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# The EU's participatory enlargement

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The prospect of enlargement has provided a push for new ideas and has invigorated debate on EU institutional reform. Besides internal institutional transformation, enlargement opens a window for another crucial step: the EU must transition from being a Union of citizens in name only to a Union that practices what it preaches. European citizens need to be involved in European politics differently, far earlier and more effectively. The enlargement process offers a chance to use participatory tools and formats in an innovative way.

The EU is a transnational polity that is naturally distant from its citizens, and its decision- and policy-making can be hardly comprehensible to non-experts. At the same time, citizens distrust political institutions increasingly more and, at the same time, desire more direct engagement. In these circumstances, representative democracy alone is not the answer.

At least rhetorically, EU leaders seem to have understood the problem. The EU has gradually expanded the range of participatory instruments for citizen engagement. With the Conference on the Future of Europe, the EU's leadership engaged in a participatory experiment that recently had a notable follow-up: the launch of European Citizens' Panels by the European Commission.

Still, the effect of citizen participation remains low. These participatory exercises did not attract much media attention, public knowledge of these instruments is very low and, importantly, citizens believe that their voice in EU affairs and policy-making is not being heard enough. So, what ought to be done?

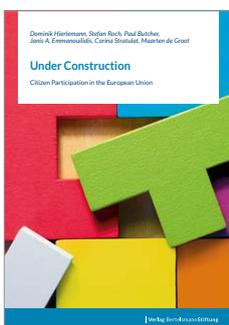
The Franco-German expert group on EU institutional reform, launched by the German and French Europe Ministers, recently outlined three recommendations in their report on how to use citizen participation in the EU more effectively. These recommendations echo ideas described and discussed in some of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's and its partners' earlier publications. This policy brief elaborates on these proposals in more detail. We show what the EU has to do with its participatory instruments to become a real Union of citizens, including during the next round of enlargement.

The path should be clear: From a participatory patchwork to a participatory infrastructure, from adhoc processes to the institutionalisation of citizens' panels and from simple dialogues with new member states to a real participatory enlargement.

The prospect of EU enlargement has sparked a new discussion on EU institutional reform. Integration of new members without the Union itself becoming more effective and democratic is hardly manageable. But as the EU evolves, traditional models of

policy-making need to be developed and adapted to new circumstances as well. There is an increasing understanding that representative democracy alone does not suffice as a pillar of the EU democratic governance when policy issues at stake are complex, distrust in political institutions is high and citizens desire more direct engagement. The EU, fundamentally a union of its citizens, must adapt to ongoing changes and rethink how to involve citizens differently, namely more deliberately, earlier and more effectively. This pressure to involve citizens in a more meaningful and effective way creates a moment for a more participatory and inclusive EU governance.

In this context, the idea of citizen participation takes centre stage in the reformed EU. While the EU has made strides in acknowledging citizen participation, it is still an idea in need of broader recognition in the wider public. While the foundation for citizen participation exists in the form of various participatory instruments, it still resembles a patchwork of disconnected instruments that often lack clarity of purpose and political and institutional backing and commitment. This hinders real progress in citizen participation in the EU at a time when the latter especially needs to better reconnect with its citizens. With significant elections on the horizon and the enduring rise of right-wing populism, involving citizens directly and rebuilding trust between them and politicians by opening up 'the black box' of the EU policy-making is imperative.



The study is the first systematic assessment of the role and performance of EU citizens' participation instruments. It highlights where and why these instruments do not function effectively and discusses how to improve them.



European Citizens' Assemblies can be an integral part of EU policy-making. The paper presents an original model for such institutionalisation and describes concrete steps and a legal pathway for it.



What should EU institutions learn from participatory experiences at the Conference on the Future of Europe? A High-Level-Group of the Conference Observatory makes recommendation.



The European Commission organised the first generation of European Citizens' Panels on key legislative proposals. The report assesses the Panels and proposes how they could be improved in the future.

