway City Council*
- **Anna Renkamp**, *Senior Project Manager, Bertelsmann Foundation*

Harnessing regional potential by using on sub-national authorities as the loudspeaker of the citizens is a crucial aspect of local development and participatory governance. Indeed, sub-national authorities, such as regional governments, municipalities and local councils, play an essential role in representing local interests and implementing policies tailored to a region's specific needs. In order to harness this potential, an inclusive, participatory approach focused on local development is needed.

The CoR has, since 2016, been at the forefront of promoting participatory and deliberative democracy in regions and cities – with its members organized nearly 300 events, engaging hundreds of local and regional authorities, and reaching tens of thousands of participants.

This session will deal with questions such as:

- To what extent do sub-national authorities represent the diversity and interests of citizens at local or regional level?
- Do citizens have significant opportunities to contribute to local decision-making processes?
- How do sub-national authorities ensure the transparency of their actions and decisions?
- Are there effective mechanisms for listening to and addressing citizens' concerns?
- Are sub-national authorities implementing innovative practices to strengthen participatory democracy?
- How do sub-national authorities coordinate their actions with other levels of government and institutions?
- How responsive are sub-national authorities to social, economic and cultural changes in their communities? And how do they adapt to meet the changing needs and expectations of citizens?

12:00-12:50 The impact of technology on the future of democracy

Key note speaker: **Bruce Schneier**, *Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School (online)*

- **Jacob Birkenhäger**, *Head of Business Unit for Deliberation, Open Government and Democracy, Ifok*
- **Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck**, *Founder and CEO, Lie Detectors*

We're in the midst of a digital revolution that will all aspects of our society, including how citizens engage in the democratic process. The digital space enables the realization of individual and collective freedoms at a very high level. The freedom to inform ourselves has been amplified, and we now have access to numerous sources of national and international information. Political democracy is being modernized thanks to digital technologies, notably the development of electronic voting. The notion of e-government is emerging, with experiments in participatory democracy and collective intelligence. However, digital uses are also proving to be detractors rather than contributors to our democracies in some cases, as technologies are malleable to any number of uses.

The EU was the first global player to recognize the speed and scale of these digital trends, including AI. In 2021, the European Commission proposed the EU Regulation on Artificial Intelligence, which aims to establish a legal framework for the use of AI in the EU. This regulation imposes specific obligations and requirements for AI developers and users to ensure safety and fundamental rights. The EU's approach to AI reflects a commitment to harnessing the benefits of AI while addressing its challenges and ensuring that it aligns with European values and principles. It involves collaboration with member states, industry stakeholders, and the public to shape a comprehensive and responsible AI strategy.

This session will deal with questions such as:

- Do digital platforms facilitate or hinder the diversity of information sources?
- To what extent does technology encourage citizen participation in the democratic process?
- How does technology affect electoral processes, from voter registration to the vote itself?
- Does the digital divide exist and how can it affect democratic participation?
- How can we guarantee equitable access to technology for all citizens?

12:50-13:00 Closing

- **Alin-Adrian Nica** (RO/EPP), *President of Timiș County Council and First Vice-Chair of the CIVEX commission*