

# Citizens expect: Lessons from the European Citizens' Consultations

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# Executive summary

The European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs), which took place throughout Europe in 2018, were supposed to bring citizens into the decision-making process and inform the European Council's discussions about the future of the European Union (EU) at the Sibiu Summit on 9 May 2019. In practice, any outcome from the ECCs has been largely absent, and, so far at least, it is unclear if they have been taken on board at all. This is despite the events providing a wealth of information on European citizens' priorities, proposals, and demands.

The reports from the ECCs, published by the member states and collected by the Council of the European Union prior to the December 2018 Summit, reveal that European citizens are concerned about climate change, migration, and the lack of unity in the EU. These results may be predictable, but the details of the discussions do offer valuable insights. Crucially, citizens also clearly demand more information on the EU and a greater voice in its functioning, by means of more systematic engagement. To respond to these expectations, future rounds of ECCs should take place, based upon the lessons learnt during this round, to improve upon the format and ensure that there is adequate and coherent follow-up.

It is imperative that any future repeat of the process defines the scope and purpose of the exercise in advance. This was the fundamental weakness of the 2018 experiment: without any clear definition of its objectives, it is impossible to adequately assess or respond to it. Some organisers interpreted the ECCs as awareness-raising

tools, while others saw them as input for decision-making: without a consensus on this, there is no basis for an effective evaluation.

If the objective is clearly stated and agreed upon from the onset, all of the other questions regarding the appropriate consultation format and methodology can be decided. Should discussions be conducted in a top-down or deliberative format? Should they be organised by governments or by civil society organisations (CSOs)? Should audiences be open or pre-selected? Should topics be set beforehand, or should discussion be kept open? All of these decisions depend on the ECCs' determined purpose.

As the EU enters a new politico-institutional cycle, the immediate priority is to ensure that the ECCs – and citizens' involvement in decision-making more widely – appear prominently on the agenda of the new Commission and subsequent European Council summits. Cooperation between all EU bodies, member states, and CSOs, perhaps coordinated by a civil society-led Task Force, should be the basis of future consultation exercises. This Task Force should be charged with the responsibility of designing improved consultations, both for the purposes of communication and participation, as well as the more politically-sensitive assignment of devising ideas about how these two types of process can best be integrated into the EU's decision-making framework. It is equally important that this process starts quickly, before the 2018 ECCs are completely discredited and forgotten.

## 1. New means of engagement

### *“My voice counts”*

The Autumn 2018 Standard Eurobarometer reveals that, for the first time since the question was first asked in 2004, a majority of European citizens – 51% excluding ‘don't knows’ – believe that their voice counts in the EU (see Graph 1 below). This figure has risen steadily since 2013, jumping 20 percentage points over the past five years. Moreover, fully half of that jump – from 31% to 45% – occurred between 2013 and 2014.<sup>1</sup>

