

“Una casa para todos”: Observations from the first European Citizens’ Panel of the Conference on the Future of Europe

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BACKGROUND

“Una casa para todos” (A house for all) is the title that Eduardo gave to his vision of the European Union (EU) in 2050. Eduardo is one of the 200 citizens invited to participate in the European Citizens’ Panel (ECP) on “Stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, sport, digital transformation” in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). He travelled from Spain to Strasbourg for the first session of this panel, which was held from 17 to 19 September.¹

The CoFoE process foresees the organisation of four ECPs on four different thematic clusters that reflect EU policy priorities.² Each panel will meet three times, which makes for a total of twelve European Citizens’ Panels. Together with the citizens’ events in the member states and the [multilingual digital platform](#) on which Europeans can share and discuss their opinions and ideas about their common future, these panels make up the citizens’ dimension of CoFoE. Citizens’ input will feed into the Conference Plenary,³ where they and political representatives from the EU and national level will work together on the outcome of the initiative.

We joined Eduardo and the other citizens as observers⁴ at this inaugural session of the ECPs and below we share our insights about the setup of the panels and some first impressions on how the process functions in practice.

THE ECP PROCESS

The first session of the first ECP kicked off on Friday afternoon and finished Sunday after lunch. About 180 citizens turned up,⁵ all randomly selected by the market research company Kantar Public from the 27 member states to represent the EU’s sociological diversity according to five criteria: geographic origin (nationality, urban/rural), socio-economic background, level of education, gender, and age. Simultaneous translation in all 24 official languages allowed participants to communicate both in the plenary and working-group format in their own native language.

To enable deliberation, participants were randomly allocated to 15 subgroups. Each of these were composed of 10 to 15 citizens who spoke maximum five languages between them, included at least 25 per cent young people (16 to 25 years old), and had an equal number of men and women. Professional facilitators helped streamline the work in every subgroup.

DAY 1

In the opening plenary, organisers welcomed participants and introduced them to the process. Guy Verhofstadt, Member of the European Parliament and Co-Chair of the Executive Board of the Conference, highlighted in his keynote address the historic nature of this transnational, pan-European process, and set forth the panels' goal, telling participants: "We want to hear your desires, demands, ideas, intentions, fears, and hopes about the future of Europe." He then emphasised that citizens "are at the centre of the entire exercise. We want to know from you how you see the future, what needs to be changed and how we should go about changing it." Therefore, as he specified, "citizens will be key in making this process a success".

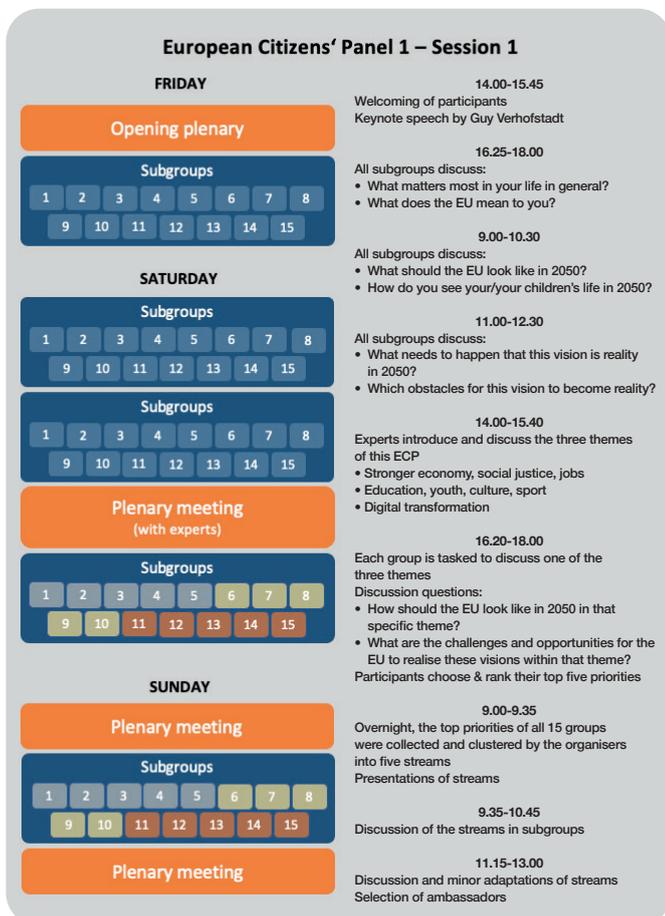
With this mission in mind, citizens moved into the subgroups to which they had been randomly assigned and started their work, guided by two questions:

What matters most in your life in general?

