



Participatory democracy at the EU level: How to break the invisible ceiling?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Discussion Paper argues that citizens' participation is not a panacea for the democratic malaise witnessed at the European or national level. However, it is a bold and important stepping stone in the process of adapting and improving the EU's democratic and governance model, which is necessary if the EU27 want to confront the ongoing agglomeration of chronic and acute crises. The way ahead is not about the false choice between incremental or radical change. At this point, **change in the context of the evolving permacrisis will likely be radical and will only be possible if EU citizens feel they have a say when it comes to co-determining the Union's future.** Policymakers at the European and national level will thus need citizens' support – but also prodding – to shoulder the responsibility required to successfully adapt to the massive challenges of this day and age. Citizens' buy-in will be essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.

Yet, a set of fundamental politico-institutional obstacles prevent the Union from getting serious about democratic reform and thus also hinders its ability to exploit the full potential of citizens' participation in European policymaking. As a result, **participatory democracy in the EU is blocked by an invisible ceiling that can only be broken by a strong political will to acknowledge and address the underlying reasons that inhibit progress.**

In this Paper, we identify **three mutually reinforcing structural impediments** that need to be acknowledged and dealt with:

1. **Multiple fears** at both the European and national levels regarding the potential consequences of a more participatory EU democracy for the inter-institutional balance of power between the different actors and tiers of governance;
2. **An imagination deficit** to conceive new ways of thinking, which are necessary to formulate, promote, and implement systemic reforms, structural improvements, and an overall renewal of the Union's democratic system; and
3. **Diverging views**, perceptions, and positions regarding the potential role and limits of citizens' participation in EU policymaking, which in turn obstruct a concerted effort to modernise European democracy.

Looking into the future, the existing EU participatory instruments can and should continue to be improved. But this will not be enough: the crux of the matter is that citizens' participation is intrinsically linked to bigger structural problems related to the state of European democracy and the functioning of the EU, whose resolve is held hostage by very tall politico-institutional obstacles. **Making the most of citizens' participation can thus only happen if all EU institutions, including first and foremost national governments, accept and support the need to reform the Union's operating system.**

Once the EU and its members are ready to adapt the functioning of an enlarging Union to the needs of the 21st century, new opportunities will and should emerge to use existing and new instruments of citizens' participation to modernise European democracy and improve the Union's institutional effectiveness.

The EU27 should develop and implement novel, more innovative, and more ambitious participatory instruments that rely on joint inter-institutional endorsement and receive adequate financial support from the EU budget. But citizens' participation in the Union should not be reduced to one single permanent mechanism. Instead, **the EU should follow a functional approach and add different specific deliberative tools at critical moments in European policymaking.** Following the notion of 'thinking enlarged', these processes will require including also citizens, civil society, experts, and policymakers from (potential) future EU countries.

In more concrete terms, this paper argues that the Union's existing participatory toolbox should be expanded to include the following new instruments that need to be collectively supported and jointly organised by the European Commission, Parliament, and Council:

1. The EU should examine the possibility of creating **'big tent' fora**, where randomly selected citizens from all over Europe and elected representatives from different policy levels (from the local, regional, and national to the European) gather every five years to discuss and contribute their ideas to the Union's strategic agenda for the upcoming politico-institutional cycle.
2. **Citizens' deliberations on major transformative projects**, including those identified by the 'big tent' fora as the Union's strategic priorities, should become standard practice. These deliberations should foresee local, regional, national, and European citizens' panels involving different sets of randomly selected citizens. The panels can channel and sustain public pressure to reach and then convert policy decisions into concrete action at the different levels of EU policymaking.

3. As the strategic pressure to adapt the Union's operating system will continue to grow in the years to come, a **European Citizens' Reform Panel** should be set up to accompany the EU's internal reform process, involving citizens from existing and potential future member states. The active participation of citizens could help to generate public support and thus counter the danger that the outcome of future reform efforts might be rejected in one or the other EU country.

4. The complex debate about and process towards a potential EU enlargement to 30+ member states suggests the organisation of a **European Forum on Enlargement**. This exercise should engage representatives from all EU and EU-hopeful countries at all levels, i.e. citizens, civil society, experts, as well as elected policymakers. In the spirit of 'thinking enlarged', establishing such a Forum would help intensify the transnational debate across Europe, increase public trust on both sides, and foster the knowledge about the complexities of the EU enlargement process.

When it comes to the future of the EU and European democracy, the age of permacrisis requires a more strategic, ambitious, and proactive approach. Fears, disunity, and muddling through will not take the Union very far. Instead, **the EU and its members should acknowledge and embrace the need for radical change.** And citizens' participation can be key in moving the Union fundamentally forward.

Citizens' participation might not be a miracle solution. But it is one concrete and promising avenue for the EU to rise to the internal and external challenges confronting the 'old continent'. Therefore, the Union and its members should grasp it with both hands and break through the invisible ceiling that prevents the EU and European democracy from levelling up.

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1. The deliberative wave

Over the past decade, **European democracy has been riding a deliberative wave.**¹ Given that deliberative processes create conditions for ordinary citizens to collectively explore and devise innovative solutions to complex societal challenges and questions, they have emerged as a potential answer to the growing and widespread public demand for meaningful participation and engagement in policymaking.² Previous and, at times, substantial institutional efforts to bring citizens closer to decision-makers, including via changes to national electoral systems, the role and powers of national assemblies, local or regional government, and the European Parliament, as well as more direct forms of popular participation (e.g. referenda),³ proved insufficient in allowing citizens to express and exchange more nuanced opinions about Europe and its policies. **The ability of deliberative exercises to give voice and agency to citizens who feel ever more politically dissatisfied and disempowered**⁴ has made these practices increasingly popular at all levels of government in the European Union (EU).

Thousands of deliberative initiatives have already taken place in various member states in different formats, allowing citizens to discuss and decide on real issues, e.g., how to spend a city's budget, how to tackle online hate and harassment, how to improve the quality of air, whether to legalise same-sex marriages and so on. They range from permanent participative consultation mechanisms to participative budgeting and the use of digital deliberative platforms. The [Irish Citizens' Assembly](#) is a notable case in point. It was established in 2016 and consists of randomly selected citizens who meet regularly to deliberate on various issues of national importance, including marriage equality, gender rights, and abortion. Other prominent examples include the French [Citizens' Convention for Climate](#) or the permanent [Ostbelgien Citizens' Council](#) (Eastern Belgium).

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Over time, the effort to test, improve, and sustain citizens' participation was also scaled up to the EU level as a means of better connecting European institutions and citizens in the spirit of modernising EU democracy.⁵ For example, the [European Commission's Citizens' Dialogues](#) were organised

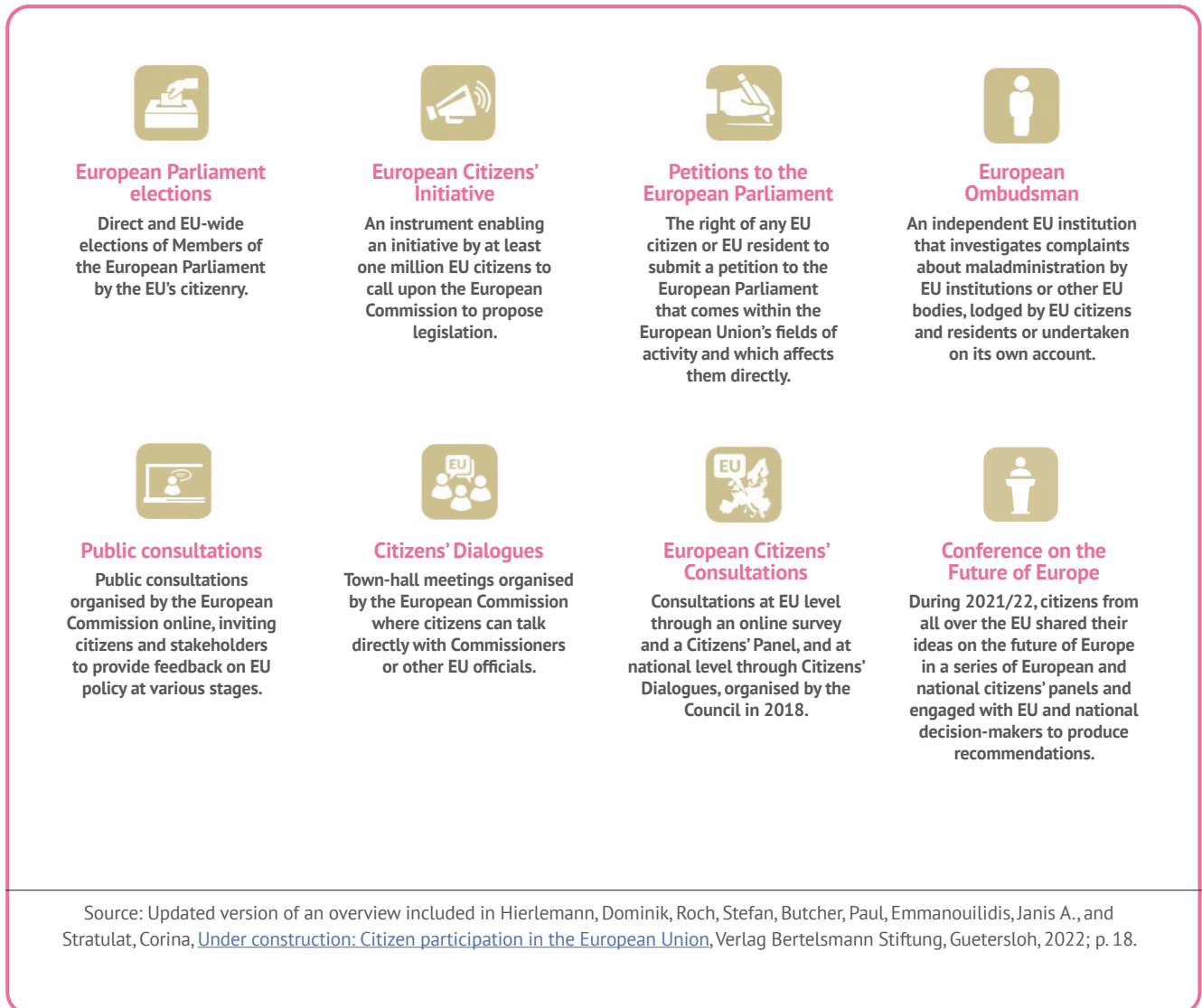
between 2012 and 2021 throughout the member states. They involved high-level EU representatives, such as European Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), engaging directly with citizens in town hall-style meetings. The goal was to discuss EU policies, priorities, and citizens' concerns. Another example is the [European Citizens' Initiative](#), a participatory instrument introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and operational since 2012. It allows one million European citizens from one quarter of the member states to ask the Commission to propose new legislative acts.