Moreover, the prospect of enlargement highlights different challenges. Besides the pressure of internal institutional and democratic reform, enlargement pushes the EU to engage in a large-scale reflection: What worked and what did not during previous rounds of enlargement? Most importantly, how should the EU proceed with enlargement without overlooking the challenges that back in the days seemed easy to manage, namely limits to legal and governance harmonisation and institutional adaptation in accession countries, conditionality, economic disparities, waning public support and, ultimately, political backlash against core EU principles and ideas? Against this backdrop, citizen participation is a promising instrument, not only for the EU to better learn more about the intricacies, potential setbacks, and limits of the accession process but, more importantly, for both parties to learn about each other.

What should the citizen participation landscape look like under these conditions and given such pressures? The Franco-German expert group on EU institutional reform, launched by the German and French Europe Ministers, has recently made three recommendations in their report on EU reform. These include building a coherent and working citizen **participation infrastructure** in the EU, advancing the **institutionalisation** of citizen participation and employing participatory instruments to prepare for **enlargement**. These recommendations echo ideas outlined and discussed in some of our earlier publications (see Further Reading). This policy brief seeks to expand and elaborate these ideas further.



## I. From a participatory patchwork to a participatory infrastructure

There is no shortage of participatory instruments at EU level. If anything, the EU offers its citizens multiple tools for participation. European citizens can submit petitions, propose a new legislation via a European Citizens' Initiative, take part in online and onsite consultations and (a more recent development) be randomly selected as participants of European Citizens' Panels. At EU level, European citizens can choose an instrument that fits their participatory needs, resources, and expectations. However, the actual diversity of participation opportunities does not translate into a larger scale citizen participation with noticeable outcomes. One major reason for this is that existing instruments are disconnected from each other and the necessary entry points in the EU institutional system. They represent rather a patchwork of disjointed elements that neither reinforce each other via strong connections, nor produce visible cumulative policy and political effects. As a result, the instruments are invisible to citizens themselves and remain underused.

The introduction of new instruments will hardly resolve this situation. Better legitimacy and effects of citizen participation could be achieved via connecting existing instruments into a comprehensive, integrated and working participatory infrastructure. The principle at the heart of this infrastructure: citizens know the instruments, know when and how they generate expected effects and know how to use them. Building such an infrastructure requires several steps.

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*“Participation instruments are invisible to citizens themselves and remain underused.”*

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First, EU institutions must do away with varying levels of commitment to citizen participation and establish a unified approach to it based on a clear understanding how citizen participation benefits EU policy-making.

Nowadays, the European Commission uses new tools such as European Citizens' Panels, the European Parliament primarily reviews them, and the Council only offers rhetorical support. Instead, EU institutions must collectively recognise and commit to using citizen input gathered through various instruments. For as long as there is no clear understanding as to where and how citizen participation generates added value for EU policy-making, the effects of all other infrastructure-building measures will be minimal.

The second crucial step involves consolidating citizen participation tools 'under the same roof', both technically and administratively. European citizens should experience fewer difficulties identifying the site with the all the necessary, clearly delineated and regularly updated information on existing instruments as well as rules for their use and expected outcomes. A transparent citizen-friendly information platform on EU participatory opportunities offers the technical foundation of a working infrastructure. The same applies to the administrative management of participatory tools. Currently, these tools are spread across and managed by different administrative units within the complex EU institutional system. This fragmentation hinders potential synergies and impedes public awareness. Centralising these tools to within a dedicated unit or department with a special mandate, i.e., within the European Commission, would create necessary links between the instruments, enhance their coordination, visibility and overall impact.

The third logical step involves interconnecting participatory instruments. Multiple instruments, both direct (petitions, assemblies) and indirect (stakeholder dialogues, civil society consultations), can enhance each other's legitimacy and results when combined. For example, the European Citizens' Initiative can identify topics for subsequent European Citizens' Panels. Panel recommendations can then be further discussed in structured stakeholder and civil society dialogues, thus, effectively connecting civil society actors with citizens' deliberations. This interconnected approach minimises the loss of citizens' input and improves the conditions for channelling it to EU institutions, ultimately leading to concrete policy and legislative outcomes.

Finally, the use of innovative, technical and digital solutions is an important element of such an infrastructure. The opportunities that emerged recently with the advancement of generative AI allows for the quick and effective collection and processing of volumes of information. Citizen participation is the field where these technologies can help to accumulate, aggregate, and process enormous amounts of citizens' input – and ensure it reaches the level of decision-making.

