



European Committee  
of the Regions

**Background note on**  
fostering  
participatory  
democracy at local  
and regional level

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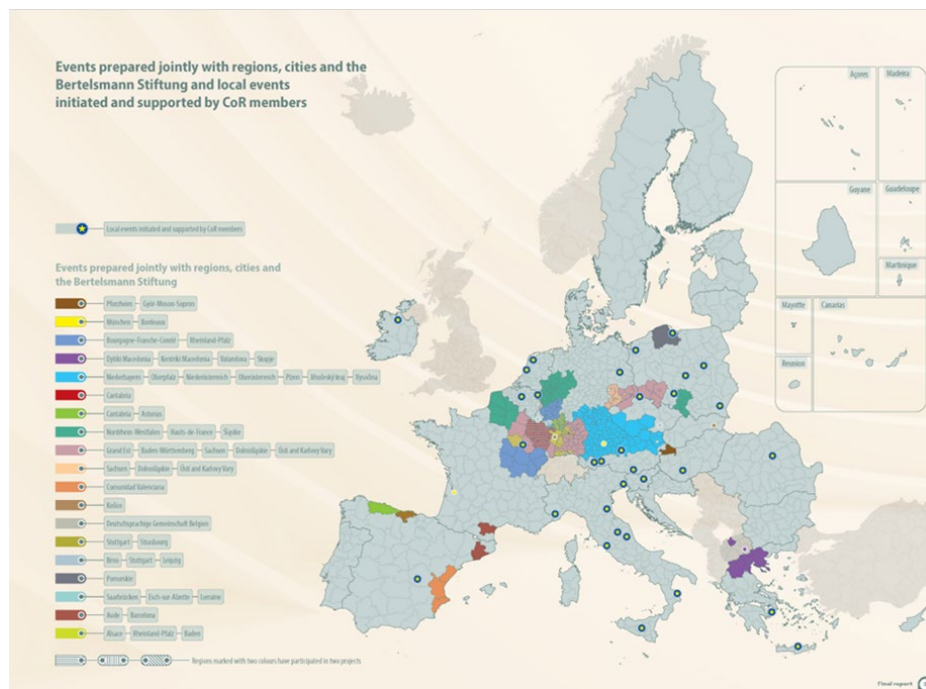
## FACTS AND FIGURES

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Cities and regions are at the heart of the so-called "deliberative wave", with many of them developing initiatives aiming at **engaging citizens in participatory and deliberative practices**.

Since March 2016, the CoR has been active in the **Reflecting on Europe/Future of Europe** campaign, providing a platform for regions, cities and citizens to engage in the debate on the future of Europe. Over **210 local events** have been organised in 117 regions and 182 cities, involving 198 CoR members and 21 500 participants and collecting over 23 000 replies to a special online survey.

In the framework of the **Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE)** and in the run-up to it, the CoR held more than **150 events** – local, regional, trans-national and cross-border citizens' dialogues – reaching out to more than 10 000 citizens.



Source: © European Union and Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, [Citizens, local politicians and the future of Europe](#)

**19 partnerships between 43 European regions and cities** were implemented as part of the CoR-Bertelsmann Stiftung **joint project "From local to European"**, with 38 local, regional and transnational citizens' dialogues taking place between September 2021 and Spring 2022. Citizens' proposals discussed in the dialogues were uploaded onto the COFE multilingual digital platform. The [final report of the project](#) features recommendations on how to best organise local events.

Finally, the [CoR network of EU regional and local councillors](#) counts over 2100 members and is an important capacity-building and networking tool for local and regional politicians with regard to EU policies, helping them to bring the EU closer to the citizens and increase their engagement. The CoR offers the members of the Network specific information, invitations to events and political debates, and the possibility to exchange information and network with CoR members and other EU councillors.

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## MAIN TERRITORIAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND/OR CHALLENGES

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Citizens' engagement has become a common feature in policy-making at all levels of government, mainly with the aim of complementing representative democracy and engaging citizens **between and beyond elections**. According to the COFE proposal 38.4, "political parties, civil society organisations, [and] trade unions should be livelier and more accessible in order for citizens to be more involved and engaged in European democracy. This would also contribute to stimulate the inclusion of EU topics in public debates via political parties, organised civil society and social partners, not only during European elections but ahead of national, regional and local elections as well."

The format, aim and contents of participatory practices vary throughout the EU and they are **adapted to local needs** and features. Different options can be chosen concerning the selection of the participants, the working methods, and the follow-up. The **main challenge is the follow-up**, i.e. how to include the outputs of citizens' consultations in a meaningful way in the decision-making cycle.

Participatory processes **require significant resources** and need to be accompanied by capacity-building and exchange between actors involved. Cooperation and networking between cities and regions should be used to promote and facilitate the organisation of such initiatives.

In the wake of the COFE, citizens' engagement at EU level should be strengthened and a **systematic link between practices happening at different levels of government should be established**, so that the results of deliberations at local and regional level which are relevant for EU policies can better feed into the EU policymaking processes.



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## MAIN MESSAGES TO PROMOTE (POLICY DEMANDS)

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A greater involvement of local and regional authorities (LRAs) and of the CoR in the EU policy and decision-making processes would increase the EU's democratic legitimacy and its proximity to citizens, as well as citizens' sense of ownership of the EU project.

