



European Committee  
of the Regions



Conference  
on the **Future**  
of **Europe**

#EUlocal

# Conference of the High-Level Group on European Democracy



## Event type

Hybrid - in Brussels  
and online

## Date

3 December 2021

## Audience

Around 150 participants

## Organiser

European Committee of the Regions

## Themes

Future of Europe, European Democracy



## Keynote Speakers' Quotes

**Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, President of the European Committee of the Regions, President of the Central Macedonia Region in Greece, "*The Conference on the Future of Europe must commit to taking this unique opportunity to place regions at the heart of the European Union's future democratic architecture.*"

**Herman Van Rompuy**, Chair of the HLG and President Emeritus of the European Council, "*The European Committee of the Regions could play an important role as coordinator, facilitator and communicator in our multi-level governance system.*"

**Manfred Weber MEP**, Chair of the European Democracy Working Group of the COFE, President of the EPP Group, stated that *a direct link between the EU legislative level and what is happening on the ground is extremely important.*

**Vasco Cordeiro**, 1st Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions, Member of the Regional Parliament of Azores, "*The European Committee of the Regions should assert itself as the third pillar of democracy in the EU, alongside the European and national levels.*"



## Key messages

1. Democracy must deliver and show its added-value to citizens
2. Cooperation between all levels of government is key to strengthening European democracy, its legitimacy and results
3. Democracy can be efficiently boosted at all levels, and a stronger role for the European Committee of the Regions in EU decisions, as the voice of the 1.17 million local and regional elected politicians, is key to bringing the EU closer to citizens
4. New forms of citizens' participation can strengthen representative European democracy. The EU and its institutions must listen to citizens and respond to their needs
5. Concrete follow-up to the listening exercise is vital, with political representatives delivering policies that matter to citizens. This practice should become a permanent feature of the EU decision-making process
6. The experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe needs to be a learning process, and must not be an end point but a starting point for an ongoing conversation on democracy, with the CoR as an ideal intermediate between the citizens and the different levels of governance
7. Digital technology has shifted the way people experience democracy. Digital access and literacy are key elements in reaping the benefits of social networks which must be a safe space for public debate, generating inclusion and participation, and fighting disinformation and fake news
8. Many improvements to the EU's democratic processes, including strengthening the role of the CoR, are possible in the framework of the existing Treaties



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## Context

The HLG is composed of seven wise men and women tasked with helping the European Committee of the Regions reflect on how to strengthen the 'European House of Democracy', with cities and regions as the foundation, Member States as the walls, and the EU as the protective roof. This event brought together political, expert and academic thinking about the EU's future from the perspective of the EU's local and regional levels of governance. Democracy is a value in itself, and the challenges of democracy at all levels need to be addressed. The Conference on the Future of Europe provides an opportunity to bring democracy to the center of the EU debate.

### 1. Democracy and Legitimacy: A democracy that delivers, democracy as a value

Democracy as a value must be embedded in a society. To be considered legitimate, a democracy must deliver and be capable of addressing the issues that citizens care about. The HLG is looking at how to improve democracy, also by giving a stronger voice to local and regional authorities in Europe. The institutional system of the European Union is not perfect, and all levels need to be heard by the EU institutions. The EU is more than its 27 Member States. It is also its 300 regions and 90,000 local authorities, and European legitimacy must be the sum of all these democratic legitimacies. A direct link with what is happening on the ground is essential to address the fears generated by the repeated crises and to accompany people in the dual digital and climate transitions, rebuilding trust amongst citizens. Social inequalities must also be addressed, as they have an impact on the possibility to participate in democratic life.

### 2. How can participatory democracy strengthen representative democracy?

Democracy and new forms of citizens' engagement are constantly evolving. They require citizens to participate in the democratic processes and politicians to be committed to listening and following up on them. It is essential to ensure that participation is inclusive and produces real results. The COFE is the first such EU-wide attempt, and should not be a one-off exercise. It needs sufficient time in order to reach concrete results and will need clear action by the EU institutions as follow-up. Citizens' participation is key to strengthening European democracy, while elected representatives retain the ultimate responsibility for their choices. It is a complementarity that is sought. Democracy requires the right environment for exchange.