The EU has created a plethora of participatory opportunities for various stakeholders and citizens. The next step is bringing them together for better outcomes.



## II. From ad-hoc processes to the institutionalisation of citizens' panels

Recently, citizen participation in the EU has advanced to a new level. The Conference on the Future of Europe made use of the participation format with randomly selected citizens. The European Citizens' Panels on key legislative proposals developed out of this. They proved that citizens' panels can be an effective participatory instrument that delivers on what it promises. The panels have mainstreamed the idea of sortition-based citizen participation and proved that this principle can work for the process of citizen participation at EU level.

However, a closer look at these innovations reveals that they risk becoming another technocratic consultation tool of or even an extension, via different means, of the familiar EU practice of stakeholder dialogue rather than a political instrument. The contributing factor is still weak institutional commitment, both behind citizen participation, in general, and citizens' panels, in particular. Unclear rules, an unspecific purpose and, as a result, the poor handling of citizens' recommendations are all consequences of lacking institutionalisation. What does better institutionalisation imply in this case?

First and foremost, today citizens' panels lack broader political significance in the eyes of EU institutions. While they have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing specific policies, they represent a fundamentally distinct form of citizen participation, and their appeal lies elsewhere. They can be especially effective at drawing public attention to critical political issues and shaping public perception of more meaningful citizen involvement. However, for these effects to materialise, EU institutions must adopt a more politically informed view of citizens' panels as tools for addressing major political issues.

Second, the selection of topics for citizens' panels is of utmost importance. Topics linked to significant EU political decisions, substantial policy reorientation, and long-term EU strategic objectives are ideally suited for such panels. Topics such as migration, climate policy commitments, contours of economic and social models, and geopolitical choices often spark societal disagreements and contestation that may hinder and slow down timely decision-making. Conducting citizens' panels on these genuinely significant topics automatically enhances their visibility and contributes to further institutionalisation of this form of citizen participation.

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*“Citizens' panels can draw public attention to critical political issues.”*

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Third, the location and timing of citizens' panels within EU policy, political, and legislative calendars and cycle are becoming particularly important for their institutionalisation. Holding these panels in conjunction with major events such as the State of the European Union (SOTEU), which encourages all EU institutions to outline and debate political and policy priorities, can notably enhance their public visibility, capture citizens' interest, and secure more robust institutional support.

Finally, EU institutions must commit to the process and even more so to the use of the outcomes of citizens' panels. Citizens' panels can only fulfil their functions and meet expectations if and when EU institutions commit to implementing their outcomes and recommendations, translating them into tangible political and policy decisions. EU institutions could indicate this commitment by signing a designated Interinstitutional Agreement. Without disbalancing interinstitutional relations, the Agreement ideally outlines responsibilities of the main EU Institutions regarding citizens' panels and delineates concrete steps and actions for providing feedback and implementing outcomes. The Agreement could, thus, establish a more robust foundation for institutional commitment.

### III. From simple dialogue to participatory enlargement

Internal political and policy-making processes in the EU are not the only arenas that clearly benefit from better, earlier and more effective citizen participation. Facing the prospect of another round of enlargement, the EU has a chance to manage this process in a completely different, i.e., more participatory and democratic fashion both vis-à-vis accession countries and internally. Here, innovative citizen participation practices and tools as well as already well-known methods of involving other stakeholders can be especially helpful.

Three main arguments support the idea of a more participatory enlargement. First and foremost, the EU cannot afford to approach future enlargement as a technocratic and legalistic process of accession managed exclusively by the elites if the EU wants it to succeed. Enlargement is first and foremost a political process. Stakeholders and citizens in accession countries need to get an opportunity to articulate and get across their views, concerns, and expectations and, perhaps, even contest certain EU conditions and rules. Participatory enlargement can contribute to greater ownership over EU membership in accession countries and its greater legitimacy and can help to avoid a potential political backlash in the future.

Second, participatory enlargement can help to better implementation of complex EU policies such as cohesion or agricultural policy. Involved stakeholders and citizens will bring valuable knowledge of local contexts and conditions that is crucial for evaluating how successfully or, conversely, unsuccessfully the EU acquis, policies and other requirements could be implemented. Doing this evaluation at the early stages will significantly increase the chances of successful implementation later.