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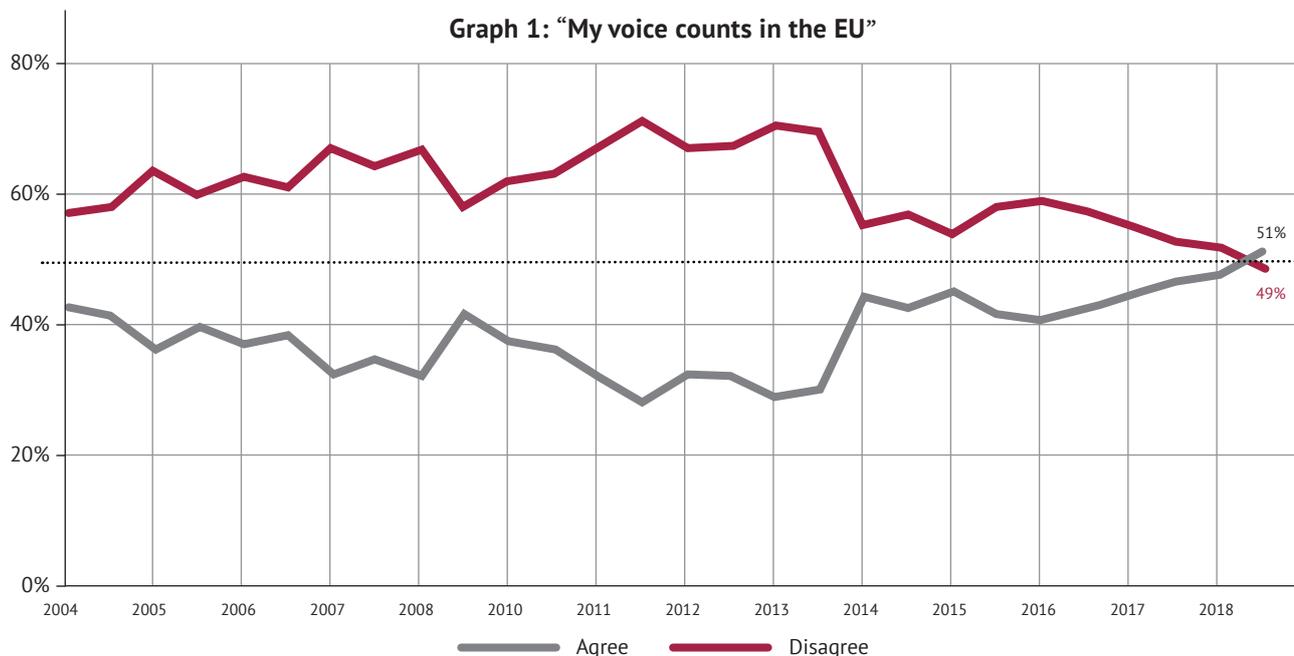
**For the first time since the question was first asked in 2004, a majority of European citizens – 51% excluding ‘don't knows’ – believe that their voice counts in the EU.**

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While a direct correlation might be difficult to establish – and certainly goes beyond the scope of this paper – it is striking to note that this upturn in people's perception of their ability to be heard at the EU level coincides with the 2014-2019 politico-institutional cycle, a period which has seen growing efforts by both EU and national officials to better engage citizens in European affairs.

2013 was the European Year of Citizens and served as the launch pad for the European Commission's Citizens' Dialogues – town-hall discussions on the future of Europe.<sup>2</sup> The new Commission, inaugurated after the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, continued in this effort: Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's programme and mission letter addressed to the College of Commissioners at the start of the mandate strongly emphasised the importance of communicating with citizens about their concerns and priorities. President Juncker's White Paper on the Future of Europe, presented in March 2017, clarified the new approach: “debate, not dictate”.<sup>3</sup>

Graph 1: “My voice counts in the EU”



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 90, December 2018

As the leaders of the European Union came together the same month to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, they too pledged to listen and respond to their citizens, reiterating a commitment made many times before. At the same time, an ambitious idea for “democratic conventions” – where citizens could communicate their wishes directly to European leaders – appeared in the manifesto of a then little-known candidate for the French Presidency, Emmanuel Macron.<sup>4</sup>

So when Macron won the Presidency and proposed to “give the people a voice” in European affairs through “citizens conventions” organised “all over Europe”,<sup>5</sup> the idea fitted nicely into the Commission’s existing ‘Future of Europe’ discussions. The initiative was eventually backed by all 27 member states at an informal European Council Summit in February 2018. More specifically, the member states ultimately endorsed the process of “European Citizens’ Consultations”, following two tracks:

1. At EU level, the Commission would host an online survey consisting of questions formulated by a Citizens’ Panel and made available in all EU languages. In parallel, the Commission would also increase the number of Citizens’ Dialogues to 1,300 by May 2019.
2. At member state level, governments would be in charge of organising physical events in their respective countries and synthesising the results.

