



European democracy, citizens' participation and the role of regions and cities



Conference report 27 June 2022, Brussels

Introduction

Following up on the final report on the Conference on the Future of Europe and its recommendations on a

permanent European Citizens' Assembly or Panel, this conference discussed the following questions:

- What are the lessons learned from the Conference on the Future of Europe for the link between participatory and representative democracy and citizens' assemblies at local, regional, national and European level?
- How should we link local citizens' assemblies to EU-level debates?
- What do regions and cities need to establish citizens' assemblies in an EU context?
- What will the European Committee of the Regions do to put the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe into practice?

Jointly organised by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, these questions were reflected upon with 65 invited politicians, citizens and experts from local and regional governments as well as from EU institutions and bodies.

The proof of concept for a permanent European Citizens' Assembly was delivered through the European Citizens' Panels successfully held during the Conference on the Future of Europe. Nevertheless, a couple of issues require further reflection including on how to better link the levels of government on participatory and

representative democracy. In this respect, the project "From local to European" carried out between May 2021 and February 2022 by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the CoR delivered some evidence on how to make this possible.

The conference delivered recommendations on how to take citizens' participation in EU policy-making and its link to representative democracy to the next level and make it a permanent reality. Recommendations were developed by three working groups and this report summarises the debates and their results.



Opening session



During the opening session, four panelists including Christophe Rouillon, Mayor of Coulaines, France, President of the PES group in the CoR, Daniel Freund, Member of the European Parliament, The Greens/EFA, Camila Jensen, Citizens' Representative from Denmark at the Conference on the Future of Europe, and Stephanie Hartung, National Citizens' Representative Germany at the Conference on the Future of Europe discussed with Dominik Hierlemann from the Bertelsmann Stiftung about their assessment of the Conference on the Future of Europe and its follow-up.

Ahead of the discussion, the audience was welcomed by the President of the European Committee of the Regions, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, who highlighted the lessons learned from the project carried out with the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the interest to continue working together on better tools to revive representative democracy while looking for new ways of participatory

democracy. Mrs Jensen and Mrs Hartung agreed in general that the involvement of citizens and the way in which the Conference was perceived in the media could be improved. Moreover, they raised the issues of the lack of time for the process, of at times critical deliberations between citizens and elected politicians, the limits of the digital platform, and the challenge of following up on the proposals and measures suggested in the final report. Christophe Rouillon stressed the need to strengthen both, representative and participatory democracy and that in so doing, Europe could build on experiences of its regions and cities with citizens' participation. Daniel Freund stated that his hopes with the Conference were focused on EU reform and Treaty change. In this respect, the Conference had exceeded his expectations and he remained optimistic whether a majority favoring Treaty change could be found in the European Council in the months to come.



Workshops

Workshop 1: Benefits of citizens' participation at different levels of democracy



Questions addressed by the workshop

- *Which experiences do we have with citizens' participation at different levels? What does the lived reality look like?*
- *What is the added value of citizens' participation on European issues at local and regional level?*
- *Which formats of citizens' participation between regions and cities have proven to be successful?*

In his initial statement, Daniel Freund shared his experiences with the Conference and confirmed the rather unexpected positive and transparent way in which the European Citizens' Panels had worked, despite the time for their deliberation compared to the scope of topics was not sufficient. He added that the

selection process of citizens had led to a well-balanced agreement among them, even on controversial issues. The momentum would now be with the follow-up of the process and the delivery, which citizens and civil society would hold the EU institutions rightly responsible for.

Recommendations

- Translate European priorities into how they affect citizens' daily life;
- facilitate contacts between local and EU politicians on topics relevant to them;
- ensure inclusivity and representativeness in the formats of citizen participation;
- bring citizens in contact with local and European decision-makers and organise direct dialogues on the results of citizen participation and the follow-up;
- bridge-building between EU politicians and the daily life of EU citizens;
- make a one-stop platform available on participation and transparency;
- tackle the lack of European identity ("thinking locally vs. European");
- facilitate access to EU information, lower the threshold to entry barrier of information about the EU.