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In addition, the **European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs)**,⁶ held between 2018 and early 2019, involved citizens from across the EU in discussions about European issues with a view to informing the European Council's 2019 strategic planning on the Union's future. The ECCs set the stage for the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**,⁷ which took place between 2021 and 2022. The CoFoE was a particularly ambitious participatory exercise managed collectively by the EU's three main institutions – European Commission, Parliament, and Council. It provided a framework for randomly selected European citizens from all over the EU to share their ideas and visions for the future of Europe in a series of European and national-level citizens' panels; a Conference Plenary involving a variety of stakeholders (e.g., representatives of the EU institutions, national parliamentarians, civil society, and citizens who contributed to national debates, as well as ambassadors of the 800 randomly selected citizens who participated in the Conference); and a Multilingual Digital Platform (MDP).

As a follow-up to the CoFoE, the Commission has recently launched a **'new generation' of European Citizens' Panels (ECPs)**⁸ to be conducted ahead of key legislative proposals. Three pilot Panels already happened between December 2022 and May 2023 on the topics of food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility. Two other ECPs will be concluded in the first half of 2024 related to energy efficiency and ramping up action against hate.

OVERVIEW: KEY EU PARTICIPATION INSTRUMENTS



Thus, the scope, goal, and deliberative quality of citizens' events organised individually and jointly by EU institutions has constantly grown. And so has the level of aspiration to render such deliberations gradually more consequential for EU policymaking. **Yet, citizens** continue to be critical of how democracy works and how responsive **the EU system is to their opinions and interests**. A recent 2023 [Ipsos poll](#) suggests that one in two Europeans are dissatisfied with the function of democracy and with their perceived lack of influence over decision-making, especially at the EU level. Respondents in all countries surveyed said that radical change in the political system was needed.

The Union thus continues to face unresolved issues of democratic legitimacy, which makes it difficult – if not impossible – to thrust ahead with European integration. But does this mean that the citizens' deliberation experiments that were carried out failed and should now be discarded as a potential avenue for EU democratic reform? On the contrary, this paper argues that such a conclusion is premature and could prove misguided. There are at least three main justifications for pressing on with the improvement of existing citizens' participation exercises/instruments in European politics, as well as the introduction of novel ones:

1. **Proven merits – experience with implementing deliberative processes suggests that they lead to better policy outcomes and greater trust between citizens and governments/institutions.**⁹ By working together, participants strengthen their civic awareness and education, and gain a better understanding of political procedures and topics under discussion at the European level. Moreover, because citizens bring forth their unique experiences and viewpoints in such deliberations, their input contributes to more inclusive and equitable outcomes.¹⁰ They also empower citizens to have a say on issues and decisions that affect their lives, acting as representatives of their counterparts from all over Europe. As such, by treating citizens not just as participants but also as representatives of other citizens, they **help to complement and strengthen – rather than undermining – representative democracy.** Therefore, in practice, citizens' deliberations can foster policy compromises and reinforce democratic principles and desiderata at a time when European liberal democracy is under pressure and needs shoring up.

2. **Pressure function – deliberative exercises can encourage critical and potentially even uncomfortable conversations about the modern drivers of transformative change,** such as inequality, climate change, digitalisation, ageing and shrinking societies, as well as global (economic) power shifts in a world transfixed by the COVID-19 pandemic and now by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. So far, the EU's incremental reaction to the multiple interlinked crises of past decades has helped to avert disaster. But it would be an illusion¹¹ to think that this will suffice in dealing with the underlying causes and multiple consequences of the 'poly-crisis' of yesteryear or with the magnitude of powerful forces still gathering steam in the age of the 'permacrisis', given that crises have now become a constant companion in Europe and beyond.¹² While the responses of the EU and its members have at times been groundbreaking,¹³ the scale and scope of the current interrelated and systemic challenges require a fundamental rethink across all policy areas¹⁴ for the long haul.

This is why **policymakers need citizens' support – but also prodding – to shoulder the responsibility required to successfully adapt to the complexities and difficulties of this day and age.** They need people's opinions to determine the policy responses to fundamental questions related to the future of Europe and their buy-in to decide on the priorities and trade-offs necessary to deal with the 'poly-transition' that the EU and its members are facing. As the reports and recommendations of citizens' deliberations show,¹⁵ randomly selected ordinary people, representing a wide cross-section of society, prove capable of confronting multifaceted public issues by learning and collaborating in the search for common solutions to shared challenges. Moreover, **because citizens are less constrained by political**

or electoral considerations, they often emerge more ambitious than their national and European decision-makers when it comes to identifying durable solutions. Thus, citizens' deliberations can serve a 'pressure function' to improve the Union's capacity to deliver, enabling legislators to implement overdue hard EU policies and reforms.

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3. **Popular demand – the call for more opportunities to participate in European political affairs has become a recurrent outcome of citizens' deliberations.** For example, it was a key finding of both the European Citizens' Consultations process and the Conference on the Future of Europe. In the CoFoE context, ideas from the Multilingual Digital Platform and the European Citizens' Panel 2 (ECP2) on democracy asked the Union to "create multilingual online forums and offline meetings where citizens can launch discussions with EU representatives" (recommendation #32), to hold regular citizens' assemblies (recommendation #39), and to involve citizens if "the EU reopens the discussion about the constitution of Europe" (recommendation #35). In addition, the ECP3 on climate change and the environment/health called for a dedicated online platform, which would allow citizens to access transparent information and promote interaction between people and experts (recommendation #33). The Conference's final report acknowledged these recommendations and dedicated proposal #36 entirely to expanding the EU's participatory toolbox, including the launch of a digital platform, improving existing forms of participation on all levels, and setting up regular citizens' assemblies.

The same **demand for a bigger say in European politics is also echoed in a variety of public opinion polls.** For example, a 2020 Bertelsmann Stiftung *eupinions* survey¹⁶ reports that 78% of polled citizens want to have a bigger say in the EU, while a 2021 Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe¹⁷ reveals that a staggering 92% of respondents think that citizens' voices should be taken more into account in EU decisions. Such results confirm Europeans' genuine desire for political participation. The mounting evidence behind this trend suggests that it is not a passing phenomenon but a real and resolute call for EU democratic reform to make EU policymaking structures more participatory than at present.¹⁸

Given their proven merits, pressure function, and ability to respond to popular demand for a bigger say in EU politics, it makes sense to keep pushing for more citizens' participation at the European level. However, **the persistence, improvement, and ultimate success of citizens' engagement with EU policymaking are not foregone conclusions.** Much depends on the political will of EU institutions and member states to internalise the dos and don'ts of earlier participatory processes, and to invest political capital and resources in making citizens' participation count in EU policymaking. This goes beyond identifying lessons to refine our participatory processes; abundant expertise on how to perfect consultation methods already exists. What will be key is whether decision-makers can overcome the resistance points and bottlenecks in the current system to allow democratic practice to evolve in keeping with the times.

The good news is that EU institutional support and openness towards citizens' engagement are consolidating. For example, the European Commission has been diligently working towards creating an ecosystem for democratic participation and innovation. This encompasses *inter alia* the launch of a [Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy](#) to support the development of socially robust policy through citizen engagement. It also comprises a revamped [Have Your Say Portal](#) for citizens to share their views on EU policies and existing laws, including an interactive Citizens' Engagement Platform.

Moreover, in December 2023, the Commission's [Defence of Democracy package](#) introduced a recommendation¹⁹ to promote the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in policymaking.

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In a similar vein, recent proposals from the European Parliament back more substantial citizens' participation in the Union.²⁰ Moreover, the Presidents of the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) – two EU advisory bodies representing the Union from a local, regional, and civil society perspective – endorsed the creation of an EU permanent structured consultation with citizens, cities, regions, and civil society organisations (CSOs).²¹ Such efforts are slowly but surely helping to change and modernise the EU's democratic culture – but much more needs to be done.

