



Future of Democracy | 04.2019

## Conference Talk

**Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has announced a two-year Conference on the Future of Europe. Even citizens ought to participate. But how?**

**In order to make participatory democracy a reality, it is essential to avoid only paying lip-service to the idea of participation – and give citizens a real say.**

The first plans for the Conference on the Future of Europe are now circulating in Brussels. Who should be involved, and what are the objectives? What topics? How to deal with the expectations of the public, and of member states? The concrete mandate for the conference is still unclear. European federalists are hoping to gain momentum for treaty change. Many member states are afraid of that very outcome. There seems to be agreement that the public should play a more important role in the discussions than has been the case in the past. With populism flaring up, growing scepticism towards elites, and perceived gaps in representation on the part of the EU population, this is urgently needed.

Indeed, participatory democracy is the talk of the town. Citizens' participation is being tested out far more commonly across Europe, both in pilot experiments and on a larger scale. The EU, too, has taken initial steps in this direction. Still, there is often a gap between expectations and reality. For instance, there is barely any public awareness of the European Citizens' Initiative. The European Citizens' Consultations initiated by the French President in 2018 were

at best a well-coordinated attempt at dialogue in all member states, without generating a lot of tangible results.

The Conference on the Future of Europe offers the chance to give the public a direct voice when it comes to developing the future shape of the EU. This would be a first. Done well, citizens' participation increases people's trust in democracy and improves policies. As the sovereign, Europe's citizens should obviously be involved. The EU, seemingly so remote from its citizens, could become a pioneer of innovative participation.

At the same time, when done poorly, citizens' participation damages European democracy. Citizens' participation in the Conference on the Future of Europe must be carefully designed and smartly choreographed. It should not simply be a communication exercise, but should herald a change in the culture of the EU institutions. This policy brief discusses the principles and success factors of good participation, and highlights three possible models of citizens' participation.

## Who, how, and what:

### The idea for the conference in a European context

In her July address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the new Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, proposed a “Conference on the Future of Europe”. The conference is to begin in 2020 and continue for two years. It ought to bring together – as equal partners – individual citizens (especially young Europeans), civil society and European institutions. The scope and goals of the conference will be decided jointly by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Von der Leyen promised that the Commission would take note of the results of the conference in its work, including the proposition of relevant legislative action. Even treaty change could be a possibility.

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The proposals for such a conference did not come out of nowhere. In Brussels, the taboo phrase “treaty change” can now be heard again more often. After the failed constitutional referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005, as well as the subsequent difficult process of creating the Lisbon treaty, treaty fatigue prevailed for more than a decade. During the previous legislative period, the majority in the European Parliament remained in favour of fully exploiting the legal framework provided by the Lisbon Treaty first (see the Brok/Bresso report, 2016). Still, the complete lack of enthusiasm for further institutional development has given way to a cautious openness to possible treaty change.

The composition of the new Commission underlines the importance of the issue of democracy for the EU institutions. No less than three Commissioners are responsible for it. As Vice President for democracy and demography, Dubravka Šuica is also charged with arranging the Conference on the Future of Europe. Long-standing Commission member Maroš Šefčovič is now responsible for inter-institutional relations and foresight. Vice President Věra Jourová will take charge of values and transparency and lead the group of three Commissioners on a “New Push for European Democracy”. At the Conference on the Future of Europe, she is to represent the Commission

on the issue of *Spitzenkandidaten* and on transnational lists.

The member states have already given the conference their approval in principle, in the context of Ursula von der Leyen’s appointment as President of the Commission. Germany and France drafted a non-paper at the end of November 2019, commenting for the first time on possible topics, structure and citizens’ participation. Not much has been heard from other EU member states. One thing is clear: European federalists would like to see a new push for treaty change. States that are more skeptical towards integration are fearful of such change. It can hardly be expected that they will speak in favor of giving extensive powers to the conference.