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**The demand for more consultations or citizens’ participation in decision-making was mentioned explicitly in half of the national synthesis reports.**

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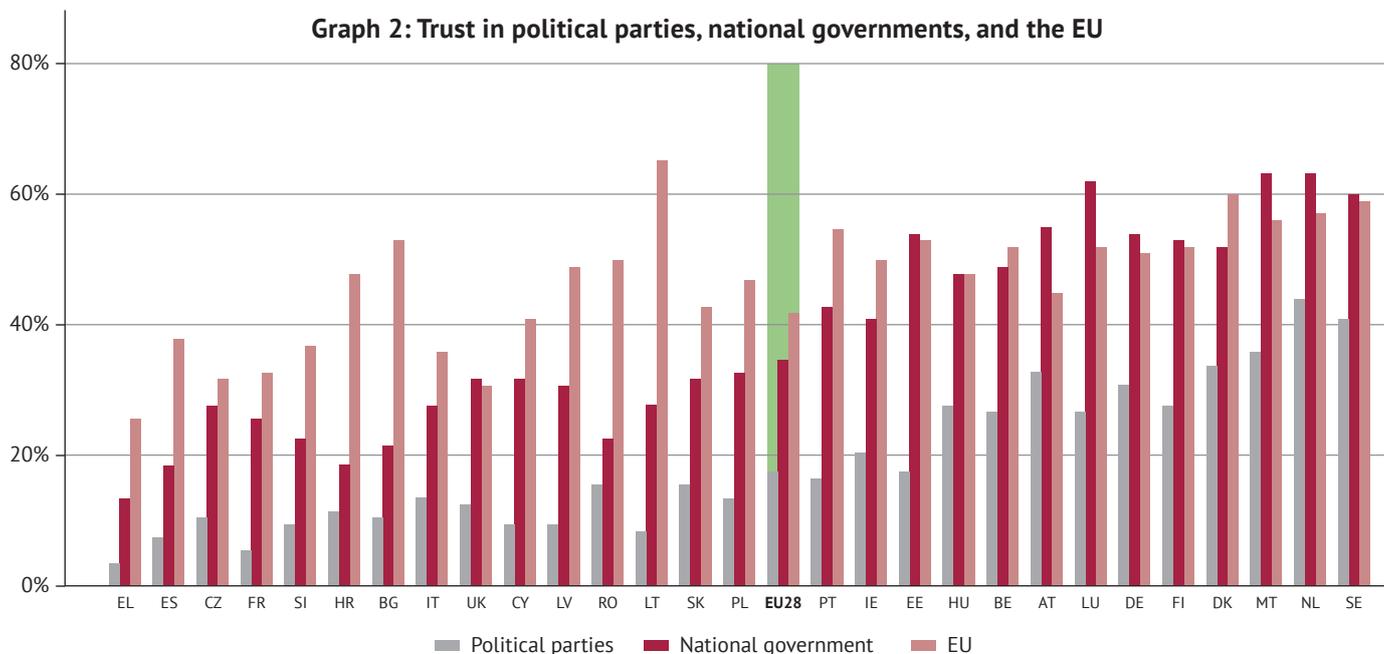
They also agreed to discuss the national syntheses at the European Council in December 2018, which would mark the end of the ECCs process for most member states. For some EU countries<sup>6</sup> and the European Commission, however, the endpoint would be the Leaders’ Summit in Sibiu in May 2019, which would debate the future of the EU and prepare the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024. The ECCs were held across all the member states throughout 2018.<sup>7</sup>

While such developments might not fully account for Europeans’ increasingly positive view of the extent to which they have a say in the EU, it is highly likely that they had a benign influence on the overall trend. This argument is reinforced by the results of the ECCs, which suggest that the exercise was welcomed by European citizens; so much so that the demand for more consultations or citizens’ participation in decision-making was mentioned explicitly in half of the national synthesis reports,<sup>8</sup> while nearly every interviewee questioned for the purpose of this paper<sup>9</sup> informally expressed the view that it would be beneficial to continue the 2018 experiment. In several countries, including Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Slovenia, citizens even called for the ECCs to become a permanent mechanism in the EU. This is the challenge that EU leaders must take up now in response to this first round of consultations.

