

Preparing for the Conference on the Future of Europe: The ‘known knowns’ of citizens’ participation

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The Conference on the Future of Europe is just around the corner. If 9 May 2020 is to be the kick-off date, the EU institutions do not have much time to properly implement their vision for the Conference, as outlined so far by the European Parliament¹ (EP) and the Commission². They foresee a complex two-year process of inclusive and meaningful discussions about key European issues, held in innovative formats, and among various actors at different levels of governance.

While the Parliament's position is rather more ambitious and methodologically concrete than that of the Commission, both institutions leave many 'known unknowns' unsettled (and perhaps some 'unknown unknowns' too). Given the state of play and the fact that there are less than three months to prepare, the Conference will inevitably be launched without clarity about the precise organisation, execution or even purpose of the exercise. But while the initiative is bound to be a learning curve, it does not need to be a stab in the dark in every way.

The aspiration³ to grant European citizens a leading and active role in the Conference has a rich history, which should now be recalled and utilised. From 'Plan D' (2005), through the Europe for Citizens Programme (2007), Debate Europe (2008), the European Citizens' Initiative (2012), to the Citizens' Dialogues (2012), the White Paper on the Future of Europe (2017), and the European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs) (2018), the EU institutions have already made multiple attempts and gained experience on how to better connect with citizens over the past decades.

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In response to such initiatives, the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF), the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the European Policy Centre (EPC) and others, have on more than one occasion tested, monitored, evaluated, and/or funded models of citizens' participation in the Union. Back in 2006, for example, in the framework of the Commission's Plan D initiative, the KBF, EPC, and partners brought 200 randomly selected citizens to Brussels to discuss their priorities for Europe's future in their own languages. National consultations in all member states followed up on these priorities to elaborate national reports with concrete policy recommendations. A final event in Brussels produced a joint agenda that was presented to the EU institutions.

Then again, in 2009, under the Commission's Debate Europe programme, the same organisations re-ran the project, adding an EU-wide online consultation

dimension to the experiment. The European Commission evaluated⁴ all these activities and many of its conclusions and recommendations still hold true today, offering valuable insights for those now preparing similar activities in the context of the Conference.

Between 2013 and 2018, an international consortium of foundations led by KBF, together with the EPC, initiated, supported and coordinated the New Pact for Europe (NPE) project, which established a transnational network of think tanks and civil society organisations (CSOs) to work on concrete proposals for the EU's future. In its first phase, the NPE project also set up so-called Citizens Advisory Groups in ten EU member states, which brought together randomly selected citizens to provide feedback on five strategic options for the future of Europe, which had been elaborated for the purpose of the project.⁵ After five years of work, reflecting more than 120 national and transnational debates throughout Europe, the third NPE report in 2017 presented the ingredients of a win-win package deal aiming to re-energise Europe by overcoming deadlocks in crucial areas of European integration.⁶

More recently, the EPC was also involved in the design and implementation of the 2018 Citizens' Panel,⁷ which saw 96 citizens from the EU27 coming to Brussels to select their 12 most important issues for the future of Europe. The KBF, OSF and EPC also joined forces to establish a network of CSOs from all member states to act as a 'critical friend' of the ECCs process that unfolded across the EU in 2018-2019.

New processes and techniques of citizens' participation have also been successfully trialled by many others, including at the national level, to allow citizens to contribute to policymaking and restore public trust in democracy. These past experiments offer a repertoire of lessons learned and best practices, which should not be ignored in the current effort to carve room for European citizens in the upcoming Conference. Such expertise could also be convened in a High-level Advisory Group providing independent advice to the leadership of the Conference.⁸

Taking stock of all these past experiences reveals what works or what does not work when it comes to citizens' participation in decision-making. Some of the 'known knowns' include the following:

WHY ENGAGE WITH THE CITIZENS?

The goal of organising citizens' consultations at both the national and European level should be stated at the outset. Do these events intend to collect people's ideas and proposals about specific EU-related topics (participatory objective)? Or do they rather aim to increase awareness and communicate European issues to citizens (communication objective)? The former will raise people's expectations about the role they can play in influencing EU policy processes and outcomes. Popular input might also help to unclog potential political bottlenecks in the implementation of strategic priorities, like the ones mentioned in the Commission's and the EP's positions: the Green Deal, Digital EU,

Global EU, and Democracy.

Conversely, when used as awareness-raising or communication tools, these events can temper public expectations of impact and instead answer people's well-documented calls for more information on EU affairs. Both types of objectives are relevant and can result in the mobilisation of European citizens in favour of the EU but, without a clear distinction in advance, these initiatives leave no basis for an effective evaluation or meaningful follow up.

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Defining the scope and purpose of citizen engagement can nevertheless be tricky, which goes some way towards explaining why the institutional positions published so far dodge this aspect. For example, even if consultations were introduced as a means of allowing participation into decision-making, the ability to assess whether they fulfil this function, or to trace citizens' contributions to policy outcomes, is likely to be difficult in a two-year Conference process involving a multitude of actors and levels of governance. The Conference leadership would, therefore, be best advised to carefully manage popular expectations and specify as much as possible what exactly motivates them to reach out to people at different points during the process.

HOW TO CONSULT CITIZENS?

Knowing the goal of citizens' participation instruments can also help to align the objectives with the available means, both in terms of process design and budget. To implement the Parliament's Citizens/Youth Agoras, for example, it is worth remembering that the Agenda Setting Event organised in 2006 by the KBF, EPC, and partners under Plan D required about half a million euro to cover the costs of having 200 randomly selected citizens from all member states come to Brussels and discuss, in their own languages, about what kind of Europe they want. The size of the funding that needs to underpin the proper organisation of multiple transnational deliberations should not be underestimated if the EP is serious about its proposal to hold pan-European agoras.