2. The curveball of citizens' participation

The lessons learned to date from experiments with citizens' deliberations suggest that **the biggest challenges faced by participatory processes are linked to systemic problems with EU democracy and the lack of support from different actors at the European and, especially, the member state level to address these more fundamental deficiencies of the Union's operating system.**

Thus, by pressing on with citizens' participation, the EU also stands to confront and potentially fix some of its deep-seated democratic dilemmas and governance challenges. While deliberative processes cannot be expected to solve all of the Union's democratic ills, they can at least serve as a reality check for European democracy, drawing attention to the ways in which European governance still needs to evolve.

So, what are the major deficiencies identified in the Union's most recent experiments with citizens' participation that are symptomatic of more significant structural problems related to the functioning of the Union? And how can EU democracy be improved and modernised by addressing them?

Criticism levelled against previous EU citizens' participation processes can be grouped into five broad categories: (1) unclear purpose, (2) complex process, (3) low visibility, (4) lack of feedback and impact, and (5) limited participation. All these points mirror structural problems with European democracy and the Union's inability to progress in key areas.

1. UNCLEAR PURPOSE

None of the recent EU deliberative initiatives were clear on their precise objectives. Did they mean to raise awareness among citizens about the functioning of the Union? Did they aim to allow citizens to shape policy in line with their expressed views and preferences? Did they seek to facilitate an exchange of opinions within or across member states? Did they intend to reconnect European citizens with their political elites? Did they want to raise public support for the EU project? Perhaps all of these. Or maybe something else entirely.

Any of these objectives could be relevant. Yet, because the exact purpose of previous participatory exercises was always vaguely formulated, they **failed to manage citizens' expectations or to secure buy-in and shared commitment from EU institutions and member states**. Some participants ignored the potential impact of their work on the results; some hoped that it would make a difference; while others remained doubtful that politicians would take it up and reflect it in future action. Moreover, without clearly spelling out the goal, organisers struggled to align their objectives with the means available, both in terms of process setup and budget. Finally, the fact that citizens and organisers alike approached the events with different aims in mind ended up undermining the possibility of meaningful follow-up.

The lack of clearly defined objectives is perhaps unsurprising, considering that the EU itself has mastered the art of operating without a clear *raison d'être*. To be sure, the added value of European cooperation has been repeatedly demonstrated, including in the previous chapters of the ongoing permacrisis. By now, potential fantasies about any one individual country being able to handle alone the magnitude of today's or tomorrow's challenges have been shattered. However, antagonistic views between and within member states have always existed and are still present when it comes to the Union's ultimate purpose and *finalité*. For example, some EU leaders, scholars, and publics have persistently supported the idea of a more political Europe or even a federal 'United States of Europe' as a survival strategy for the continent. Others have emphasised that they have merely joined an internal market for its economic benefits. Still, others have constantly looked at the EU as an ally against external threats or their own corrupt governments.

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Until now, the EU has survived both because *and* despite these internally diverging interpretations of its rationale. Yet, on occasions, the lack of clarity and consensus on the Union's purpose has stalled or even rolled back crucial achievements in European integration (with Brexit being the extreme scenario); it has inhibited the Union's capacity to come up with adequate policy solutions to long-standing problems; it has affected the public legitimacy of ensuing responses; and it has sabotaged a joint strategic vision for the EU's future. In a Europe *à la carte*, it might seem easier to also have citizens' participation *à la carte*. But while the flexibility principle can help to ensure that everyone is comfortable to partake in the European project – or in deliberations

– it does not guarantee that everybody will arrive at their 'desired destination', when and how they have planned. And so, the likelihood of frustration rises.

2. COMPLEX PROCESS

Complexity has been the hallmark of recent citizens' deliberations organised by the EU. It was evident, for example, in the broad scope of themes covered by the Conference on the Future of Europe, which made it difficult for citizens to meaningfully engage in discussions, especially considering the short timeframes available.²² This was a conscious choice of the EU27, who did not want the CoFoE to concentrate on a limited number of crucial questions related to the Union's future direction of travel. They feared that this could undermine the role and prerogatives of EU institutions and put member states even more under pressure to deliver concrete results following the Conference. Moreover, complexity was reflected in the design of the CoFoE process, with its successive plenary and group exchanges; many different elements (e.g., ECPs, Conference Plenary, and MDP), and stakeholders (e.g., experts, facilitators, citizens' ambassadors, officials, and civil society representatives), each with their distinct – but not always clear – roles, and separate levels of European and (sub) national debates. As a result of this intricate process, citizens and external observers could not always make sense of the exercise or transparently trace back decisions to the input collected.

The ECCs likewise suffered from general confusion:²³ all 27 member states organised thousands of national events without a unified and coherent format; the Commission hosted an EU-wide online survey consisting of questions formulated by a European Citizens' Panel; no systemic link was established between the consultations transnationally or with the EU-level activities; and hundreds of thousands of European citizens participated in the initiative and offered information about their priorities and proposals without realising that they were contributing to a pan-European exercise – ruleless as it was. Such a disjointed initiative, which again was a deliberative choice of the EU institutions and member states, could hardly be expected to produce a common identity or usable output, never mind secure political accountability. And **the voices of those who advocated a more streamlined process of the consultation were disregarded, given the opposition of the EU27 members to a design that would have produced a more coherent and potentially more effective outcome.**

Describing the European Union as complex is stating the obvious. Pretty much everything about the EU is intricate, including the broad array of policy issues it covers, its ever-larger *acquis communautaire*, its complex institutional architecture and multilevel decision-making processes, or its division of labour and competences with the member states. Public opinion polls regularly show that large parts of the European electorate perceive the Union as distant and non-transparent.

Citizens' lack of basic information about EU institutions, their functioning and competences, decision-making procedures, and details about the current state of play in different policy fields became obvious in the CoFoE Citizens' Panels and the Commission's 'new generation' ECPs.²⁴ Public awareness about other member states' issue positions and debates is also notoriously low. And tensions between the different tiers of government in the EU only complicate the ability of citizens to comprehend how the system works and where responsibility lies.

People tend to distrust, fear, or reject what they cannot understand. This goes at least some way towards explaining public Euroscepticism, breaks in European solidarity, or low turnout in EP elections.²⁵ Yet again, complexity might be unavoidable given today's multifaceted problems, the interconnectedness of the world, and the large scale that tends to condition effective policy responses. Just like complexity might be inherent in any properly deliberative process, inclusive of all levels, interests, and preferences in the EU, as well as geared towards results of European relevance. In this sense, **the challenge is not so much – or only – about reducing complexity to boost EU legitimacy but rather about demystifying European politics for the wider public.** And since EU citizens' deliberations are about European affairs, 'debunking myths' about the EU also seems important (alongside proposed methodological tweaks)²⁶ to mitigate observed flaws in participatory processes.

3. LOW VISIBILITY

The gradual development of the EU's participation toolbox has not gained much traction in the public and political spheres. **European citizens are largely unaware of the citizens' participation instruments available to them.**²⁷ Most citizens do not know that the ECCs, CoFoE, or Commission's ECPs ever happened. For example, beyond the 800 randomly selected citizens engaged in the CoFoE Panels and the 50,000 contributions on its digital platform, the reach of the Conference among Europeans remained limited. And the political capital injected into these initiatives was equally meagre. **EU leaders and other high-profile national politicians did not promote these deliberations** while they were ongoing, nor did they politicise the issues citizens debated or the proposals they made in the context of a wider political debate within and beyond national frontiers. Again, this was not a coincidence but a political choice by those who do not want citizens' participation instruments to play a stronger role in EU policymaking. As a result, **the media saw little at stake in these experiments.** The media's scant appetite to cover citizens' participation further lowered the visibility of the practice.

This experience highlights a paradox regarding broad-based interest in the EU's work. The growing influence of European decisions on citizens' lives – especially in times of crisis – increases the salience of the Union for the public. National politicians also pay heed when policies from Brussels are domestically consequential – either to shift blame or take credit for them, as convenient.

And the media will always love policy 'drama' or a political scandal. However, everything else the EU does – which covers the largest share of its activity – is usually perceived as too 'boring' or too technical to make headlines or become the subject of political and public debate. This does not bode well for public awareness of the Union and its initiatives, citizens' deliberations included. Instead, **low EU visibility reinforces the general perception of the EU as a distant apolitical apparatus and allows member states to continue acting as gatekeepers of the European integration process out of fear of losing sovereignty.**

4. LACK OF FEEDBACK AND IMPACT

So far, much of the focus seems to have been on implementing citizens' participation exercises at the EU level and trying to improve the method each time. This strategy is justified because the work has to begin somewhere, even if it is with imperfect, timid, and gradual steps. But a more citizen-friendly European democratic system will also have to learn to listen and act on what participants express in such deliberations. **Past experiments have often left citizens in the dark about what happened to their input and the impact of their participation on EU policymaking.**

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For example, no real discussion about the experience and outcomes of the ECCs – whether in terms of process or policy substance – occurred in the European Council or member states. Concrete institutional follow-up to the final report of the CoFoE also has not yet materialised at all levels. While the EP reacted to several citizens' recommendations by **narrowly** embracing the institutional reform cause, including the call for a Convention²⁸ and potential treaty change, the (European) Council's response has thus far been negligible. **EU countries, whose unanimous support is needed, remain sceptical and divided over European reform plans supported by citizens,** including those made in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.²⁹

A notable exception has been the Commission's 'new generation' of Citizens' Panels on key legislative proposals. Relevant Directorate Generals seem to have taken these Panels' recommendations into consideration – albeit to different degrees and only in the final stage of decisions on the concerned files.³⁰ Two more ECPs are planned for the first half of 2024; one on energy efficiency and another on ramping up action against hate.