### To begin with: resolving three key questions

The format, aims and timeframe of the Conference on the Future of Europe will be defined by an inter-institutional agreement between Parliament, Commission and Council. Three key questions have to be clarified in advance:

Firstly, what are the aims of the conference and what is its mandate? A narrow mandate would mean that not only the format and the timeframe but also the structure of possible outcomes will be clearly identified and pre-defined. In that case, inter-institutional negotiations would take on a more important role in the preparations for the conference. A broader mandate would leave the conference and its organizers with more scope when it comes to planning and would leave open how the two-year dynamic develops. Whether or not the process leads to a European Convention and possible treaty change would then remain to be seen.

The second key question relates to the themes of the conference. It would be possible to focus primarily on institutional issues and on the question of EU democracy. Transnational lists for European elections and the troublesome question of *Spitzenkandidaten* would then be the beginning of a discussion about how citizens can be more involved in EU policies, and how they can take on a more innovative and direct role, as well as ultimately how the democratic character of the EU and its ability to act can be strengthened. This could be followed by discussions on how to offer EU citizens more opportunities for participation. In this sense, it would

above all be a conference on European democracy. An alternative approach would be one which does take up the institutional hot topics currently on the table, but which does not restrict itself to solving these conflicts alone. All strategic policy questions, such as climate-change, economic and social models, the currency union as well as security and defence, would be up for discussion. The German-French non-paper goes in this direction.

Thirdly, the manner and extent to which the public would be directly involved in the conference still remains completely open. If it goes beyond a discussion forum of organized civil society groups, this element could be a real innovation. There could also be specific formats encouraging participation of young people. The European Parliament is committed to the broadest and most representative participation by the public possible in the conference. The parliament building itself could be used as a conference venue, which would have symbolic implications.

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## “Done well, citizens’ participation increases political legitimacy.”

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It is precisely this element which plays a decisive role when it comes to the credibility of the conference, and its potential as a whole. Done well, citizens’ participation can increase the legitimacy of political decisionmaking. Done poorly, it can lead to the disillusionment of the citizens involved or even to the delegitimization of politics itself. Involving citizens in the conference is therefore a demanding project which has to take account of the central principles that define the quality of participatory democracy.

### What role for citizens: source of ideas or decisionmakers?

If the aims of the Conference on the Future of Europe are not yet clearly defined, the aims of involving citizens are even less so. That is not a problem in itself. Every process begins with a vague idea. However, experience shows that citizens’ participation is often understood in very different ways. Some politicians regard new forms of participation only as a further possibility for communicating with

citizens. They, meanwhile, (not always, but often) expect to participate directly in decisionmaking.

In conceptualizing the process, it helps to look at research. As early as 1969, Sherry R. Arnstein developed the “ladder of participation”. The basic idea is simple. The intensity of participation can be higher or lower. The higher we climb the ladder, the more involved citizens are, the more they have power over decisions or can even implement them. Information, dialogue, consultation, a stake in decisionmaking, decision implementation — in essence, these are the steps on the participation ladder.

We do not yet know how the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe will ultimately flow into policy or even be implemented. That is realistic and legitimate. Citizens’ participation is a different question. Regardless of how the final format of participation will look like, the participants want to know what part their work will play in further discussions. Are citizens being consulted or are they directly involved in deciding the conference’s results? That is the core question which must be raised before beginning to plan the conference.

### Top-down, bottom-up or both? Finding the right topics.

Three subject areas are being considered for the conference. Institutional questions which often relate to the interaction between Parliament, Commission and Council. Policy questions which are regarded as important topics for the future of the EU. And then the broader question of how citizens can be involved in shaping and developing European policy.

Research into participation has long been concerned with the question of which topics are particularly suited to broad participation. Are “hot topics” preferable, such as the question of migration, where politics alone might not succeed in finding answers? Or is it better to choose “cold topics”, which are discussed in a less emotional way but have great long-term significance, such as dealing with demographic change? Depending on the situation, certain topics are sometimes more and sometimes less suitable. But in principle there is no topic on which citizens’ participation would not be possible.