Likewise, to decide on all the other administrative aspects of the consultations, like the format of the exchange (Q&A with politicians/experts or deliberation with other citizens), the topic of discussion (general or specific), the audience of the events (open access or representative selection), the organisers (governments

or civil society), it helps to know whether the objective is participation or communication.

The Conference will certainly have to resort to different formats and methods of citizens' involvement, depending on the phase and level at any given point. But those planning such events do not have to start from scratch: there is plenty of know-how in this field. Choosing how to carry out such events is not a question of creativity, but rather of whether the means fit the purpose – whatever that purpose is.

The best way to ensure that the Conference's participatory dimension delivers results and earns credibility is to maintain a regular exchange between politicians and citizens throughout the process, and to increase the number and type of opportunities for people to engage with their national representatives, as well as with their fellow Europeans. The Conference should ensure that consultations take place at both the national and transnational level and at all the different stages of the process, as well as being directly linked to the representative parts of the Conference. If citizens are involved in every phase – agenda-setting, the various policy discussions, and the drawing of conclusions – they are more likely to buy into the process, boost their knowledge of European affairs, and reconsider their perceptions that the EU is not responsive.

To this end, and as suggested in the EPC's Second Draft Blueprint for the Conference on the Future of Europe⁹, the process should start in 2020 with Transnational Citizens' Panels in which people elaborate thematic questionnaires about pre-defined key priorities, to serve as a basis for subsequent thematic discussions/consultations at national level (in National Citizens' Consultations) and transnationally (in Transnational Citizens' Agoras).

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In addition, the EPC's Blueprint foresees a Conference Assembly in early 2022, including randomly selected citizens from all member states that participated in Transnational Citizens' Agoras, observers (like CSOs, experts, academics, and representatives of EU prospective countries), as well as all members of the so-called Conference Plenary, comprising MEPs, Commissioners, government officials, national parliamentarians, and representatives of the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of

the Regions. The Conference Assembly would establish a direct link between the citizens' and the representative dimensions of the Conference, in ways that can be clearly communicated and understood by the wider public. Marrying the different dimensions and levels of the Conference might also help to strengthen citizens' perception that they are taken seriously and being listened to by their leaders in this exercise.

WHAT IS THE FOLLOW-UP?

Feedback is vital for the success of the citizens' consultations. If people participate but cannot see how their contribution is taken up by politicians or reflected in decisions, their trust in these exercises – and in their political representatives – is likely to fade even further. This has been a fundamental weakness of past initiatives, all of which have had an underwhelming follow-up.

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In the context of the Conference until now, the EU institutions have so far spent only little attention to the need for keeping citizens informed about how their input will be used at the different stages of the process. In the anticipated Joint Declaration for the Conference, all institutions should commit to giving citizens a proper response to reflect their participation throughout the Conference. And it should be much more than just one line in the European Council's Conclusions, as was the case with the ECCs. People's contributions should also be discussed by reference to the final process outcome, which should be a concrete Future of Europe Action Plan, including tangible results and recommendations for financial, legal, institutional, policy, and/or treaty reforms (if necessary), as proposed in the EPC's Blueprint.

But to be able to make sense of what European citizens are contributing in their own national consultations organised as part of the Conference – and thus, adequately respond to their input – a balance should be struck between standardisation and flexibility. If every member state is given a free rein – as was the case

in the ECCs process¹⁰ – to organise national citizens' consultations in whichever way they choose, there will again be too little unity and coherence to the initiative and its results to be able to secure a proper follow-up.

Why reinvent the wheel or repeat past mistakes when some answers are already there for the taking?

Beyond a set of common principles, the member states should also agree on a joint agenda (based, for example, on a questionnaire drafted by thematic Transnational Citizens' Panels at the start of the process) and on a reporting template for the events they hold. This will ensure comparability across consultations and countries, as well as facilitate the synthesis of results that will later require a response.

There is much talk about the 'unknowns' of this Conference, but little awareness of the many 'knowns' of citizens' participation. Ignoring past experience means wasting immense past courage and effort, when time is of the essence and energy is needed to work out the more unfamiliar aspects. Why reinvent the wheel or repeat past mistakes when some answers are already there for the taking?

¹ European Parliament (2020), *European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe*, Strasbourg

² European Commission (2020), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe*, Brussels.

³ [Opening Statement in the European Parliament's plenary session by Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for President of the European Commission](#), 16 July 2019, Strasbourg.

⁴ [Evaluation of the Plan D / Debate Europe citizen consultation projects for the European Commission](#), DG COMM, by Euréval, Matrix, and Rambøll-Management, Final Report, Version 1.4, September 2009.

⁵ See New Pact for Europe (2013), [Strategic Options for Europe's Future](#) (rapporteur: Janis A. Emmanouilidis), Brussels.

⁶ See New Pact for Europe (2017), [Re-energising Europe: A package deal for the EU27](#) (author: Janis A. Emmanouilidis), Brussels.

⁷ See Stratulat, Corina and Butcher, Paul (2018), ["The European Citizens' Consultations: Evaluation Report"](#); Brussels: European Policy Centre and Butcher, Paul and Stratulat, Corina (2019), ["Citizens expect: Lessons from the European Citizens' Consultations"](#); Brussels: European Policy Centre.

⁸ For more details see Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Stratulat, Corina (2020), ["Second Draft Blueprint for the Conference on the Future of Europe"](#); Brussels: European Policy Centre.

⁹ Emmanouilidis and Stratulat (2020), *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Stratulat, Corina and Butcher, Paul (2018), "The European Citizens' Consultations: Will the member states make them count?"; Chapter 21 in [Yes, we should! EU priorities for 2009-2014, EPC Challenge Europe, Issue 24](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.

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