What does the EU mean to you?

As the facilitators explained, the aim of this session was to collect the personal values of participants in each subgroup and the reasons for which they deemed the EU important (or not).

Figure 1: Process of the European Citizens' Panel 1, Session 1



DAY 2

At the start of the second day, the subgroups were invited to have a more forward-looking discussion, prompted by the following questions:

What should the EU look like in 2050?

How do you see your/your children's life in 2050?

By asking them to project themselves into the future, facilitators sought to steer the subgroups into formulating visions and expectations for the Union of future generations. It is at this point that citizens visually depicted their hopes of the EU's future in drawings like Eduardo's "house for all". These sketches then guided the discussion of the two consecutive subgroup sessions that followed.

In the afternoon of day two, participants met in plenary to listen to seven experts talk about various aspects of the main topics of the panel. Two experts focussed on a stronger economy, social justice, and jobs, three other experts dealt with the youth, culture, and sports dimensions, and two experts contributed on the digital transformation aspect. Each group of experts first gave their take on their theme and then reacted to the suggestions made in their own areas on the multilingual digital platform. Citizens then asked them some questions of clarification.

Before reconvening, each of the 15 subgroups were randomly allocated to one of the three themes below:

- stronger economy, social justice, and jobs;
- education, culture, youth, and sports;
- digital transformation.

Five subgroups dealt with each of these themes and explored them with two specific questions in mind:

What should the EU look like in 2050 within that specific theme?

What are the challenges and what are the opportunities for the EU to realise the visions of the group within that theme?

At this point, after spending one full day in general discussions, the subgroups were asked to start focusing on the theme to which they had been allocated.

The exchanges resulted in a long list of ideas for the future in each subgroup per theme. The final task of the day saw participants choose and rank their top five priorities from this list.

During that evening and into the early hours of the third day, the organisers brought together the top five priorities of all 15 subgroups and organised them into five work streams. These reflect five broad policy areas under which several other, more specific issues raised by participants could fit:

Figure 2: The five streams

1. Working in Europe	2. An Economy for the Future	3. A Just Society	4. Learning in Europe	5. An Ethical & Safe Digital Transformation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour Market • Youth & Employment • Digitalisation at Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation & European Competitiveness • Digital Infrastructure • Sustainable Economy • Taxes • Agriculture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal Rights • Fairness • Social Security • Access to Sports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Identity • Cultural Exchange • Digital Education • Environmental Education • Harmonisation of Education • Quality, Financing & Access to Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical & Inclusive Democratisation of Digitalisation • Data Protection • Cyber Security • Healthy Digitalisation

Source: [Multilingual Digital Platform](#)

DAY 3

These five streams and their affixed subtopics were then discussed by participants in the final day of the ECP, both in the subgroups and plenary. Citizens received handouts with automatic translations of these clusters and were asked to give their feedback. A few small (mostly language) edits⁶ were suggested by citizens before everyone consented to using these streams as the basis for their work henceforth.

The ECP concluded with the selection of 20 ‘ambassadors’ that will represent this Panel in the Conference Plenary, establishing a link between the citizens’ and representative dimensions of the CoFoE process. To be chosen as ambassadors, citizens had the entire weekend to put their name into ballot boxes that were designated for this purpose. A total of six such ballot boxes were provided to divide the volunteers into three age groups (under 26, between 26 and 45, and above 45) and by gender. Half of the 20 ambassadors were female and seven younger than 26. The actual selection was carried out in the final plenary by four volunteers (two male/two female, two under 26 years old, and two over 75 of age).

Until the next session of this Panel, which will take place online between 5 and 7 November, and in-between the sessions of all the other Panels, citizens will be able to ask questions to the experts and exchange ideas among themselves on a dedicated space created just for them on the multilingual digital platform.

SOME INITIAL ASSESSMENTS

This was the first session of the first ECP of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and the initial step of a long and complex process that will unfold over the next months. Therefore, our impressions can only be preliminary and tentative at this point. Moreover, in our role as observers, we had to strike a fine balance between our desire to collect information from a sample of citizens, organisers, facilitators, and other observers,

which is as representative as possible, and the need to remain discreet, allowing the process to advance unobstructed by our presence. This means that our ‘data collection’ is neither complete nor systematic. For these reasons, the present evaluation merely seeks to convey our first *impressions*.