However, it is uncertain whether the practice of ECPs will continue in the next Commission, after the EP elections in June 2024, and whether the Council and EP will give them more (if any) institutional support in the future.

By not properly closing the feedback loop on citizens' deliberations, European and national decision-makers open the door to widespread frustration.

In general, citizens already consider themselves unable to shape the Union's policies. They believe that their preferences do not really matter anymore in the governing of their own countries. But the feeling of disempowerment is even more pronounced in the complex and distant arena of European politics. In last year's Ipsos poll, the public's perceived influence over EU policymaking was expressed in single digits: from 3% in Sweden to 9% in Italy. Without hope of being able to exert influence or bring about change through collective voice, people lose trust in established democratic institutions and practices.³¹ The wider the gap between citizens and their national or EU political representatives, the deeper the democratic legitimacy crisis and the stronger the populist challengers become.

5. LIMITED PARTICIPATION

The EU's foray into citizens' participation is also relevant for the Balkan and Eastern European countries seeking membership. As prospective EU members are preparing their accession, one would expect the Union to invite the enlargement countries to practise its newfound 'passion' for citizens' deliberations (especially if it is here to stay). After all, the issues discussed in such exercises are also important for those who want to join the Union, who share similar interests and challenges, and who deal with all thematic areas in their membership conditionality. But **recent EU experiments with citizens' participation consciously left out the aspirant countries.** For example, although many had strongly advocated the participation of citizens from enlargement countries, the Western Balkans were not involved in the CoFoE, although the region has the European perspective and thus a stake in discussions about the future of Europe. This decision was a missed opportunity to foster democratic engagement, trust-building, and cross-border cooperation between EU countries and their nearest strategic allies.

3. The sticky points

This paper argues that a set of fundamental politico-institutional obstacles prevent the Union from getting serious about democratic reform and thus also hinders it from exploiting the full potential of citizens' participation in European policymaking. As a result, **participatory democracy in the EU is blocked by an invisible ceiling that can only be broken by strong political will to acknowledge and address the underlying reasons that inhibit progress.**

But it is also **symptomatic of the lack of a clear and credible vision for the future of the Union's engagement with its neighbours.** The EU has been consistent in its rhetorical commitment to enlargement. Especially since the start of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the policy has been heralded as a (geo)political priority in the Union's vital security interest. Yet the member states have also demonstrated consistency in their disruptive tactics that have stymied enlargement for decades. With no real progress, above all in the Western Balkans, and no effective solutions to the region's fundamental problems, the Union's discourse on a shared future often rings hollow.³² More so since the member states remain indisposed to contemplate the EU's own capacity to enlarge in the current form. Having no comprehensive plan while war rages on and the global geopolitical race accelerates invites others to shape the new international order to their own liking.³³

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In sum, **all the key problems identified in the EU's recent experiments with citizens' participation are symptomatic of bigger structural problems related to the functioning of the Union,** which in turn negatively affect the performance and effectiveness of European democracy. The implication is that the efforts to improve and promote deliberative processes in the Union's decision-making cannot be divorced from the EU's overall deficiencies and inadequate policy/governance reform agenda. Put differently, **European democracy cannot become more participatory unless the EU27 are willing to face up to the Union's more fundamental limitations and unless the EU and its members are ready to embrace fundamental changes.** But if the answer is obvious, why has this resolve not yet taken place?

Three mutually reinforcing structural impediments need to be dealt with: **(1) multiple fears** at both the European and national levels regarding the potential consequences of a more participatory EU democracy on the inter-institutional balance of power between the different actors and tiers of governance, **(2) an imagination deficit** to conceive new ways of thinking, which are essential to formulate, promote, and implement systemic reforms, structural improvements,

and an overall renewal of the Union's democratic system, and **(3) diverging views**, perceptions and positions regarding the potential role and limits of citizens' participation in the democratic polity.

1. MULTIPLE FEARS

Political actors at both the national and European levels are weary about the effects of more citizens' participation on their own decisional power and positioning in the EU's institutional system. In most member states, especially in countries that have less exposure and experience with citizens' participation, governments and parliaments fear losing more national prerogatives to EU institutions in their remaining bastions of state sovereignty. Thus, they look at citizens' empowerment via deliberations as potentially leading to their 'power castration'. They are concerned that the European Parliament, above all, but also the Commission, will use citizens' participation to enhance their influence over EU decision-making. They fear that 'Brussels' will instrumentalise deliberative practices to put policy pressure on national capitals and, ultimately, to pool more sovereignty away from them and towards the European tier. As such, they worry that member state actors will be stripped of (even more) influence and control in the Union's complex inter-institutional setting.

EU governments, in particular, perceive themselves as 'strategic masters' and 'masters of the Treaties' and want to ensure that they can continue to shape the Union's strategic agenda and long-term future. **Most national capitals are thus keen on avoiding that citizens' participation could evolve at the expense of the (European) Council's ability to determine EU decisions in line with national preferences and interests.**

In addition, a good number of policymakers in the member states are concerned that **strengthening deliberative democracy could further undermine the legitimacy of national governments.** This worry is particularly strong when governments are under pressure at home and when the fear of failing to cope with some of the politically overwhelming policy challenges is already strong. Thus, instead of seeing participatory instruments as an aid in situations that demand sensitive or hard political choices, policymakers in this category often fear that they might look weak and not in control if they reach out to people. In turn, this attitude undermines their readiness to exploit the potential of citizens' participation.

Many national parliamentarians are also afraid that more direct involvement of European citizens in the Union's decision-making will chip away at the representative character of European democracy and, in return, undermine their privileged power position therein. As elected representatives, they consider themselves the main legitimate delegates of the ultimate sovereign and fear that a higher level of citizens' participation could undermine their role.

Similar anxieties can be observed also at the European level, especially among those who have not been strongly supportive or actively involved in previous participatory experiments. For example, actors in the EU institutions, including in the Commissions' services, **fear that the Union's already complex policymaking processes will become even more intricate** if European citizens' opinions and preferences related to future legislative proposals also need to be considered. Thus, they worry that more citizens' involvement might not only further complicate decision-making processes but potentially also undermine the Union's ability to deliver effective policy results.

From an inter-institutional perspective, and given the Council's resistance and the EP's support for greater citizens' participation, some **fear that the Commission might end up being politically squeezed in the power struggle between the Parliament and member state governments.** This worry is also present in parts of the Berlaymont, which, in turn, undermines the Commission's overall political ambition to systematically enhance the role of citizens' participation in the Union, especially if this requires the involvement of and cooperation among all EU institutions.

In addition, some actors in the Commission are concerned that introducing **new deliberative instruments could negatively affect the Commission's legislative and policy-setting role** in the EU system. They look at the prospects of participatory democracy as a zero-sum game, in which more citizens' involvement in EU legislation would lead to less room for the Commission to call the shots on law-making and thus, in practice, weaken its monopoly on legislative initiatives. This concern feeds on the belief that the Brussels' executive is likely to find itself at odds with broader public views, given that the Treaties require the Commission to be guided by the common European interest and longer-term perspective. So, when setting the agenda and proposing legislation, actors in this category fear that the Commission could become much more constrained than the European Parliament or the Council in the later stages of the policymaking cycle.

The Brussels executive could instrumentalise citizens' participation to push policy decisions in a certain direction which reflects the Commission's institutional interests.

Conversely, there are others both at the EU and national levels who are concerned that the **Brussels executive could instrumentalise citizens' participation to push policy decisions in a certain direction** which reflects the Commission's institutional interests. These worries are particularly strong when the Commission is solely responsible for the implementation of a specific deliberative instrument, like the 'new generation' of ECPs.

The concern that the Commission's prerogatives might be undermined and the fear that the Brussels' executive could exploit citizens' participation appear to contradict each other. However, they both hinder the improvement of existing or the introduction of new citizens' participation instruments. This is merely one example where **highly diverging fears motivate various actors for very different reasons to oppose a higher level of citizens' involvement in EU policymaking**. As a result, in the past, including in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, one witnessed the emergence of unholy alliances that have jointly – consciously or unconsciously – inhibited more ambitious, more structured, and more effective experiments in citizens' participation.

The validity of any of the abovementioned fears is debatable. However, one thing is clear: **fears both at the EU and national levels make it difficult to modernise European democracy through the more systematic pursuit of citizens' participation**. These concerns do not only undermine the individual willingness of EU institutions and member states to enhance existing instruments. They also counter the Union's ability to introduce novel, more innovative, and more impactful instruments of citizens' deliberation, which ultimately require the solid involvement, cooperation, and political buy-in from all EU institutions.³⁴ The relevance of securing inter-institutional agreement behind participatory initiatives was amply demonstrated, for example, in the struggle of getting the CoFoE off the ground and then follow-up on its results, but also in the work required to make the 'new generation' of ECPs count in policymaking.