#### **Populism as reform incentive?**

To be sure, it is possible that the EU-wide surge in support for radical populist parties,<sup>10</sup> which claim to express the will of the people, may have also contributed to making citizens feel better represented in the EU. For example, the electoral success of parties offering ‘alternative’ views to the pro-European forces may have given anti-EU voters the impression that their voice is being heard, where previously they felt unrepresented. However, this prospect only adds force to the plea for regular and more creative ways of strengthening the link between mainstream politicians and electorates, both at national and EU level.

Graph 2: Trust in political parties, national governments, and the EU



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 90, December 2018

In the past few decades, the confidence gap between voters and their leaders has grown tremendously. According to the Autumn 2018 Standard Eurobarometer, political parties – otherwise key markers of modern democratic government – are the least trusted institutions in Europe. In no member state does confidence in political parties cross the 50% threshold, while the average across Europe is just 18% (see Graph 2).

### Political parties are the least trusted institutions in Europe.

Moreover, little more than a third of Europeans (35%) trust their national parliaments and governments, while 42% of those surveyed express trust in the EU. This broadly sums up how many see today’s national political establishments: dishonest, self-serving, and unresponsive to the opinions or interests of ordinary citizens.<sup>11</sup>

Declining trust in democratic institutions might have been celebrated in the past as the birth of the “critical citizen”<sup>12</sup> and taken as a sign of a healthy democracy. However, at present it fosters a sense of unease and even a fear that it has created a rift which breeds not just popular discontent and support for more radical political options, but also indifference towards politics.

Indeed, the feeling that people have been betrayed by those in power seems to go hand in hand with a growing popular unwillingness to participate in the sort of conventional politics that has long been seen as necessary to endorse democracy and ensure democratic legitimacy. As a result, frustrated citizens vote in fewer numbers and with a weaker sense of partisan consistency, and are increasingly averse to committing themselves

to political parties or other traditional institutions (such as trade unions), whether in terms of identification or membership.<sup>13</sup> Put differently, people are abandoning the traditional world of party democracy, where they once interacted with their political leaders and felt a sense of belonging towards them.

There is a silver lining, however: as they withdraw from conventional politics, people are also retreating into more specialised and often *ad hoc* forms of representation. In the emerging knowledge society, better education and access to information and communication technologies have encouraged those who feel orphaned by their political representatives to speak up through new participatory channels, both on- and offline (like petitions, boycotts, demonstrations, or single-issue movements), in the attempt to carve a new niche for themselves in the democratic model.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that citizens still want to be politically engaged, but through new means. The democratic process is therefore increasingly under pressure to evolve in order to better accommodate civic dialogue and involvement in decision-making. In short, citizens expect better.

### The results of the 2018 ECCs provide invaluable lessons for how this project could be improved and taken forward.

In this search for more European civic space and new mechanisms to strengthen democracy, the ECCs’ attempt to connect and listen to the people emerges as a promising experiment. But if these consultations are to be repeated in the future, the results of the 2018 ECCs provide invaluable lessons for how this project could be improved and taken forward to meet those high expectations.

## 2. Lessons of the 2018 ECCs

### **Results and impact: European citizens' priorities**

The results of the consultations largely reflect familiar policy priorities: environmental issues (including climate change) and migration were the 'top' subjects in nearly every country. However, the particular angles that concerned citizens do offer some valuable insights. Much of the discussion on the subject of 'migration', for example, actually dwelt on how the policy response to the migration crisis was a kind of test case for EU unity, solidarity, or effectiveness of decision-making, rather than migration necessarily being a problem in its own right. The EU's perceived inability to respond effectively to the refugee crisis, the lack of cooperation between member states, and the use of immigration as a talking point for populists or extremists were as much a part of the debate as were the subjects of quotas or integration. So even if the 'headline' findings of the consultations were nothing new, the details to be found in the summaries are potentially very useful in revealing the particular aspects on which Europeans lay emphasis. This will allow politicians to shape policy accordingly.