• *Observing citizens*

Our conversations with participants suggest that citizens’ motivations for joining this process can be grouped into four categories. Some people accepted the invitation because they felt intrigued by it and were curious to test it out. Others decided to participate because they found the promise of an intercultural experience particularly appealing and were eager to speak and hear from citizens of other member states.

Others were persuaded to get involved because of the opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas. “When I saw the slogan of the Conference – ‘the future is in your hands’ – I felt excited that people could actively contribute their ideas and opinions but also have a say and be part of a process that is normally far away and in the hands of politicians”, said an Italian woman.

Then there were those who felt deeply preoccupied with what they described as serious challenges facing Europe and did not want to miss the opportunity to contribute to a potentially transformative process for their countries and the Union. “When I think of the lack of equal rights or climate change issues, I cannot sleep at night”, explained a Slovakian man in his twenties. “It is important to work on these problems”, he continued.

But even if all participants found some reason to commit to the Panel, they tended to express only modest expectations from the Conference. Some confessed to us that they had come without any specific ideas about results, while others revealed their doubts that their input would be taken up by politicians and translated into future action. “I hope that our discussion will be heard. I am sceptical that we will get to actual reforms, and I hope

that this Conference will not be swept under the carpet,” one female participant from Latvia pointed out.

“The European Union is no longer contemporary and democracy needs updating, we should try a new approach”, insisted one German woman. Taking this argument further, a Polish man claimed that “the EU should activate citizens and politics should become much more about people’s participation.”

While the question of what will happen with their contributions seemed to weigh on the minds of most participants, a few of the sceptical citizens appeared to be influenced by their experiences with national politics when reflecting on the potential impact of the exercise. “Politicians don’t deliver on what people want, so I hope that our proposals will be taken up by leaders here”, a Polish woman remarked.

There is, nevertheless, a clear distinction between citizens’ more general expectations and their personal hopes for the Conference. The former might have been humble but many participants did articulate their desire for this process to lead to change. For some, change meant finding solutions to problems. For others it related to reforming the EU and politics more generally: “The European Union is no longer contemporary and democracy needs updating, we should try a new approach”, insisted one German woman. Taking this argument further, a Polish man claimed that “the EU should activate citizens and politics should become much more about people’s participation.”

Quite a few citizens initially thought that the person calling to invite them to participate in the Panel was trying to sell them something or making a joke. Indeed, many admitted not knowing anything about the Conference before they were invited. “I’ve never heard about this Conference before I was approached to join it and none of my friends knew about it either. I think it is important to let more people know that this is happening”, a young German woman declared. “Even after receiving the invitation, I never came across any reports about the Conference in the media or other sources”, added a retired woman from Ireland. Several citizens only accepted the invite after actively searching the initiative online to make sure it was a real thing.

And several participants experienced different types of logistical challenges while traveling from their homes to Strasbourg. It took a Maltese woman over 15 hours to reach the ECP’s venue. Because of all the organisations issues she encountered, she ended up describing her journey as “frightening”.

Yet, all these anecdotes and challenges – which to a certain extent are understandable given the scope and scale of the exercise – seemed to fade away as the process advanced and citizens delved ever more into the substance of the discussions. Without exception, all those who agreed to speak to us praised the deliberative and social character of the experience. “I am sad that we have to stop. Sometimes politicians discuss all night. I wish we could continue”, declared one German woman at the end of the first day. An Italian man then confessed on Sunday that “I am very tired but so happy for all the people I met this weekend and all the discussions I had with them. It was incredible.”

- *Observing the process*

Clearly, a lot of thinking, coordination and hard work had gone into designing and implementing the protocol of the first session of the first Panel we observed. There is no doubt that those involved in defining the methodology for this panel did their utmost to define a process that builds on the best practices of past experiences in similar exercises. Attempting to simultaneously deliver deliberation, representation, practicality, and results is a rather tall task.

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Moreover, this is only one element of an otherwise intricate and multi-level structure both on the citizens’ dimension as well as in the general framework of the Conference. A lot of elements related to this complicated process are yet to unfold and many bits and pieces still have to fall in place over the next half year. Therefore, our points below are only meant as constructive suggestions to a generally well designed process and do not seek to underestimate the great effort or the vast complexity behind the exercise.

- *The nature of topics*

Concerns about the wide scope of the themes assigned to the Panels had already been expressed⁷ before the start of the Conference. And the problems inherent in the selection of such vast topics were quick to manifest in this first ECP session.