2. IMAGINATION DEFICIT

Apart from widespread *angst* in the upper echelons of power at the EU and national levels, **a profound 'imagination deficit' prevents systemic reforms, structural improvements, and an overall renewal of the Union's democratic system**. This deficiency is by no means limited to the prospect of citizens' participation but affects the future of the European integration process more generally.

Short-termism, a high degree of risk aversion, and *status quo* thinking prevail over readiness to challenge and overcome old recipes.

Unwillingness and inability to imagine different structures, processes, and instruments, as part of a revised notion of democratic theory and practice, undercuts the possibility for change. **Short-termism, a high degree of risk aversion, and *status quo* thinking prevail over readiness to challenge and overcome old recipes.**

The fact that leadership has become scarce at the different tiers of government does not help either, especially when tough questions arise, where trade-offs are inevitable and clear political priorities must be set in an increasingly volatile regional and global environment. For example, in any efforts aiming to review and reform some of its core policies (including the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy), to adapt the Union's future long-term budget in a way that reflects the increasing need to deepen European cooperation,³⁵ or to prepare the Union's institutional structures for future potential rounds of enlargement, leadership is a *sine qua non*. But the reality is different: **weak governments in many member states, under more pressure from radical, right-wing nationalist political forces, and marked by an increasingly high level of national introspection, render the EU27 hesitant to substantially amend the Union's operating system and update European democracy**.

But the EU and its members need to imagine and embrace change. In a world characterised by unprecedented levels of transformation and uncertainty, EUrope is operating on the basis of a system designed for a different era. Yet the 'old continent' faces major interlinked tectonic shifts, including the green, digital, and demographic transitions (poly-transition), a transformed geopolitical and geo-economic environment, and the imperative to prepare itself for a potential enlargement to 30+ member states. Consequently, the EU and its members live in a new and demanding reality, in which "more difficult and much more ambitious decisions will have to be taken and where there is a clear need to act together at the EU level to address profound transnational challenges".³⁶

The magnitude of the challenge can understandably feel daunting. But **as long as the significance of the 'global Zeitenwende' identified in Sunday speeches fails to translate into the formulation and implementation of far-reaching policy actions at the EU level, the "rhetoric-actions gap"**³⁷ widens. This situation is reinforced by ever higher levels of introspection as the result of an increasing 'me first' syndrome, which starts from the individual (hyper-individualisation), moves to the family, local, regional, and national level, and ultimately evolves into a 'my country first' mantra.

Two implications ensue. First, **debates in the member states become (even more) inward-looking, while the need for frank transnational exchanges between national societies is ever greater**. National naval-gazing stands at odds with the need for common responses at the European level, which require a better understanding of the positions, interests, concerns, and aspirations of both current and potential future member states. Second, preoccupations with political concerns at the national level and the fact that traditional political actors are increasingly under pressure at home deter governments from investing political capital in the EU, especially when it comes to radically reforming the Union's core policy areas and updating its underlying operating system.

The alternative option for the Union would be to let its imagination run: to think freely, big, and long-term, without the straitjacket of existing instruments, outdated approaches, and limited aspirations. **But imagination must combine two key ingredients: humility and courage.**³⁸ Both of these tend to come in short supply.

The alternative option for the Union would be to let its imagination run. But imagination must combine two key ingredients: humility and courage.

Humility allows one to be candid about the limits of one's expertise and knowledge. It encourages one to openly admit past mistakes and review assumptions against new information (e.g. from crises) before making new decisions. The humble puts a mirror in front of oneself and would never claim to have a "monopoly on what democracy is".³⁹ Humility prompts one to prepare for surprises, no matter how unlikely they might seem. Humility facilitates engagement from the perspective of others, avoiding blackmailing and the 'heads I win, tails you lose' approach in favour of a strategy of mutual backscratching, if not consensus-building.

Courage is the ability to drop one's rigid, ideological mind frames and engage in some serious and potentially uncomfortable soul-searching to establish the robustness of one's sacred political, economic, and social models, because old concepts and deeply held assumptions might need to be revised or even abandoned to ensure progress. But courage is also about daring to act proactively without taboos and to undertake *whatever* extraordinary changes the introspection process reveals necessary. **Only the brave can take an honest look in the mirror instead of simply pointing the moralising finger at others; only the brave can be politically daring to proactively address systemic risks instead of simply wishing them away or hoping that they will (again) be able to muddle through.**

Future events and even more fundamental crises might eventually teach the EU humility. But mustering courage is a conscious decision to act that remains up to the member states and EU institutions to assume. **This requires that national and European leaders think and act beyond the limits of the past. A more substantial involvement of citizens in this process can help them to reach a higher level of ambition and be more daring.**

3. DIVERGING VIEWS

In addition to multiple fears and the imagination deficit, a third fundamental factor that inhibits EU democratic reform, including via new instruments of citizens'

participation, is the disagreement among key actors at the national and European levels. **EU countries and institutions cannot agree on what should be done to improve the quality of European democracy and what role citizens' participation should play in that process.**

More concretely, **three diverging groups** at the European and national level stand out:

- First, **the functionalists** hold that more citizens' involvement in EU decision-making is key to systematically improving the legitimacy and effective functioning of European democracy and the Union in general. They firmly believe that citizens' participation can no longer be limited to voting in elections every few years. They think there is a fundamental need to reduce the gap between the EU and its citizens by enabling the latter to insert opinions and policy objectives/proposals more directly in the Union's decision-making apparatus. Moreover, they argue that strengthening citizens' participation could help to overcome some of the political gridlocks witnessed at the European level. They trust that citizens' participation can help to foster compromises by putting public pressure on those national and European stakeholders who resist the deepening of cooperation and integration among the EU27. They hope that the inclusion of citizens can improve the Union's collective ability to deliver much-needed concrete policy and governance reforms.
- Second, **the sceptics** see a potential added value to giving citizens a more substantial say in EU policymaking but fear that their involvement could backfire if expectations are not fulfilled. They worry that the Union and its members might in the end prove politically unwilling or unable to implement the proposals brought forward by citizens. They remind supporters of citizens' participation that the Union is a complex entity with multiple levels of governance whose competences are limited by the EU Treaties. Thus, citizens, who are often not acquainted with the intricacies of the Union's operating system or the topic under discussion, might get frustrated if their input is ignored or leads to results that do not fully reflect their initial aspirations.

Actors in this camp also argue that citizens might have a short-time horizon in mind when a long-term perspective is needed, which then not 'only' leads to uninformed opinions but also to short-sighted positions and proposals, which can undermine the overall potential of citizens' participation. Therefore, by and large, they have little faith in people's collective wisdom. To be sure, extensive analysis, including from the OECD,⁴⁰ shows that such scepticism is largely unwarranted. Proposals brought forward by so-called 'ordinary citizens' are, in most cases, informed and valid, even when it comes to difficult and complex issues like, for example, abortion rights. Yet this evidence does not prevent the sceptics from being critical towards a higher level of citizens' participation.

► Third, **the opponents** believe that participatory democracy can be politically dangerous and harmful to the functioning and legitimacy of the Union. They fear that instruments of citizens' participation stand to undermine representative democracy at both the national and EU levels, as well as becoming instrumentalised by populists who challenge democratic values and practice. In addition, they probe the legitimacy and representativeness of randomly selected citizens by questioning the prudence of allowing a small group of people to influence the Commission's legislative proposals and/or the final shape of decisions taken at the European level. Put differently, they do not only underestimate popular intelligence. They also overestimate the entrepreneurial spirit of populists/radicals. Experience to date writes off such concerns: European citizens

participating in deliberations are perfectly capable of coming up with ideas/proposals/recommendations that are not guided by 'populist thinking'.

The **fundamentally diverging views, perceptions, and positions regarding the potential and limits of citizens' participation**, which are present both among EU officials and in the member states, **weaken the Union's ability and readiness to improve the functioning of existing instruments and introduce new ones**. Even more so if these tools require the support from and cooperation among all EU institutions, like it has been the case during the Conference on the Future of Europe. Decision-makers' disaccord, coupled with their multiple fears and imagination deficit, make for tall obstacles that stand in the way of more citizens' participation in the EU. So, how do we get past or around such hurdles?

4. The tight spot & the way forward

Participatory democracy is batting on a sticky wicket. While the EU has tried its hand at deliberative processes over the past years in an attempt to improve the public's trust and engagement in European decision-making, **genuine openness and commitment around the EU institutions and in the member states about citizens' participation are, at best, in their infancy and, at worst, on life support**. As a result, the future of citizens' participation and its potential to contribute to the much-needed reform of EU democracy and governance remain uncertain.