Finally, participatory enlargement is crucial for a deeper mutual understanding between member states, especially around big and controversial and highly contested political topics. Involving stakeholders and citizens at early stages will create more context for the sharing of understandings, expectations, and aspirations of the actors from accession countries rather than a top-down broadcast of the old member states' visions and views.

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*“Participatory enlargement is crucial for deeper mutual understanding.”*

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Three concrete mechanisms could be used to make enlargement much more participatory. Drawing from enormous experience of conducting citizens dialogues nationally and transnationally, the EU could propose and implement **mass-scale structured**



**citizen dialogues** in accession countries. Ideally, such dialogues should be organised early in the process according to the same deliberative methodology and criteria for effective conduct of such deliberative exercises, i.e., allowing for sufficient time and quality of deliberation (incl. high-quality multi-lingual interpretation), being professionally moderated and so forth.

The dialogues will bring together actors from current EU member states (main EU representatives, institutions and bodies, national politicians, policy-makers and administrators, civil society actors and ordinary citizens) and stakeholders and citizens from accession countries.

The dialogues serve several purposes which should be reflected in carefully chosen topics for such exercises. On the one hand, they are to be conducted to gather and channel input from stakeholders and citizens from accession countries – a step that is essential for better understanding of their interests, demands and concerns related to accession and EU membership. The gathered input will be a valuable and authoritative source of information of local conditions and aspirations and helpful for the EU to calibrate the enlargement process. On the other hand, the dialogues will allow for better and more effective communication of the enlargement process, and EU membership expectations of the process itself. On a higher level, the dialogues could ultimately contribute to building a social base of future membership in the candidate countries and a better awareness on both sides of what an emerging common political entity – the enlarged EU – implies for everyone.

Another mechanism to make enlargement more participatory would be a concerted effort aimed at **bringing civil society actors** from accession countries into the accession process at an early stage. Civil society actors are important agents of change whose involvement will clearly affect trajectories and the overall success of the enlargement process. Drawing from the experience of previous rounds of enlargement, EU efforts should go far and beyond well-known measures of financial support, enabling favourable legal environments and opening Brussels-based networks to civil society actors from the candidate countries.

Though empowerment of civil society in the candidate countries should stay on the EU agenda, the focus should shift beyond empowerment to meaningful involvement. Civil society actors from accession countries should be involved early on in topics regarding accession discussions and negotiations via **structured civil society dialogues**: bilateral between the EU and civil society actors, trilateral between the EU, national state officials and civil society actors and, importantly, between civil society actors from the current and future member states. Additionally, civil society actors from accession countries should be directly involved in the membership negotiation process with an opportunity to choose the model of involvement they find most convenient and enjoy transparent access to relevant documents. Active involvement of civil society actors will increase process transparency, will ensure a flow of valuable expertise, and will eventually increase local citizen ownership of the process and its outcomes.



Finally, various approved participatory tools could be used **to connect politicians and policy-makers** from current and future member states together. For the sake of ownership, the accession process cannot be an exclusive domain of designated employees from EU government affairs units and departments. There has already been calls from the European Parliament to build connections with candidate countries parliamentarians from the very onset of negotiations. Wide involvement of national parliamentarians and state officials from various ministries early in the process is imperative for participatory enlargement. It is via these connections that lasting personal links between political and policy actors will be built and mutual understanding forged.

Opening the enlargement process to a whole variety of actors, including ordinary citizens, should be an important lesson learned from the previous rounds of accession to the EU. Connecting actors from current and future member states via a whole range of participatory methods that prove to deliver is a reliable way of achieving better mutual understanding, increased ownership and, essentially, legitimacy and acceptance of the enlargement process.

The European Union needs to be a Union of citizens that have a chance to participate in European policy-making – early on, democratically, efficiently. The upcoming enlargement process offers a chance for this and will at the same time be more successful if a participatory mindset and appropriate tools are used.

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### A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s „Democracy and Social Cohesion” program deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, and the sustainability of democratic politics, as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizen participation.