Skeptics towards citizens’ participation like to point out that citizens are certainly able to discuss

fundamental ethical questions and make decisions on them, but that they lack the knowledge needed to discuss more complex technical or institutional questions (such as *Spitzenkandidaten* or transnational lists). However, numerous examples point to the opposite: already in 2004, a Citizens' Assembly in the Canadian province of British Columbia developed a concrete suggestion for electoral reform. Currently, Chile is discussing whether the national crisis might be solved by a new constitution drafted by citizens themselves. The question of topics therefore comes down to designing the process in the right way and working out how to involve experts.

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“Currently, Brussels takes only ‘organized citizens’ into account. The ‘individual citizen’ is left out”

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It is mostly politicians and civil servants from Brussels and the member states that are currently thinking about what should be important and how citizens ought to be involved. Clearly, the strategic priorities presented by the European Council and the Commission result from longer discussion processes and are a suitable thematic foundation for the Conference on the Future of Europe. At the same time, however, this “top-down” approach could be complemented by a “bottom-up” perspective, particularly regarding the choice of topics. Citizens would then have the opportunity to put their own issues on the agenda of the conference. This would increase the legitimacy of the conference in the eyes of the public.

### Randomly selected citizens: how to avoid the “usual suspects”

Which citizens should be involved in the conference? Should participation be open to all Europeans or only to selected citizens? These days, more and more countries have so-called Citizens' Assemblies, which involve members of the public who are chosen at random, with the aim of being as representative as possible. Ireland, with its Assemblies on various topics, is the most prominent example. France applied this method during the *Grand Débat* and is now continuing it on further topics. The EU also conducted a citizens' panel with more than one hundred randomly selected Europeans, during the European Citizens' Consultations of 2018.

Weighted random selection offers a number of advantages: in principle, every citizen has the chance to be chosen. The group of participants is composed to represent the diversity of society — usually, this means ensuring that women and men are equally represented, as well as various age groups and diverse socio-economic backgrounds. This prevents events that only cater to the politically interested. Citizens with quite diverse experiences, interests, opinions and perspectives take part. For this reason, even those who do not participate ascribe great legitimacy to such assemblies.

In the EU, this approach has a particular attraction. Most EU participatory processes only take account of “organized citizens”. “Individual citizens” with their own interests, ideas and views remain excluded. This approach could promote the transnational component and thus foster the creation of a European public sphere.