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The reason has less to do with the Union's experience in implementing deliberative processes, which by and large has so far proven positive both for the organisers and participants. Undoubtedly, **the different instruments should continue to be improved from the point of view of the deliberative method**. For example, whether it is about setting clear and narrower objectives, allowing longer time for deliberation and awareness-raising among citizens, increasing the visibility of the events, better connecting discussions on different tiers of governance from the local and regional to the national and European, improving the links between the citizens and the representative dimensions, or closing the feedback loop with participants; there is no shortage of proposals for

refining the process, which aspire to counter some of the criticism levelled against existing citizens' participation processes.⁴¹ In addition, new participatory formats should also be added and tried out. **But the crux of the matter is that citizens' participation is intrinsically related to more substantial structural problems concerning the state of European democracy and the functioning of the EU**, whose resolve is held hostage by very tall politico-institutional obstacles.

If anything, the Union's experiments with citizens' participation cast new light on 'old' issues with the EU and its governance. From the lack of purpose and high complexity to poor visibility, unclear impact, and biased inclusiveness, **the Union's long-standing, overall weaknesses seem to have rubbed off on recent experiments with citizens' participation** and become even more salient through them. Thus, it will not suffice to try again and do better-quality initiatives involving randomly selected citizens from all over Europe. If this practice is to catch on and help to modernise European democracy, it must **acknowledge and overcome the very same hurdles that hold back EU integration: i.e. the multiple fears of 'power castration', irreconcilable differences, and a lack of courage to imagine and implement a different future**.

Dealing with any of these impediments is not straightforward. Arguably, diversity will always be a given in a Union of 27 (or maybe later 30+) member states, which is based on a complex institutional structure involving numerous stakeholders from all levels of EU governance. Likewise, as long as the nation-state remains the fundamental unit of organisation in a globalised world that poses challenges which require supranational action, member states will continue to be edgy about their right to self-determination and protective of their increasingly residual privileges.

Finally, given the magnitude of the inter-related problems rolling out incessantly in the age of the permacrisis, and considering their affixed uncertainty, it is perhaps unsurprising that **the reflex of decision-makers is to fall back on what used to be certitudes** (e.g., models, approaches, and principles) – often only to find they no longer apply.

Thus, there is a certain degree of inevitability about the ongoing situation. But **inertia must be overcome if European liberal democracy is to survive for future generations**. The only condition is that the forward thrust exceeds the stagnant or regressive forces. **History shows that past epic challenges, like economic depression, war, or authoritarianism, were surmounted only through extraordinary changes in terms of institutions, ideas, and scope to respond to altered circumstances.**

Now, things are massively changing again. The *status quo ante* no longer exists and will not return. And it would be **dangerous to trust that the ‘crisis automatism’ witnessed in previous chapters of the permacrisis over the past 15 years will always work in future**. It would be naïve to believe that the EU and its members will always do what is required when the pressure is so high that the Union has no choice but to go the extra mile to avoid the situation spiralling out of control.

The EU and its members need to counter the prevailing fears and overcome the imagination deficit that hamper the readiness and ability to change. **The fundamental challenges and potential dangers that the EU27 face require a different mindset, following a more strategic and thus more ambitious and proactive approach.** Consequently, reforms “as deep as the phenomena that reveal the fragility of the existing order and as fast as the re-ordering of the geopolitical order currently underway”⁴² are needed. But will the EU and its member states embrace sweeping changes (e.g., related to some EU core policies, financing models, and underlying governance structures)? Will they show the necessary political stewardship to reform the Union’s operating system? And can they do so without citizens’ endorsement input and pressure?

Citizens’ buy-in will be critical not only for the sake of advancing EU participatory democracy but also as a means of answering calls for more political involvement. It will also be **essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.**

More specifically, ways should be identified to **involve citizens in the effort to reform the EU in the upcoming politico-institutional cycles (2024-2029 & 2029-2034) and in the gradual process of moving enlargement countries towards EU accession.** Following the notion of “thinking enlarged”,⁴³ these processes will require the inclusion of citizens from all over Europe. Unlike in the past, for example, in contrast to the CoFoE experience, citizens and other representatives from (potential) future EU countries

should be given an active role in discussions that aim to determine the long-term future of the Union.

For now, it is unclear if the longed-for silver bullet to the EU’s mounting problems is at all silver or even a bullet. The Union is in uncharted territory as it seeks to tame the new reality and preserve its democratic ethos. To be able to make out the contours of the future EU democratic polity, and ascertain how to fill in the shape, its institutions and members will first have to **get used to feeling uncomfortable, dare to sift through the system, and make peace with the idea of change.**⁴⁴ In so doing, it will get easier to dispel many existing fears and bridge the diverging views and perceptions between the functionalists and sceptics regarding the future of citizens’ participation. A mindset open to *whatever* is necessary to evolve and thrive in line with one’s core tenets will be able to cope far better with the possibility that a higher level of citizens’ participation might disturb the existing inter-institutional balance or improve representative democracy.

The full positive potential of citizens’ participation can only be exploited if all EU institutions, including first and foremost national governments, accept and support the need to reform the Union’s operating system.

More concretely, **the full positive potential of citizens’ participation can only be exploited if all EU institutions, including first and foremost national governments, accept and support the need to reform the Union’s operating system.** Individual institutions’ fears of seeing their power prerogatives undermined can only be effectively countered if the EU and its members adapt the functioning of an enlarging Union to the needs of the 21st century. If the EU27 decide to start moving in this direction, it will reduce some of the inter-institutional fears and, in return, create new opportunities to use citizens’ participation in modernising EU democracy and improving the institutional and policy effectiveness of the Union.

And if adjusting one’s frame of mind is not challenging enough, helping others to do the same adds a further *volet* to the challenge. Both sceptic politicians and citizens will have to be targeted. Familiar ideas about **greater transparency of EU decision-making, smarter communication campaigns, including by media, and more investment at all levels in educational programmes about European affairs and deliberative processes** could help to this end. Reform-oriented stakeholders and advocates of citizens’ participation in the EU, member states, and the broader civil society will need to mobilise in casting the net as wide as possible to start bringing in also the cynics and ‘unconverted’.

All these efforts will be necessary to **counter the widespread perception that a higher level of participatory democracy** can endanger or even replace representative democracy at the European or national level. Explaining the potential benefits and limits of citizens' participation should aim to persuade the sceptics and opponents that a more participatory democracy is not a substitute but a valuable addition to representative democracy, helping to improve its legitimacy and effectiveness. It is essential to explain and showcase that a higher level of citizens' participation cannot only help increase public buy-in but also strengthen the ability of elected policymakers to implement difficult policy decisions. In other words, **participatory democracy is a promising avenue to modernise EU democracy and thereby enhance the effectiveness of liberal representative democracies.**

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In addition, if adaptability becomes the operational word and the Union is serious about giving citizens' deliberations – as one pathway to democratic reform – a real chance, then the EU and its members should also **develop and implement novel, more innovative, and more ambitious participatory instruments that rely on the common endorsement and involvement of all EU institutions.** The Conference on the Future of Europe was by no means an easy inter-institutional exercise. But it was a joint experience that forced the European Commission, Parliament, and Council, as well as representatives from national governments and parliaments, to bridge some of their differences. As a result, they gained common experience and more trust in each other when it comes to involving EU citizens in deliberations about critical issues related to the future of Europe. Citizens' participation instruments under the auspices of only one EU institution can provide added value, as seen in the context of the Commission's 'new generation' ECPs. But they can also increase suspicion on the part of other EU institutions, which might develop misgivings about the respective participatory instrument being used to promote the interests of its 'parent' institution.

Consequently, building on previous experiences, **EU institutions should jointly initiate, organise, and assume responsibility for future efforts aspiring to involve citizens in policymaking while also ensuring that the outcomes of deliberations influence European decisions,** which ultimately require the involvement and support of the three major EU institutions. These joint efforts would not and should not undermine the different stages of the current

decision-making process, like the Commission's right of initiative or the legislative co-decision process between the Parliament and Council. Instead, it is a call for more coordination between the different EU institutions and bodies in the co-design and implementation of new initiatives to enhance trust among them and ensure that the resulting citizens' input is endorsed and used by all stakeholders in the system, in the suitable phases of the Union's policy cycle to guarantee impact.

When seeking new ways of citizens' participation, the Union should follow a functional approach, aiming to **enhance the involvement of citizens at key moments in the EU policymaking process.** Permanent participatory elements, like the Commission's Citizen's Engagement Platform, are welcome as a means of granting citizens the possibility to express their views on European issues and policies on a more continuous basis. Moreover, in general, the potential of online forms of participation should be fully exploited. While lively deliberations demanding prolonged engagement in one go can admittedly be more difficult in an online format, the experience of the CoFoE and 'new generation' ECPs shows that it is perfectly feasible and, at times, even more practical to hold conversations in virtual spaces. Online tools can also help with inclusiveness, bringing new and more diverse views into the debate.

But **citizens' participation in the EU should not be reduced to one single permanent mechanism** (e.g. citizens' assembly). Instead, **the Union should add different specific deliberative instruments to its participatory repertoire,** to fulfil various goals and objectives. In this sense, the Commission's approach of involving European citizens on different policy issues (e.g., food waste, virtual words, and learning mobility in 2023, and potentially on anti-hatred and reconciliation⁴⁵ this year) is correct and should in future foresee even more diverse deliberative methods, as well as the inclusion of citizens from the enlargement countries.