Background

Conventional wisdom suggests that democracy is globally under threat including in some member states of the European Union. This finding is shared by most political observers and academics and usually verified by low levels of election turn-outs and eroding trust in political parties, governments and public institutions. As surveys and research confirm, this trend is unequally spread across different groups of society, different ages and levels of education. Last but not least, it varies significantly between and even

within regions and cities. The latter aspect – branded by academics through the notion of the "geography of discontent" – has led to quite some political debate in recent years. Such concerns have, among others, led to "the deliberative wave" in many countries and new forms of experimenting with democratic innovation at local, regional, national and transnational level as well as at the level of the European Union. That deliberative wave has come a long way and regularly hits the beach of "representative democracy" with at times heated

discussions between and within political parties and among experts about representativeness and legitimacy of citizens assemblies, juries or other “new” forms and formats of democratic innovations – and the “right way” of doing things.

In its [Communication on the follow-up on the Conference on the Future of Europe of 17 June 2022](#), the European Commission suggests that regions and cities shall be systematically put on the map of the EU when it comes to democratic innovation. The Communication refers to a “European public space” to

flourish and “democracy to be enriched at European, national, regional and local level” through “Citizens Panels to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key proposals”. Such views are also supported by a [2021 Report of the European Parliament on citizens dialogues and participation in EU decision-making](#). This makes sense because cities and regions are laboratories and sources of such processes and because what the EU does matters to them as much as cities and regions do matter to the EU.

Citizens’ participation in the EU: From patchwork to infrastructure

A [recent study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung](#) analyses the existing channels of citizens’ participation in the EU and combines them with evidence from surveys and research. The study concludes that in order to make citizens’ participation work, the EU needs to move from a participation patchwork to a participation infrastructure by addressing three gaps: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap. In a participation infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work on their own, but would collectively establish the basis for a

functioning participatory EU democracy alongside the representative dimension of European policy-making.

Looking back, it can be stated that continued and permanent citizens’ involvement at EU level can build on the proof on concept, which the Conference on the Future of Europe has delivered. The methodology, a combination of a multilingual, digital platform with randomly selected citizens’ panels, has confirmed the potential to create another layer of active citizens’ involvement.

Workshop 2: How to involve regions and cities in a “European Citizens’ Assembly”?



Questions addressed by the workshop

- *What could be the role of cities and regions in a ‘European Citizens’ Assembly’?*
- *How can we connect local and regional citizens’ participation formats to the EU level?*
- *What has to change to make multi-level governance work for citizens?*

In his initial statement, Kieran McCarthy, member of the Cork City Council, Ireland, and President of the European Alliance group in the CoR, stated that the Conference on the Future of Europe revealed the stark lack of knowledge by citizens of the myriad of work the

EU is doing while at the same time, the EU institutions should lessen the jargon of EU policy and to talk about the work programmes of the EU and their practical outcomes in layperson’s terms.

Recommendations

- Cities and regions should play an active role in explaining the added value of the EU by bringing European topics closer to citizens (in laymen's terms avoiding jargons);
- cities and regions should nurture bottom-up approaches and enhance local initiatives on issues of local or even European scope;
- cities and regions should receive information and training on EU issues and in particular in participatory schemes;
- cities and regions should increase capacity building of local politicians, citizens and officials to host more social dialogues;
- more thematic focus on matters of every-day life that could help to connect various regions of distant geolocation;
- the CoR to build networks and gather knowledge, experience and best –practices of participatory formats;
- remote formats to be further exploited when it comes to connecting people;
- communication needs to entail new channels, tone to be interesting, engaging, interactive, fair and inclusive;
- mobilise young people;
- more integrated systematic feedback mechanism to be applied to enable citizens to follow up the implementation of suggested ideas/recommendations.

Background

During the Conference on the Future of Europe, most of the 6 000+ events were held locally by a variety of government bodies and civil society organisations. However, their impact on the outcome of the Conference remained rather limited. Moreover, many of these local events were purely informative and did not respect the principles laid down in the "Conference Charter" as regards the random selection of participants, the application of deliberative methods and the political follow-up. With only six member states holding national citizens' panels - Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and the Netherlands - the same assessment holds true for efforts made by national governments.