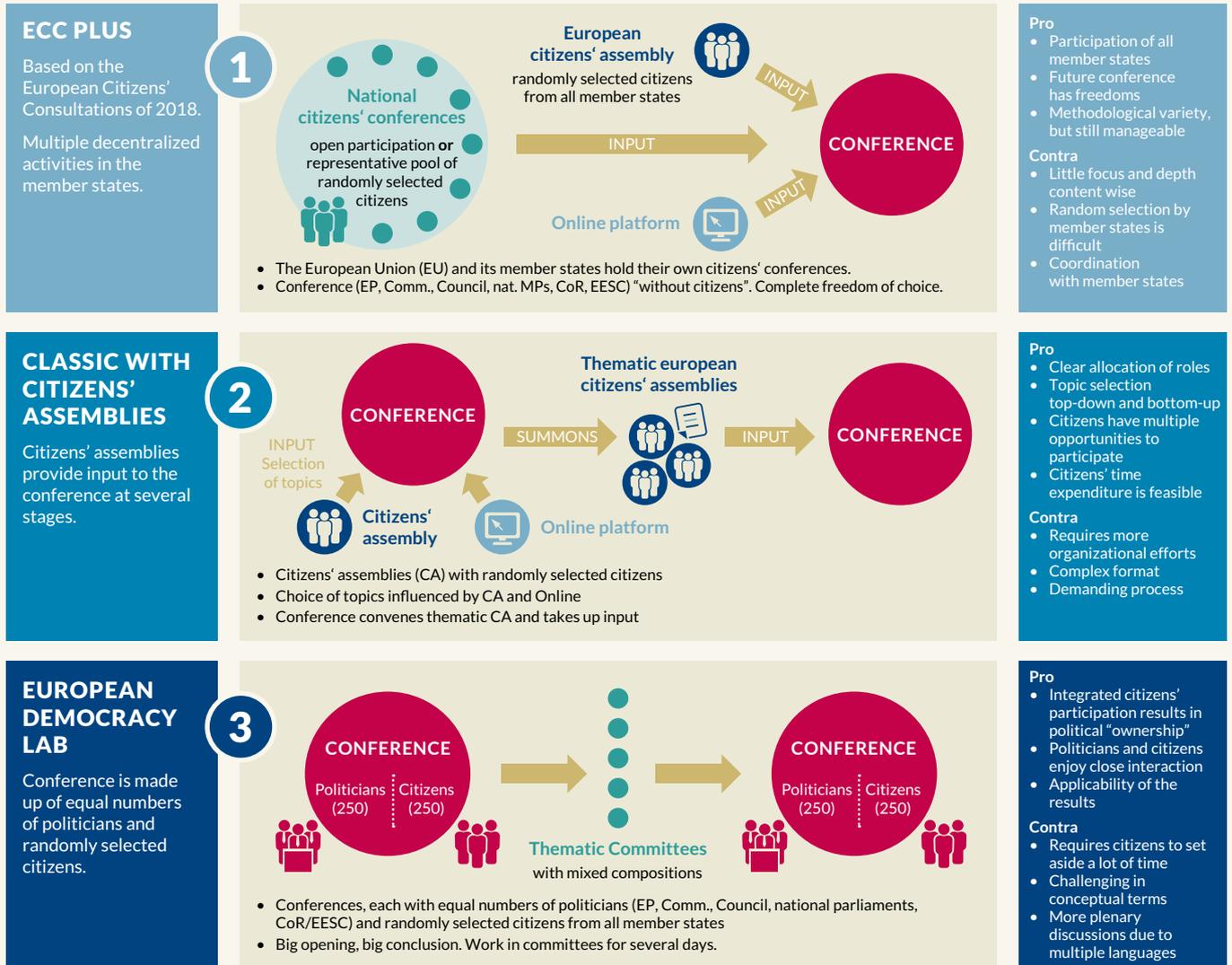
But deciding to choose “random citizens” opens up further questions: what should be the focus of participation? Should it be at a national, decentralized level or at a transnational, central level? Should citizens meet separately or together with the other members of the conference? How will citizens exchange views, given that the EU has 24 official languages? These questions show that a conference with citizens' participation is not a normal conference. It is essential to consider quality criteria for participation, alongside the institutional logic of the EU.

### Europeans unite: more online participation for a European public

In addition to physical participation, people must be able to participate virtually, in order to involve a broad European public in the conference. Whilst inviting randomly selected European citizens is a high-quality form of participation, online participation can lead to broad awareness across the member states.

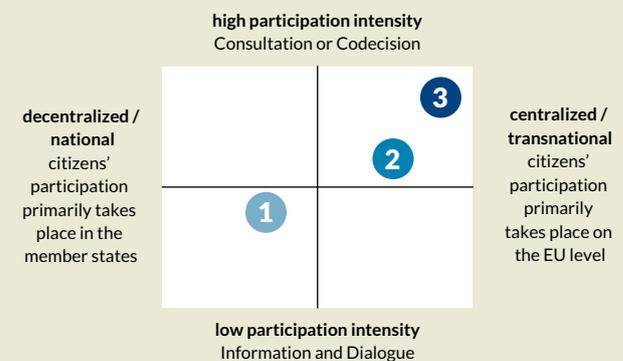
The French *Grand Débat* exemplifies the interplay between online and offline spaces and points to a number of challenges. Town hall meetings with President Macron drew great public attention to the website of the *Grand Débat*. Citizens could upload their opinions and suggestions on the central issues of the debate. However, participants could not interact with each other. The deliberative component