The variety of today's topics and instances where citizens' input can be helpful – or indeed necessary – demands a corresponding multitude of channels to facilitate people's participation and intervention in EU policymaking. Setting up a diversity of participatory tools for different occasions can also help to involve a more significant number of European citizens and politicians in such practices, boosting inclusiveness and familiarity with the instruments of deliberative democracy and improving the awareness of citizens about how the Union operates. A participatory culture relies on ever more people becoming aware and at ease with these processes, which is particularly important given that the EU will remain a complex institutional entity.

By way of illustration, the Union's existing participatory toolbox could expand to include **multilevel citizens' deliberations on (1) the EU's strategic priorities for the next politico-institutional cycle, (2) major transformative topics** related, for example, to the fundamental poly-transition that the EU and its members are and will be confronting in the years to come, **(3) the process that might lead to a substantial reform of**

the Union's governance system, including a potential European Convention, or **(4) the path towards the EU's enlargement to 30+ member states**. In more concrete terms:

- The EU should examine the possibility of creating **'big tent' fora**, where randomly selected citizens from all over Europe and elected representatives from different policy levels (from the local, regional, and national to the European) gather every five years to **discuss and contribute policy details to the Union's strategic agenda for the upcoming politico-institutional cycle**. In addition, these fora, collectively organised by the European Commission, Parliament, and Council, could also meet in the middle of the legislative term to assess progress related to different key policy priorities that had been jointly identified by citizens and elected representatives.
- **Citizens' deliberations on major transformative projects**, including those identified by the 'big tent' fora as the Union's strategic priorities, should foresee local, regional, national, and European citizens' panels involving different sets of randomly selected citizens. These panels can channel and sustain public pressure to reach and then convert policy decisions into concrete action at the European, national, and subnational levels.

In more concrete terms, **the deliberations that took place in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe should be linked to the national citizens' panel** (i.e. "[beEU](#)") that the Belgian Council Presidency has set up. Participants of this national panel should meet 'ambassadors' from the CoFoE to discuss their findings **related to the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI)** and the role that the EU could play in this field. In view of the Union's upcoming politico-institutional cycle (2024-2029), the "[beEU](#)" panel, which includes randomly selected Belgian citizens, will seek to understand the perspectives of the participants on the direction that Europe should take on AI. The results of the panel should not only be shared with EU institutions, as already foreseen by the Belgian Presidency. Its outcome should also be discussed with those who deliberated issues related to the future of AI in the context of the Conference. This would give a transnational dimension to the efforts of the Belgian Presidency by adding a European citizens' perspective to a debate on a fundamental transition challenge faced by the EU and its members. Building on the experience of the Belgian Presidency, **future Council Presidencies should also consider organising citizens' panels on a topic of their choice**, in line with their own agenda of priorities and the broader policy imperatives of the time.

- As the strategic geopolitical imperative of enlargement grows and the permacrisis advances – both heavily straining the EU's current constitutional arrangements and means to respond effectively – the pressure to reform the Union's operating system will continue to grow. And if recent efforts by the EP and Commission to explore more substantial

reforms eventually persuade the European Council to support the launch of a process that could eventually lead to a reform of the Union's governance system (including the potential start of a Convention), the process should be properly prepared. In this context, **a 'European Citizens' Reform Panel' should be set up to accompany the EU's internal reform process**, involving citizens from current and potential future member states. This Panel should be a collective initiative supported and organised by the European Commission, Parliament, and Council. Current and prospective European citizens should be included before and during the proceedings of a potential Convention to give input and/or feedback to decisions. Therefore, 'ambassadors' from the Panel should be invited to participate in the Convention as observers.⁴⁶

The involvement of citizens in a process that could lead to a substantial reform of the European Union would be particularly significant given that a potential amendment of the EU Treaties will have to be ratified in all member states, which in some countries will require a national referendum.⁴⁷ **A more active participation of citizens could help to generate public support and thus counter the danger that the outcome of a future Convention might be rejected in one or the other EU country.** European citizens' inclusion in a potential EU governance reform process could thus help to foster the perception that results were co-created, which could facilitate public endorsement.

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- The complex discussion about the EU's expansion to 30+ member states, with all the multiple and sensitive implications of that process both for the Union and the aspiring countries, suggests the organisation of a **'European Forum on Enlargement'**. In the spirit of 'thinking enlarged', establishing such a Forum would help to intensify the transnational debate, increase public trust on both sides, and foster the knowledge about the complexities of the EU enlargement process. The EU institutions should jointly organise this exercise and engage representatives from all EU and EU-hopeful countries, at all levels: i.e. citizens, civil society, experts, as well as elected policymakers.⁴⁸ Given that progress towards a widening of the EU is widely recognised to be in the fundamental interest of the Union in the new geopolitical context and considering that the process and discussions related to it are likely to take some time, the decision to initiate such a Forum should be taken as soon as possible,

preferably before the start of the next politico-institutional cycle. The basic idea and more concrete suggestions related *inter alia* to the objectives, timetable, choice of topics, and so on, could be discussed in the context of the Commission's pre-enlargement policy review and then incorporated into the European Council's 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda.

These proposals are especially pertinent in the context of the start of the next cycle following the 2024 EP elections. In June, the European Council will agree on its 2024-2029 strategic agenda and, following the elections and the formation of the Union's new leadership configuration, the new Commission will have to set its political priorities for the next five years. **Citizens' involvement could prove useful to European decision-makers in the process of drafting the priorities laid down in these documents, as well as in the effort of formulating and implementing concrete policy actions** and recommendations for specific and potentially contentious or sensitive items (e.g., the green and digital transitions, budget restructuring) on the EU institutions' ensuing 'to-do' lists.

The improvement of existing and the creation of new instruments will need and should be underpinned by adequate financial resources from the EU budget. The Union's future Multiannual Financial Frameworks (MFFs) should thus foresee a dedicated budget line that enables institutions to organise participatory exercises. The EU budget should also be generous enough to allow for proper communication activities/strategies that can help to counter the visibility deficit of these practices by raising their profile and reach across the Union. In addition, European funds for the organisation of citizens' deliberations in the member states and the enlargement countries should be made available and should allow successful applicants from all levels to access them directly – as opposed to via their national governments. **In domestic contexts affected by illiberal tendencies the Union should not rely on national governments alone to foster participatory efforts.** Instead, it should support bottom-up and local or regional participatory initiatives in a manner that is unmediated by political incumbents.

5. Embracing & enabling radical change

Far from adding up to a comprehensive repertoire of action, the recommendations mentioned above seek to indicate the direction of travel for EU democracy in the years to come. The Union's structural problems might be deep-rooted, and the obstacles preventing change might be very tall. But **complex and interrelated crises keep stacking up, and the EU and its members will not be able to indefinitely ignore their own limits.** 2024 is not only a big electoral year for the Union, given the EP vote in June. It is also a momentous electoral year for the rest of the world: eight of the 10 most populous nations will hold elections this year and many of these have been bucking the illiberal democratic trend for decades.⁴⁹ As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa warned, "We will know whether democracy lives or dies by the end of 2024."⁵⁰

Fears, disunity, and muddling through can buy the Union and its members time. But the EU27 will at some point have to unleash its imagination and come up with effective solutions to fundamental existing and future challenges.

In such a volatile geopolitical and geo-economic context, **fears, disunity, and muddling through can buy the Union and its members time. But the EU27 will at some point have to unleash its imagination and come up with effective solutions to fundamental existing and future challenges.** One way to look at the present situation is to interpret today's cumulative crises as external shocks and pressures on the system, i.e. to externalise the problem. But a more pragmatic and proactive approach is to recognise that, in fact, "what we have before us are some breath-taking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems",⁵¹ encouraging the Union to engage in soul-searching, reinvent its democratic political model, and shape the future to its liking. From this perspective, **the way forward is not so much about defence against powerful external threats but rather about critical self-reflection and readiness to self-improve to get the EU in a better position to cope with a testing reality.**

The way ahead is also not about the false choice between incremental or radical change. At this point, **change in the context of the evolving permacrisis will likely be radical**, whether it is piecemeal or wholesale, and the focus should be on the need to adapt as if our survival depended on it – because it does. And **radical change will only be possible if EU citizens feel they have a say when it comes to co-determining the Union's future.**

Dealing with the “enemy within”⁵² will entail a fundamental change in how Europeans think about politics and how they practice democracy. But the work does not start from scratch. EU institutions and the member states have already demonstrated that they can be humble and brave by promoting experimentation with democratic innovations, like citizens’ deliberations. The initiatives implemented over the past decade offer a solid foundation on which to continue building EU participatory democracy through better and new instruments, in a diligent effort to enrich representative democracy and improve the legitimacy and effectiveness

of European governance. While the breadth and depth of the reform imperative remain vast across areas, this work is essential and should be seen through.

Citizens’ participation might not be a miracle solution. But it is one concrete and promising avenue helping the EU to rise to the internal and external challenges that confront the ‘old continent’. Therefore, the Union and its members should grasp it with both hands and break through the invisible ceiling that prevents the EU and European democracy from levelling up.