### 3. Strengthening European democracy across all levels: local, regional, national, European

No people and no place can be left behind - it is necessary to listen to citizens' needs and close the gap between Brussels and the other levels. Only through a joint effort of all levels of government can our democracies achieve results, and this is a shared responsibility. The EU has to face new challenges with new instruments and a better involvement of all levels of decision-making, so that together they can bring solutions to the challenges of the green and digital transitions. European citizenship is also key in order for the EU to develop the instruments, competences and democratic processes it needs to manage these transitions.

## Conclusions

Seven essential words emerged: Trust – which needs to be restored in democracy and in the EU; Hope – the paradigm of hope for Europe and its future needs to be restored; Truth – it is important to rediscover its value, respecting facts and giving people confidence; Listening – and responding to citizens and their expectations; Follow-up – dialogue with people needs to show results; One million – politicians elected at local and regional level across the EU, with the CoR as a go-between with the EU institutions; Time – beyond the timeframe of the COFE, further action is needed in the form of a permanent dialogue. The CoR should assert itself as the third pillar of democracy in the European Union, alongside the European and national levels. It should evolve into a real political assembly, representing the one million local and regional elected politicians, not just by changing its name but by transforming how it works.



## Speakers and Discussants

- **Apostolos Tzitzikostas** President of the European Committee of the Regions, Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia
- **Herman Van Rompuy**, Chair of the High Level Group on European Democracy and President Emeritus of the European Council
- **Manfred Weber MEP**, Chair of the European Democracy Working Group of the COFE, President of the EPP Group
- **Didier Georgakakis**, Professor of Political Science, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne
- **Joaquin Almunia**, Member of the High Level Group on European Democracy, former European Commissioner for Competition and for Economic and Financial Affairs
- **Mark Speich**, Chair of the CoR Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX); Secretary of State, North Rhine-Westphalia Region, Delegate to the COFE
- **Olgierd Geblewicz**, President of the EPP Group in the CoR; President of West Pomerania Region, Delegate to the COFE
- **Kieran McCarthy**, President of the European Alliance Group in the CoR, Member of Cork County Council, Delegate to the COFE
- **Kalypso Nicolaidis**, Professor at the School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute (EUI)
- **Rebecca Harms**, Member of the High Level Group on European Democracy, former Member of the European Parliament
- **Eva Maydell MEP**, President of the European Movement International, Delegate to the COFE
- **Karl Heinz Lambertz**, Member of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community, President of the Association of European Border Regions, Delegate to the COFE
- **Vasco Alves Cordeiro**, First Vice-President of the European Committee of the Regions, Member of the Regional Parliament of Azores, Delegate to the COFE
- **Silja Markkula**, Member of the High Level Group on European Democracy, President of the European Youth Forum, Chair of the Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Working Group of the COFE
- **François Decoster**, President of the Renew Europe Group in the CoR, Member of Hauts-de-France Regional Council, Delegate to the COFE
- **Ziga Turk**, Executive Secretary of the High Level Group on European Democracy, Professor at the University of Ljubljana
- **Olivier Costa**, Director of European Political and Governance Studies Department, College of Europe
- **Maria João Rodrigues**, Member of the High Level Group on European Democracy, President of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies
- **Roberto Ciambetti**, President of the Veneto Regional Parliament, Member of CALRE, Delegate to the COFE
- **Jelena Drenjanin**, Vice-Mayor of Huddinge, Chair of the Committee on Governance of the Congress of the Council of Europe, Delegate to the COFE
- **Christophe Rouillon**, President of the PES Group in the CoR; Mayor of Coulaines, Delegate to the COFE
- **Tomasz Grosse**, Member of the High Level Group on European Democracy, Professor at the University of Warsaw
- **Michael Bruter**, Professor at the London School of Economics
- **Diana Finkelstain**, Local Councillor, Iasi Municipality member of the CoR's Young Elected Politicians (YEP) programme