



Bringing the EU closer to its citizens: The call for an EU permanent mechanism for structured consultations and dialogues with citizens

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Working for an open, transparent and regular dialogue with EU citizens

The European Union is a unique political entity, which unites different levels of government in working towards the common goal of economic and social progress for its citizens. The elected leaders of cities, regions, member states, the leaders of the EU institutions and civil society organisations have the joint obligation to work together to develop the European project further and to make it more transparent and democratically accountable in the spirit of article 11 of the Treaty on European Union, calling on the institutions to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with its citizens, representative associations and civil society.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) are in constant dialogue with citizens through their members and their respective constituencies: civil society organisations for the EESC and local and regional authorities for the CoR. Thus, the Committees have been developing expertise, knowledge and tools to constitute the bridge between citizens and the European Union.

In recent years, EU institutions and bodies, including European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions, have increased their efforts to connect with citizens. They have launched a multitude of dialogues, consultations and similar initiatives. The citizens' consultations and dialogues carried out by the Member States in 2018 have also asked the citizens about their views on the future of Europe. On 13 and 14 December 2018, the European Council will receive a report on these initiatives which highlights the desire of many

citizens to be better involved in decision-making by the European Union.

The dialogues and consultations have shown that the EU citizens, but also local and regional elected politicians and organised civil society representatives, have a genuine interest in its policies and in becoming more engaged in their Union's future.

The time has come to bring initiatives together and to reinforce their impact on EU policies design and implementation

The time has come to give more coherence to such active interest and efforts, making them more meaningful with regard to their impact through a longer-term strategy and feedback mechanism involving both organised civil society and local and regional authorities.

As Presidents of the EU's two advisory bodies representing the European Union from a local, regional and civil society perspective, we suggest to build up on the experience developed in the Committees and other EU institutions by establishing an EU permanent structured consultation with citizens, cities, regions and civil society organisations.

Such a consultation should:

- boost the democratic dimension of the European Union by mobilising and encouraging the broad engagement of citizens, organised civil society organisations and local and regional parliaments and governments;
- provide real feedback on the EU policies to improve their design and implementation and to establish a follow-up mechanism;

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- involve actively all EU institutions as well as locally and regionally elected representatives and civil society organisations, who must play a key role in organising and following up on these dialogues;
- become a permanent, annual exercise.

We argue that an EU permanent structured consultation with citizens will require a coordinated and coherent approach agreed between the EU institutions and advisory bodies in order to exploit synergies and complementarities among them as well as to speak with a clear and coherent voice to citizens.

The contribution of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions to a permanent dialogue mechanism

The contribution of the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions would include the organisation of local citizens' assemblies and hearings with the participation of locally and regionally elected representatives and civil society organisations. It would of course fully exploit, in a synergic and coordinated process, the tools and mechanisms that they have developed in these years to consult with citizens. This would gather views on new European Union initiatives and legislation with a regional and local impact.

Collecting the views of citizens, local and regional elected representatives, social partners and civil society organisations would follow the logic of an annual cycle. The cycle would start following up on the announcement of the European Commission's annual work programme in autumn, from which topics for consultations could be selected.

Debates would be held during the first semester of the following year. All events would produce reports and recommendations. In the context of their

respective plenary sessions the Committees could invite national and European associations to share their views on the selected topics.

The Committees would publish a joint summary report in autumn which would be presented to the Presidents of the European Council, of the European Commission and of the European Parliament at the occasion of the State of the Union speech.

This report should support EU action to respond better through appropriate measures to citizens' needs and expectations. It is indeed crucial that citizens feel their contributions are taken seriously and can constitute a real input to the EU decision- and policy-making process.

The EU permanent mechanism for structured consultations and dialogues with citizens would be accompanied by supporting activities such as

- related communication activities documenting the process, applying a single European Union brand across all citizens'-related communication and consultation activities;
- training and networking among the local, regional and EU institutions and organisations involved;
- the setting-up of a joint advisory board composed of experts and experienced think tanks;
- an evaluation programme looking at the impact of the process from an external point of view.

We propose the establishment of an EU inter-institutional working group in order to agree upon common guiding principles and a methodology to launch an EU permanent mechanism for structured consultations and dialogues with citizens during the next EU institutional cycle (2019-2024).