## Citizens' Participation at the Conference on the Future of Europe (Conference): **3** models



**BRIEF EXPLANATION:** One fundamental question in planning citizens' participation for the Conference on the Future of Europe is that of the intensity of participation. Will citizens be informed or consulted about the work of the conference, or will they even have a direct influence on the decisions made? The geographical focus of participation must also be clarified: Does citizens' participation take place exclusively in member states or is there a transnational component? **Model 1 (ECC Plus)** focuses on broad citizens' participation in the member states. In addition, there is a unique transnational Citizens' Assembly, which provides input on the choice of topics for the conference. **Model 2 (Classic)** involves a citizens' assembly with randomly selected European citizens at the beginning of the agenda-setting process. In a more classical setting, the Conference would also convene several thematic citizens' assemblies to provide input. Citizens are consulted, but have no say on the outcome of the conference. In **Model 3 (Democracy Laboratory)**, politicians and randomly selected Europeans participate on an equal footing in the conference and in thematic committees. All models incorporate a Europe-wide online participation component.

### Conceptual localization of the **3** models



Source: Authors' depiction.

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– joint discussion and reflection – was reserved for the regional Citizens’ Assemblies, with randomly selected participants.

In France, the evaluation of more than two million contributions to the debate was generally limited to underlining the central strands of discussion and categorizing opinions and suggestions. In such a model, the online aspect stands for information, transparency and broad participation. It is only at the physical events that people come together for a more complex debate between different positions.

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“A conference on the future of Europe demands its very own dramaturgy and the entanglement of online and face-to-face interaction.”

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What does that mean for the Conference on the Future of Europe? A virtual discussion in which several million people take part across the EU, combined with the physical involvement of citizens, would have the potential for a snowball effect, setting off further debates. Ideas could be collected online and categorized. In face to face meetings, these concrete proposals from citizens could then be developed further.

The conference needs a clear structure from start to finish. What formats should open the debate? How can the ideas emerging from physical events be followed up online? How will inputs from online participation be fed into the further discussion process? If the conference really aims to initiate a broader European process of reflection, then the key to that lies in the integration and interaction between online and offline spaces.

**No ordinary conference: citizens’ participation is not just an “add on”**

A Conference on the Future of Europe with citizens’ participation is more than just a conference with citizens — it is a completely different format. Debates involving the public will have an effect on the shape and dynamic of the discussion process and are subject to their own logic, which has so far been largely absent from the Brussels mindset. The following points are relevant for designing the process:

**Transnational and multilingual dialogue:** Interactive forms of participation on a purely member state level are relatively easy to arrange. Transnational, multilingual dialogues are more difficult. This would require large numbers of interpreters, so that all participants would be able to speak in their native languages. Since deliberative forms of participation barely work in a traditional plenary setting, models have to be developed that allow linguistic diversity to function in small groups or in a “world café” setting. Examples for this can be found in the EU Citizens’ Panel (May 2018) or the Citizens’ Dialogue organized by the Commission and the Bertelsmann Stiftung (May 2019), where participants from five countries came together in The Hague.

**Chairing the conference:** Citizens’ participation requires special competences when it comes to moderation. This applies to the design of the process as well as to the actual implementation of events. Even when an experienced EU politician takes the chair, it is still important to have process facilitators who are familiar with the atmosphere and dynamic of participatory formats.

**Expert involvement:** Citizens’ participation on complex issues only works when experts are involved. Citizens need enough time to reflect on the experts’ input and to discuss it. The Irish Citizens’ Assembly has shown how that can work. A distinction must also be made between experts and interest groups.

**Schedule and results:** Depending on whether participants are expected to offer only loose ideas or concrete suggestions based on consensus, different amounts of time have to be allotted. The question of how much time citizens can devote to the conference is crucial.

**Interlocking processes:** A conference with citizens’ participation has to be choreographed in such a way that the different participatory processes connect with each other and provide a coherent picture to the public. It has to be clearly visible to outsiders how each building block contributes to the process and result of the conference.

**Three models of citizens’ participation at the Conference on the Future of Europe**

When designing citizens’ participation at the conference, two central dimensions can offer orientation. On the one hand, we have to decide on the intensity

of participation. Following the participation ladder, where are the formats located? How concrete should the results of citizens' participation be? Are individual ideas from citizens enough or is consensus the aim? How much time can citizens be expected to devote to this? On the other hand, there is the question of the main level of participation. Will events involving citizens mostly take place in member states, at a decentralized level, or should there be a transnational, central forum with participants from all EU countries?