Such "missing links" between citizens' participation at local, regional, national and EU level remain among the challenging aspects for the follow-up of the Conference. Consequently, the [European Commission's Communication of 17 June 2022](#) addresses suggests to "to build capacity among national, regional and local actors to launch a new generation of decentralised citizens' dialogues built on deliberative approaches". Moreover, "a European Charter on Citizens' Participation targeted at all those who participate in or organise citizen engagement

activities" shall be developed thus responding to proposals made by the European Citizens' Panels.

The call for permanent citizens' participation in EU politics and policies resonates with the manifold experiences of EU regions and cities with democratic innovations as well as with the evidence suggested by the European Committee of the Regions' local dialogues and projects like the one carried out with the Bertelsmann Stiftung. In their [project "From local to European"](#), which applied the principles of the "Conference Charter", 50 regions and cities, 200 local politicians and 400 officials were trained between May 2021 and February 2022 and 2 000 citizens involved in 50 local, regional and cross-border citizens' debates on the future of Europe. As [the project's evaluation](#) confirms, local actors highlight the need for accompanying exchange and research and would welcome EU support on capacity-building. The [new European network of practitioners and researchers](#) in the field of democracy, civic deliberation, participation and citizenship education to be established at the end of 2022 under the EU's "Horizon Europe" as well as the activities of the European Commission's Competence Centre for Deliberative and Participative Democracy will be appreciated by local and regional authorities, too.

Linking citizens' participation across levels of democracy

Making the distinct local and regional voices of citizens heard in the making of EU policies and politics could take various formats such as:

- debates on selected topics, such as health, defence, security, which would be part of European citizens' panels proposed in the European Commission's annual work programme for which regions and cities ("legislative approach");
- citizens' panels in regions experiencing common challenges such as cross-border regions, metropolitan or rural regions, regions on their way to green transition, facing demographic decline or similar threats to their industry and service sectors ("geographical approach");

- connecting regions and cities with a certain experience in citizens' participation, who volunteer to address EU issues and suggest, for example, topics to be treated by the European Citizens' Panel ("network approach").

An approach taking elements of all of these into account could be imagined, too. Towards experiences of the European Committee of the Regions with partnerships of regions, local citizens' panels could culminate in one or several concluding citizens' assemblies held on

the Committee's premises. In line with the principles developed in the context of national, regional and local citizens' assemblies and research, [evidence from the CoR-Bertelsmann](#) project confirms that citizens' participation needs to be based on

- inclusiveness, i.e. random selection, demographical and social stratification of citizens involved;
- deliberation, i.e. a process that creates conditions for open and informed debates;
- impact, i.e. the need to embed the process in genuine policy-making and follow-up of recommendations by parliaments and governments.
- finally, evaluation by and for the actors involved must accompany citizens' participation processes. With regard to the EU level, such evaluations should be subject to exchange and policy-learning too

Workshop 3: How to do capacity-building and networking on citizens' participation?



Questions addressed by the workshop :

- *What quality standards, competences, skills are needed for citizens' participation to be successful?*
- *How to embed efforts of capacity-building (training, guidelines etc.) inside administration and beyond?*
- *What should be the role for an EU network on citizens' participation and how to organise it well?*

During his address to the participants of the workshop François Decoster, Vice-President of the Regional Council of Hauts-de-France, President of the Renew Europe Group in the CoR, said: *"The CoR is the place that gives a voice to local and regional authorities in the EU decision making process. Our opinions are increasingly taken into account because we are the people with their feet on the ground and EU-institutions are aware of our added value, also in terms of legitimacy. The network of EU Councillors of the CoR with local politicians who are in charge of communications on EU issues in their constituencies,*

are good means of capacity building, networking on citizens' participation at local level, and bringing up citizens' concerns to EU decision makers". He was joined by Helmut Scholz, Member of the European Parliament, who highlighted the [2021 Report of the European Parliament on citizens dialogues and participation in EU decision-making](#) supporting the view that "it is important to promote exchanges between citizens of different countries at European, national, regional and local level, in particular through networks of towns and regions and by facilitating an inter-regional dialogue".