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One crucial problem was that citizens were not able to go into any depth into all the different policy areas subsumed by the overall theme. The subgroup exchanges were more a collection of random points on a variety of issues linked to the thematic cluster than proper deliberations of diverging opinions on the same subject. Thus, when citizens were later asked to identify and rank their preferences, they essentially had to choose from a list of spontaneous ideas, not of properly thought-through contributions.

Given the breadth of the theme, it also proved difficult to provide citizens with comprehensive material about the different topics and inform them about the extent to which these are/can be dealt with on the European level. The written briefing⁸ that participants received ahead of the first ECP session barely addressed the current state of play in each policy field. The focus was rather on providing citizens with a summary of the main ideas in each area on the basis of the input gathered on the multilingual digital platform. Thus, this document did not help to inform people about the main controversies, challenges, opportunities, and ongoing initiatives in each area. And even if information was offered, the language of the briefing was arguably too vague and technical⁹ to be comprehensive to ordinary citizens.

Moreover, there was a general and conspicuous lack of information about European institutions and their functioning. Some participants also stated that they would have liked to be told how reform can come about in the EU system.

- ***The role of experts***

The same goes for the seven experts who were brought into the Panel's proceedings on day two. They all had to give a full account of their areas of expertise within the limited time of one plenary session. Suffices to say that none of their policy fields could be adequately presented and discussed with citizens.

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Moreover, several participants felt that some of the experts focused too much on promoting their own points of view and ideas instead of providing a balanced overview of their respective topics. Finally, the fact that each expert was briefly brought into the subgroups for a more targeted round of Q&A with participants ended up disturbing the flow of discussions in some cases, without being of much added value to citizens.

- ***The narrowing of the ECP theme***

As is common in deliberative processes, subgroups discussions start out broad before becoming more specific. This ECP followed this strategy and delivered a concrete result (i.e. the five streams) which can feed into the next Panel sessions and help the process move forward. The problem is that in doing so, the design of this Panel arguably granted too much time to the general discussions and then rushed through the steps that delivered the final five streams. There were three subgroup sessions dedicated to broad exchanges about the EU and the overall topic of the Panel. In comparison, only one subgroup session focused on formulating priorities for a single theme, while the final subgroup session directly confronted the citizens with the actual streams.

Especially in this final subgroup session, participants had only one hour to digest and react to the five streams that the organisers have generated based on citizens' input from previous days. Not only was the time allocated particularly short, but the content of the five streams were printed out on documents that had been automatically translated overnight using the system on the multilingual digital platform. This might have been a necessary rather than preferred option for organisers, given the time constraints. However, for some languages (like German or Lithuanian), participants had a hard time understanding the text.

- ***The instructions for facilitators***

A final issue that caught our attention was that every facilitator seemed to have handled the subgroup discussions differently. Obviously, a certain degree of flexibility in the method of facilitation is standard, so long as each facilitator respects the steps foreseen in the process and leading to the final goal. However, some of the variations we witnessed could have had an impact on the results.

For example, some facilitators devoted time to properly explain the process and goal of each day to the citizens, while others jumped pretty much straight away into the substance. The latter strategy arguably makes it more difficult for citizens to make sense of the complex process in which they are participating.

Moreover, while some facilitators seemed to follow an active approach, connecting the dots between various parts of the discussion and fostering exchange among citizens, others limited their role to simply giving the floor to those who wanted to intervene. This translated into different levels of interaction and depth of discussions across subgroups, but also resulted in some participants hardly contributing at all.

- *Overall impressions*

Despite some of the shortcomings mentioned in this report, we believe that the first European Citizens' Panel of the Conference on the Future of Europe was responsibly set up by organisers, with due consideration of fundamental elements of deliberative exercises.¹⁰ Ideally, the process would be adjusted in response to concerns like the ones raised here or elsewhere. However, we are conscious that the team in charge of the design has to work with structural impediments, like the broad thematic clusters and short timeframes between events, which are out of their control. By and large, though, this panel demonstrates that there is already a great deal of know-how in putting together deliberative processes that are geared towards delivering concrete results.

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This ECP also confirms the potential of such exercises to actively engage participants, broaden their perspectives and knowledge, and leave a long-lasting impression on them. The mood of the citizens in the final plenary of this first ECP session was overwhelmingly positive. They were excited about the experience they had lived through over the weekend, all the people they met, everything they learned, and the opportunity they were offered to make their voices heard. The democratic function of such deliberative processes should therefore not be underestimated.