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If we follow the logic of these two dimensions and take account of the quality criteria for good citizens' participation described here, various scenarios emerge for the conference and for participation. Three idealtypic models are briefly presented here; they can also be combined.

**1.) European Citizens' Consultations Plus (ECC plus):** Building on the concept of the European Citizens' Consultations, national citizens' conferences take place in all member states. The conferences can be a combination of several smaller regional gatherings, they can be open to anyone who is interested or they can invite randomly selected representative groups of participants. The concept and the responsibility are in the hands of the member states. In addition to this, at the EU level there is a Citizens' Assembly with participants from all member states, as well as an online platform. The results of all these discussions are made available to the Conference on the Future of Europe.

**2.) The Classic with Citizens' Assemblies:** It is called the Classic because the conference essentially brings together the “usual players”, consisting of the Commission, representatives of the member states, MEPs and representatives of civil society. Despite this, randomly selected European citizens play an important role at several points in the process. Before the start of the conference, a European Citizens' Assembly meets and discusses which issues are relevant from the point of view of the public. Together with the results of an online

discussion, these are then considered by the conference. At a later point in the process, the conference convenes various thematic Citizens' Assemblies at a transnational level, whose inputs in turn flow back into the conference.

**3.) European Democracy Lab:**

This model is truly new territory and is based on the first Constitutional Convention in Ireland in 2015, during which politicians and members of the public came together for conference discussions. The Conference on the Future of Europe would then consist in equal parts of representatives of politics (European Parliament, Commission, member states) and citizens from all member states. Work would take place not only in plenary sessions, but also, very importantly, in thematic committees which would, again, include citizens from all member states.

In all variations, there can and should be a strong online component which would give all European citizens the chance to bring their ideas, opinions and suggestions into the debate on the future.

**Legitimacy and impact rather than “democracy washing”**

Direct participation of European citizens in an EU conference is uncharted territory – and therefore both an opportunity and a risk. An opportunity, because the EU can finally breathe life into the slogan of a “Europe for Citizens”. Done well, citizens' participation increases people's trust in politics, political concepts are improved and are accepted by more people. A risk, because a broad public is watching the process and it is important to avoid giving the impression that the citizens are being misused for political purposes. When participants in a participatory process feel that they are being instrumentalized, their commitment turns into resistance. “Democracy washing” should not be in anyone's interest. This would be doing a disservice to the efforts to make the EU more participatory.

Quality and legitimacy are essential when it comes to citizens' participation in the conference. Here, the EU institutions could take their cue from the French *Grand Débat*, where an independent “collège des garants” composed of respected public figures watched over the quality and independence of the citizens' discussions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an innovation. Whether the conference and citizens' participation in it succeeds, largely depends on political will. There have already been a number of isolated experiments with participation at the EU level that were detached from the institutional context. At this conference, such

experiments should be avoided. Citizens' participation is not purely an exercise in communication, but an attempt to initiate a general cultural change in European politics and the EU institutions.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a start, but first it has to succeed.

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## Further reading:

Dominik Hierlemann and Christian Huesmann (2018). European Citizens' Panel on the future of Europe. Gütersloh.

European Committee of the regions (2019). From local to European: Putting citizens at the centre of the EU agenda. Brussels.

Corina Stratulat and Paul Butcher (2018). The European Citizens' Consultations – Evaluation Report. Brussels.

Catherine E. de Vries and Isabell Hoffmann (2019). Great expectations: The New European Commission, its Ambition and European Public Opinion. Gütersloh.

Anna Renkamp and Dominik Hierlemann (2019): New ways to increase citizens' participation in Europe – Cross-border EU Citizens' Dialogues in Frankfurt/Oder, Passau and The Hague. Gütersloh.

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The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program is dealing with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens' participation. It is published 6–8 times per year on an unfixed basis.