Recommendations

- Start implementing the standards that already exist;
- link with the wider public including civil society and media;
- reflect about necessary skills including of facilitators;
- share positive outcomes;

- provide training and guidance on quality processes including for politicians;
- have an online repository of projects, toolkits and other sources,
- offer mentoring, coaching, also among peers to share best practices and to provide for transnational learning opportunities;
- role of networks: exchange of ideas, connect government levels, good practices;
- network to include experts, practitioners, administrations, citizens (ex-participants; alumni);
- network should provide a safe space for exchange and the possibility to reflect on failures, too.

Background

Among the European Commission's priorities, a "[new push for European democracy](#)" aims at giving European citizens a bigger say and strengthening democratic participation and active citizenship. It fueled deliberative and participatory approaches in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the roll-out of the [European Democracy Action Plan](#). Lessons learned from participatory citizens' involvement suggest, however, that such processes require significant resources and need to be accompanied by capacity-building, exchange between local actors and evaluation and research. The follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe should provide fertile ground for deepening existing models and tools, not at least with a view to the 2024 European Elections.

In Europe's cities and regions, one finds a wealth of participatory processes to engage citizens, which vary with regards to the policy issues or controversies surrounding them, the methods applied as well as their level of "constitutionalism". Similarly, EU institutions have involved stakeholders and citizens in policy-making e.g., through the European Citizens' Initiative, public consultations and thousands of citizens' dialogues held since 2012. Moreover, the European Commission carries out regular public opinion surveys on the citizens' perception of the EU and its policies. The Conference on the Future of Europe marks a move from communicating and listening to enabling co-creation and deliberative models to make citizens' engagement a truly open and proactive process.

Citizens' participation in the EU: networks, exchange and research

[EU-funded research on democracy and governance](#) has touched upon different aspects of citizens' participation. Launched in October 2021, the European Commission's "[Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy](#)" at the Joint Research Centre provides a knowledge base, a community of practice, training and conferences. In May 2021 the European Commission published call for proposals under the "Horizon Europe" programme to set up a "[network for innovative solutions for the future of democracy](#)", which could be launched in autumn 2022. The network will aim at bringing together practitioners and researchers in the field of democracy, civic deliberation, participation and citizenship education.

In its [Communication on the follow-up on the Conference on the Future of Europe of 17 June 2022](#), the European Commission suggests that regions and cities shall be systematically put on the map of the EU when it comes to democratic innovation. The Communication refers to a "European public space" to flourish and "democracy to be enriched at European, national, regional and local level" through "Citizens Panels to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key proposals".

The Communication also suggests to continue "innovative research on democracy and governance", projects looking into "effective methods for multi-level, multilingual, and multi-modal citizen deliberations at the EU level" as well as pilot models for targeted deliberations and co-creation processes for specific EU policies. In an opinion adopted in 2020, the European Committee of the Regions proposed to establish an EU-wide network on citizen engagement ("CitizEN").

A [recent study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung](#) analyses the existing channels of citizens' participation the EU and combined them with evidence from surveys and research. The study concludes that in order to make citizens' participation work, the EU needs to move from a participation patchwork to a participation infrastructure by addressing three gaps: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap. In a participation infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work on their own, but would collectively establish the basis for a functioning participatory EU democracy alongside the representative dimension of European policy-making.

Closing session

Moderated by Ian Barber, CoR, three presenters, Mrs Stephanie Hartung, National Citizens' Representative Germany at the Conference on the Future of Europe, Mrs Cécile Molle, Particitiz, and Mrs Anna Paola Quaglia, Joint Research Centre at the European Commission, briefly reported back from the three workshops and their recommendations with a view to the questions they discussed.

Finally, Vasco Alves Cordeiro, President of the European Committee of the Regions, concluded the session by highlighting that the Conference on the Future of Europe was an unprecedented exercise of citizens' consultation, which also showed that there is a large margin of progression. In his view, all levels of governance face the following three challenges for upcoming citizens' consultations: the right conditions to motivate people to participate need to be created; it should be clear from the beginning of the process to the citizens how far they are empowered; last not least, processes must be accountable of what to do with the citizens' recommendations. He closed by stating that local and regional authorities have already an interesting record in citizens' participation and will play a key role in addressing these challenges.