**The interplay between the European and local and regional dimensions of democracy is a key point to address, together with the need to develop a structured way to meaningfully engage with citizens.**

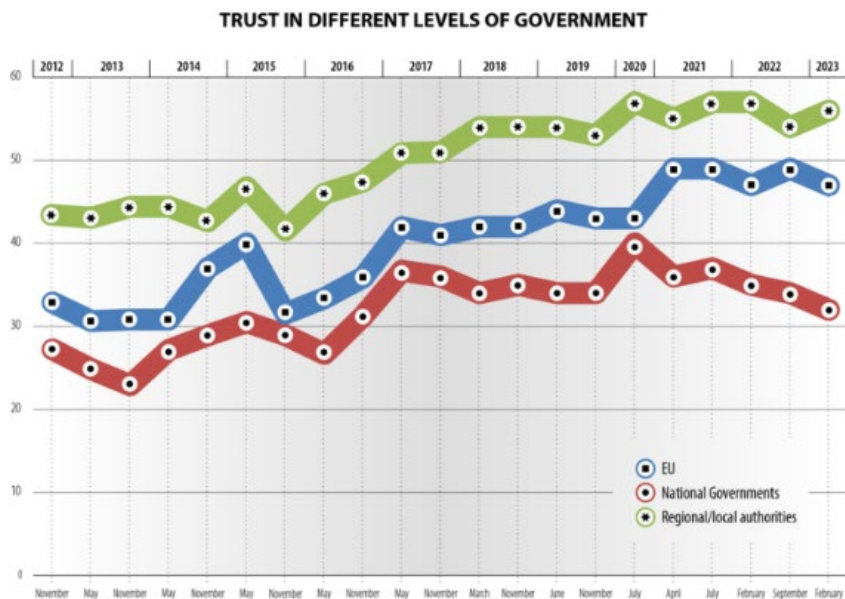
The CoR can capitalise on and further develop its own and its members' practices and knowledge concerning:

- A new way of working of the EU, leading to a **better involvement of LRAs and of the CoR in all stages of EU policy-making;**
- **Tools and best practices for dialogue with citizens** and fostering participatory democracy at EU and local/ regional level.

In this context, the **COFE is a landmark**, both in terms of methodology and the proposals it adopted.

COFE was a complex experiment of participatory democracy and meaningful interaction between citizens and their elected representatives, which can inspire future interactions and tools, notably when it comes to informing and mobilising citizens ahead of European elections.

Moreover, COFE proposals on European democracy include the acknowledgment of subsidiarity and multilevel governance as key principles for the way in which the EU functions and its democratic accountability (No. 40), and the several tools to involve cities and regions in participatory practices and bring them closer to their elected representatives (No. 36, 37.5, 38.4).



Source: © European Union, 2023, Regional and local barometer: [CoR elaboration based on the Standard Eurobarometer](#)

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## ILLUSTRATION OF HOW THE POLICY WORKS IN PRACTICE

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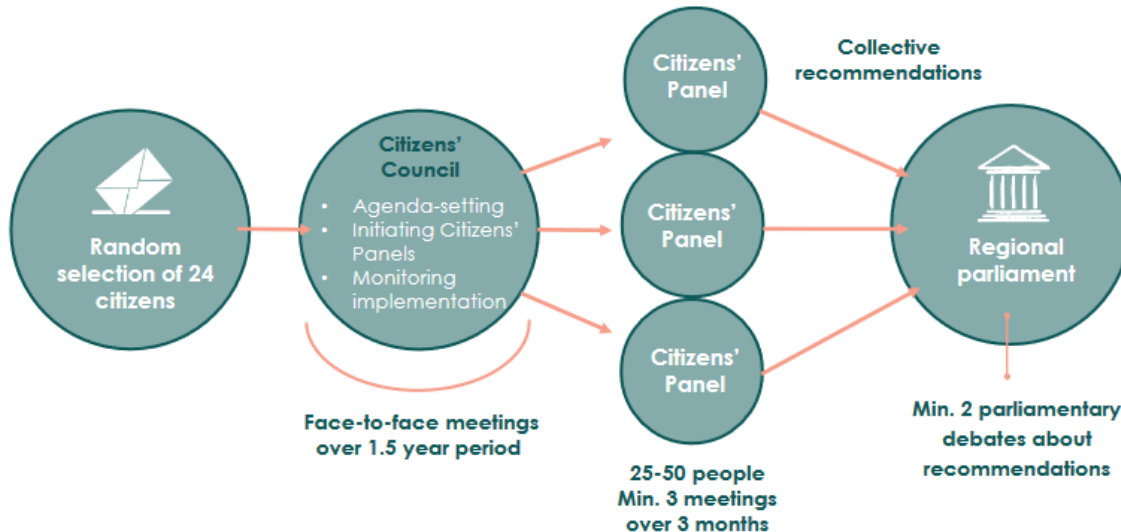
### "The Ostbelgien model"

In 2019, the Parliament of **Ostbelgien** (the German-speaking community in Belgium) voted to establish a Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies.

The **Citizens' Council** is a permanent institution, while the Citizens' Assemblies or Citizens' Panels are temporary.

The Citizens' Council is composed of 24 people, elected for 18 months, representative of the population in terms of gender, age, education and residence. The Council sets the agenda and prepares the **Citizens' Assemblies**. This means that the Citizens' Council decides the topics to be addressed but does not issue any recommendations itself.

It determines the size and duration of a Citizens' Assembly on a specific topic (around 50 randomly selected citizens working for three weekends over three or four months). The Assembly then issues recommendations to the Parliament, which has to engage in a debate with them. The Assembly's recommendations are not legally binding, but the Parliament, the Government, the relevant commission and the minister responsible have to consider them and draw up a due response.



Source: OECD (2020), Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>



## European Committee of the Regions

Created in 1994, the European Committee of the Regions is the EU's political assembly of 329 regional and local representatives such as regional presidents or city-mayors from all 27 Member States, representing over 446 million Europeans.

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