The big elephant in the room is impact. What will happen with the ideas and proposals that emerge in these panels? We know that the Conference Plenaries are supposed to reflect the citizens' input into their conclusions and that a "feedback mechanism will ensure that ideas expressed during the Conference events result in concrete recommendations for EU action."¹¹ The CoFoE Rules of Procedure (footnote 7) also specify that any clear divergences from the positions of the ECPs and national events will have to be reported in the proposals submitted by the final Plenary to the Executive Board. However, it is difficult to say at this point what will be the influence of the ECPs on the final outcome of the Conference and its subsequent implementation by EU institutions and national governments.

That step, between a great deliberative process and a political decision, which can transform a merely deliberative process into a proper participatory instrument, has yet to be taken.

Of course, this uncertainty is not unique to the CoFoE but concerns most participatory instruments and exercises. In time, we have come to perfect the design of deliberative events. However, we are yet to make them count in policymaking and to create a cultural openness in our political systems, especially at the European level, to work with such methods on a more regular basis. That step, between a great deliberative process and a political decision, which can transform a merely deliberative process into a proper participatory instrument, has yet to be taken. This Conference is a stepping stone in that direction, and not the end of our quest for better democratic governance. Our future political systems will eventually have to allow everyone's voice to matter if Eduardo's vision of a "house for all" is to be realised.

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- ¹ There will be three sessions in total for this panel: one in Strasbourg, a second one online, and the final one in Dublin.
 - ² Apart from this ECP, there will also be a Panel dealing with “European democracy, values and rights, rule of law and security” (24-26 September), another Panel covering “Climate change, environment and health” (1-3 October), and one “EU in the world and migration” (15-17 October).
 - ³ The Conference Plenary is composed of representatives from all three European institutions, national Parliaments, and citizens. It will also include members of the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, social partners, civil society, and other stakeholders. It will ensure that recommendations from the national and European citizens’ panels, grouped by themes, are debated without a predetermined outcome. The Executive Board will draw and publish the conclusions of the Conference Plenary.
 - ⁴ Other observers (official and independent), media and representatives from the three EU institutions also followed the proceedings.
 - ⁵ Of the 200 citizens who registered 180 showed up, which means there was a drop-out rate of about 10 per cent.
 - ⁶ In the final plenary the topic “agriculture” was added to the list, “regulation” was changed into “taxes”, and the topic “Democratisation of Digitalisation” turned into “Ethical & Inclusive Democratization of Digitalisation”.
 - ⁷ Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Stratulat, Corina (2020), “[The Conference on the Future of Europe: Mind the gaps!](#)”, *EPC Commentary*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
 - ⁸ Conference on the Future of Europe (2021), “[Basic Information: Stronger economy, social justice and jobs / education, culture, youth and sport / Digital Transformation](#)”, Brussels.
 - ⁹ For example, on page 4 of this document, several terms are dropped without any explanation: “European Semester”, “mandate of the ECB”, “EU own-resources”, “the Economic and Monetary Union”, Conference on the Future of Europe (2021), “[Basic Information: Stronger economy, social justice and jobs / education, culture, youth and sport / Digital Transformation](#)”, Brussels, p. 4.
 - ¹⁰ See, for example, Chwalisz, Claudia (2020), “[Good practice principles for deliberative processes for public decision making](#)”, in *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
 - ¹¹ Article 1 in the [Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), p. 2.



The Conference Observatory, a joint initiative of Bertelsmann Stiftung, the European Policy Centre, King Baudouin Foundation and Stiftung Mercator, will closely monitor the Conference on the Future of Europe, assess its impact and present ideas on how to improve it.

The Observatory aims to make the Conference a meaningful and successful endeavour by monitoring its proceedings, providing policy input and recommendations on the strategic priorities that citizens will discuss, and assessing the potential institutional and legal consequences of debates conducted during the Conference. Through the Observatory, the consortium will also advise the Conference leadership and develop proposals for the future participatory and democratic make-up of the EU.

The European Union faces major transformational challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, a fragile global order and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In an environment of continuing uncertainty and crisis, the EU must demonstrate it is capable of critical self-reflection and renewal. The Conference on the Future of Europe could and should be used to this end.

The Conference is also a test case for the EU's ability to include its citizens in the conversation, have an EU-wide debate about necessary reforms, and think about the right institutional structure for the decades ahead. The involvement of people from all member states, from all walks of life, will be new and, in many ways, unprecedented.