Participants

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Andrey Demidov, Bertelsmann Stiftung

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Timo Peters, State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg

Wolfgang Petzold, European Committee of the Regions

Magali Plovie, French-speaking Parliament, Brussels

Amelie Prenzler de Carvalho, Saxon State Ministry of Justice, Democracy, European Affairs and Gender Equality

Anna Paola Quaglia, European Commission

Anna Renkamp, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Katja Reppel, European Commission

Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, European Commission

Christophe Rouillon, Mayor of Coulaine, France, President of the PES group in the CoR

Koen Roovers, EU Ombudsman

Inês Roseta, European Committee of the Regions

Emely-Marie Schäfer, JEF Sachsen

Helmut Scholz, Member of the European Parliament, The Left/GUE/NGL

Winfried Schröder, Baden-Württemberg Representation Office Brussels

Alice Schulte, North Rhine-Westphalia Representation Office Brussels

Karina Suleimanova, European Committee of the Regions

Hannah Surmatz, Philea

Carol Thomas, Council of European Municipalities and Regions

Paulo Alexandre Valente de Jesus Rosa, European Commission

Antoine Vergne, Mission Publique

Emily Williams, Bertelsmann Stiftung

Anthony Zacharzewski, Democratic Society

Further reading

Bertelsmann Stiftung/European Committee of the Regions: Europe up close, March 2022, [Link](#), also available in [French](#) and [German](#)

Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022), Next level citizen participation in the EU. Institutionalising European Citizens Assemblies, 24 June 2022, [online](#)

Conference on the Future of Europe (2022), Final report, 9 May 2022, [online](#)

Conference on the Future of Europe Observatory (2022), Conference on the Future of Europe: what worked, what now, what next? High-Level Advisory Group report, 22 February 2022, [online](#)

Dijkstra, Lewis, Hugo Poelman and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2018), The geography of EU discontent, European Commission, DG REGIO Working papers 12/2018, [online](#)

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European Committee of the Regions (2020), Local and regional authorities in the permanent dialogue with citizens", *Official Journal of the EU*, C 440, 18 December 2020, pp 49-53; report by Declan McDonnell, 18 October 2020, [online](#)

European Committee of the Regions (2019), From local to European. Putting citizens at the heart of the EU agenda, [online](#)

European Parliament (2021), Citizens dialogues and citizens' participation in EU decision-making, 7 July 2021; report by Helmut Scholz, [online](#)

Hierlemann, Dominik, Stefan Roch, Paul Butcher, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Corina Stratulat, Maarten De Groot (2022), Under construction – citizen participation in the European Union, Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh, [online](#)

OECD (2020), Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions. Catching the deliberative wave, Paris, [online](#).

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“From local to European”: a project by the CoR and the Bertelsmann Stiftung

Between April 2021 and February 2022, the project “From local to European” was carried out by the CoR and the Bertelsmann Stiftung – together with 23 cooperation partnerships from 67 European cities and regions. The latter

conducted citizens’ dialogues with around 200 politicians and 2 000 citizens, which contributed to the Conference on the Future of Europe with more than 400 concrete proposals on the future of Europe. The five key results of the project are:

- (1) The project led to high-quality citizens’ dialogues. Over 90% of the citizens and over 90% of the organisers rated the citizens’ dialogues as very good or good. All initiators stated that the support provided by the project had improved their own Citizens’ Dialogues.
- (2) Expertise for good citizen participation was firmly established. All initiators rated the quality principles as useful, regardless of their previous knowledge of citizen participation. They were applied in practice. It was only random selection, as a little-known instrument, that had some implementation issues.
- (3) Participatory democracy in the cities and regions has been given a lasting boost. All project partners stated that they would apply the quality principles again in the future. In addition, all events were supported by about a total of 200 politicians, who discussed with the citizens their proposals and promised to take concrete action.
- (4) Citizens want to be more involved in European issues. The evaluation of the citizens’ assessments and the approx. 400 proposals made by citizens clearly show that European citizens want more citizen participation at the European level.
- (5) United in diversity: the proposals of European citizens are similar. Around 400 developed proposals show: European citizens want more out of Europe and more unified solutions at EU level. Furthermore, it is evident that citizens not only often discuss the same issues, but also often arrive at similar proposals for the future of Europe although these concern different countries.

Link to the final report of the project, February 2022



**European Committee
of the Regions**

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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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