- ¹ OECD (2020), *Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: catching the deliberative wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris, available at: [Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: catching the deliberative wave](#)
- ² Hierlemann, Dominik, Roch, Stefan, Butcher, Paul, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., and Stratulat, Corina, *Under construction: Citizen participation in the European Union*, Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, Guetersloh, 2022.
- ³ Referenda on European issues, organised at the national rather than European level, proved to reduce democracy from a process to a binary yes-no decision and then lock countries into a choice about issues of enormous complexity and with massive ramifications, without actually increasing people's influence over EU policymaking (Brexit is illustrative in this sense).
- ⁴ See also, Raines, Thomas, Goodwin, Matthew and Cutts, David (2017), *The Future of Europe: Comparing public and elite attitudes*, London: Chatham House or Mair, Peter (2006), "Polity skepticism, party failings and the challenge to European democracy", *Uhlenbeck Lecture 24*, Wassenaar: Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, p. 6.
- ⁵ For a general overview and evaluation of citizens' participation instruments see Hierlemann et al. (2022), *op. cit.*
- ⁶ See, for example, Stratulat, Corina and Butcher, Paul (2018), "[The European citizens' consultations: evaluation report](#)", *EPC Book*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁷ See also Emmanouilidis, Janis A. et al. (2023), "[Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)", *Observatory Report*.
- ⁸ See Demidov, Andrey, Greubel, Johannes, and Petit, Perle (2023), "[Assessing the European Citizens' Panels: greater ambition needed](#)", *Observatory Report*. This paper was elaborated and published in the context of the *EU Democracy Reform Observatory*, which is a joint initiative of Bertelsmann Stiftung, European Policy Centre (EPC), Stiftung Mercator, and King Baudouin Foundation.
- ⁹ OECD (2020), *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ Provided that the sample of participants also engages the unusual suspects. Often, the profile of citizens draws from the more pro-EU and educated than average citizens, which prompts criticism about the representativeness of the views or results for the wider population. In turn, this can undermine the legitimising function of citizens' participation instruments.
- ¹¹ Zuleeg, Fabian (2023), "[Overcoming the European progress illusion](#)", *EPC Commentary*.
- ¹² See Zuleeg, Fabian, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., Borges de Castro, Ricardo (2021), "[Europe in the age of permacrisis](#)", *EPC Commentary*.
- ¹³ Like the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF), the European Peace Facility (EPF) or the decision to grant candidate status to (and by now open accession talks with) Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, as well as give the European perspective to Georgia.
- ¹⁴ Zuleeg, Fabian and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2022), "[Europe's moment of truth: United by adversity?](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ¹⁵ See Stratulat and Butcher (2018), *op. cit.*, Emmanouilidis et al. (2023), *op. cit.*, and Demidov (2023), *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ Bertelsmann Stiftung eupinions Survey (2020), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>.
- ¹⁷ Special Eurobarometer 500 Future of Europe (2021), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer>.
- ¹⁸ For ideas on how citizens' participation could be institutionalised in the EU, see Emmanouilidis et al. (2022), *op. cit.*
- ¹⁹ Commission Recommendation on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes, 12/12/2023, C(2023) 8627 final.
- ²⁰ See [Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties](#), European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2023 on proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties (2022/2051 (INL)), P9-TA (2023) 0427; see also [Parliamentarism, European citizenship and democracy](#), European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2023 (2023/2017 (INI)).
- ²¹ https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/brochures/Documents/From%20local%20to%20European/4082_Citizens%20Consult_brochure_N_FINAL.pdf
- ²² See Emmanouilidis et al. (2023), *op. cit.*
- ²³ See Stratulat and Butcher (2018), *op. cit.*
- ²⁴ See Emmanouilidis et al. (2023), *op. cit.* and Demidov (2023), *op. cit.*
- ²⁵ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/300427/eu-parlament-turnout-for-the-european-elections/>
- ²⁶ See Stratulat and Butcher (2018), *op. cit.*, Emmanouilidis, Janis A. et al. (2023), *op. cit.*, and Demidov (2023), *op. cit.*
- ²⁷ Hierlemann et al. (2022), *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0244_EN.html
- ²⁹ See Duff, Andrew (2023), "[Towards common accord? The European Union contemplates treaty change](#)", EPC Discussion Paper, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³⁰ Demidov (2023), *op. cit.*
- ³¹ Public trust in the government and political institutions has been in free fall since the late 1960s and early 1970s. with political parties – otherwise key markers of modern democratic government – being held in the lowest regard. See, for example, Dalton, Russell J. and Wattenberg, Martin P. (2000), "Party change and the democratic process" in Dalton, Russell J. and Wattenberg, Martin P. (eds.), *Parties without partisans. Political change in advanced industrial democracies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press and Mair (2006), *op. cit.* According to the winter 2020-2021 Standard Eurobarometer, 60% of Europeans distrust their national parliaments and governments, compared to 43% who "tend not to trust" the EU (Standard Eurobarometer 94, winter 2020-2021, "[Public opinion in the European Union](#)", pp.: 8-11).
- ³² See Stratulat, Corina (2021), "[EU enlargement to the Western Balkans – Three observations](#)", *EPC Commentary*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³³ Stratulat, Corina and Lavrelashvili, Teona (2023), "[From rhetoric to action on enlargement: a three-pronged way forward](#)", *EPC Commentary*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³⁴ See Petit, Perle (2023), "[EU-level citizens' participation needs wider institutional support](#)", *EPC Commentary*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³⁵ Duff (2003), *op. cit.*
- ³⁶ See Zuleeg and Emmanouilidis (2022), *Europe's Moment of Truth*, *op. cit.*
- ³⁷ See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Zuleeg, Fabian (2022), "Overcoming the ambition-unity dilemma", *EPC Discussion Paper*; here pp. 3-4.
- ³⁸ See Carney, Mark (2021), *op. cit.*, especially pp.: 449-456.
- ³⁹ Krastev, Ivan, "[Biden can't decide what counts as democracy](#)", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2021.
- ⁴⁰ OECD (2020), *op. cit.*
- ⁴¹ See Stratulat and Butcher (2018), *op. cit.*, Hierlemann et al. (2022), *op. cit.*, Emmanouilidis et al. (2023), *op. cit.*, and Demidov (2023), *op. cit.*
- ⁴² Carney, Mark (2021), *Value(s): climate, credit, covid and how we focus on what matters*, William Collins.
- ⁴³ Brusis, Martin and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (eds.) (2002), *Thinking enlarged. The accession countries and the future of the European Union*, Europa Union Verlag, Bonn.
- ⁴⁴ Stratulat, Corina (2021), "[Forging a new democratic frontier](#)", *Input Paper to the EPC Annual Conference*: "Is Europe still in the global race", Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ⁴⁵ In its recent Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on "[No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred](#)" (JOIN(2023) 51 final, 6/12/2023, p. 19), the European Commission mentioned the organisation of European dialogues in early 2024, with citizens from across the EU, in particular young people, and with decision-makers, experts and members of the most affected communities to discuss reconciliation and produce recommendations on how to move from hatred and division to the shared enjoyment of European values of equality and respect for human rights and dignity.
- ⁴⁶ For a more detailed account of these proposals see: Emmanouilidis et al. (2023), *op. cit.*, Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2022), "[The Future is Now – What next after the Conference on the Future of Europe?](#)", in ELIAMEP and Hanns Seidel Foundation (eds.), *Taking Stock, Moving Forward: Reflections Following the Conference on the Future of Europe*, pp. 4-10.

⁴⁷ Article 48(4) Treaty on European Union (TEU).

⁴⁸ See also Hierlemann, Dominik, Demidov, Andrey and Roch, Stefan (2024), "[The EU's participatory enlargement](#)", Bertelsmann Stiftung Policy Brief 1/2024.

⁴⁹ <https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>

⁵⁰ <https://www.press.org/newsroom/nobel-laureate-maria-ressa-warns-democracy-ballot-upcoming-elections>

⁵¹ John Gardner cited in Carney (2021), *op. cit.*

⁵² Stratulat, Corina (2016), "[The enemy within: are modern European democracies afraid of introspection?](#)", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.



A joint initiative by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the European Policy Centre, the King Baudouin Foundation and the Stiftung Mercator, the EU Democracy Reform Observatory aims to foster debate and discussion on modernising European democracy, providing recommendations on how to make EU democracy and decision-making more legitimate, participatory, and effective.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has revived discussions on participatory democracy and the place of meaningful citizens' participation in the EU. Since the end of the Conference, the Commission has added the citizens' recommendations to its current annual work programme. Furthermore, it has launched its 'new generation' of European Citizens' Panels, to be convened ahead of key legislative proposals.

At the same time, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has openly challenged and contested European democracy, raising serious and fundamental questions about its resilience and future while consistently testing the EU's capacity for concerted political responses and action. It has also prompted reflection, both within the EU institutions and in member states, on whether the EU's constitutional foundations, institutional order, and governance are 'fit for purpose'.

As these two major developments define the context for relaunching debates on European democracy, the EU Democracy Reform Observatory seeks to spark and shape ideas about modernising European democracy through in-depth research, analysis, and debate. Following the work of the Conference Observatory (the consortium's earlier initiative focused on the Conference), the EU Democracy Reform Observatory seeks to advance discussion on the role of participatory democracy in the EU, its connection to representative democracy, and better instruments of citizen participation. Furthermore, the EU Democracy Reform Observatory aims to reflect on how proposals to reform the EU, brought about by the *Zeitenwende*, relate to and address the broader state of European democracy. In this spirit, the Observatory seeks to support EU institutions and decision-makers with fresh and outside-the-box thinking to foster progress on this highly divisive issue.