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### **By and large, the topics discussed at the consultations were relatively consistent across member states.**

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Other topics that were frequently raised include European values; concern about the rule of law; how to encourage or build a European identity; and the need for more solidarity, cooperation, and integration between member states. The general impression here was that the EU at present does not work as effectively as it should, and that cooperation between countries could be improved through more cultural exchange, such as via the Erasmus Programme.

Structural funds, mobility within the single market, and dual standards in food products were very important topics in Central and Eastern Europe but largely absent from discussion in Western member states. Economic issues – particularly the euro, job creation, and youth unemployment – were especially prominent in the Southern European countries most affected by the financial and Eurozone crisis: this was the most-discussed topic in Portugal, for example. By and large, however, the topics discussed at the consultations were relatively consistent across member states.

These results may be predictable, but the follow-up on citizens' priorities and suggestions is not. At the national level, there has already been some response to the ECCs. In Germany and Luxembourg, for example, the governments have announced that they will introduce a

new curriculum on the EU in schools, in direct response to the consultations showing that public awareness about Europe, including among young people, is low. The German report, uniquely among the national summaries, concludes by recognising the findings of these events as a mandate for the Federal Government, detailing concrete policy actions to address the people's demands.

Interviewees from the Czech Republic and Portugal also mentioned that the EU is becoming a bigger topic of discussion in their countries, suggesting that this might be linked to the ECCs. For example, virtually every Portuguese political party is currently running a campaign about how they want to listen to the concerns of citizens, playing up the topic of direct participation. That has never been the case until now.

But does this mean that the ECCs have been successful?

If the goal was to influence *European* policy, nearly all of the interviewees said that they were not aware of any follow-up from the EU. The Declaration<sup>15</sup> resulting from the Sibiu Summit, the nominal end-point of the 'Future of Europe' discussions and the time when European leaders determined the Union's priorities for the next five years, did not refer to the ECCs at all; neither the process nor its results. The list of vague commitments it describes covers all the important 'buzzwords', but fails to mention or reflect the discussions conducted with citizens that were intended to be at the heart of the Summit's conclusions. Given that the priority areas invoked by citizens during the ECCs are fully captured by the Summit's 'wish list', the failure to draw a link with the consultations is a missed opportunity that would have given the final Declaration a dose of popular legitimacy without needing to navigate any political sensitivities among member states. It also raises doubts about how seriously European leaders have taken the ECCs, and risks letting down the citizens who participated in the consultations.

Of course, the Commission's online survey remained open until 9 May, and the Union is bracing for a new change of leadership after the EP elections in late May. Hence, feedback – at least on citizens' input – might still arrive.

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### **Citizens and organisers approached the events with different goals in mind, thus complicating the possibility of offering a meaningful follow-up.**

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Yet even if it does, what is the standard against which it can be judged? There is one insuperable obstacle when it comes to trying to assess the ECCs: quite simply, the

overall purpose of the process was never clearly specified. How can the contributions be taken on board at EU level if no clear goal has been set in advance? How can delivery be assessed without a set objective? Lacking this crucial piece of information, an evaluation or conclusion is difficult – but it does provide an important lesson for the next time.

### ***The why***

Perhaps the key takeaway from the ECCs relates to the importance of specifying the exercise's objective(s) in advance: *why* organise such events? The 2018 process, while nominally intended to gather ideas and proposals from the citizens on the future of Europe, in practice was often used by organisers as an awareness-raising or communication tool. This is certainly welcome, especially since citizens expressed a desire for more information on the EU. But it also means that both citizens and organisers approached the events with different goals in mind, thus complicating the possibility of offering a meaningful follow-up. And, based on the national reports – such as those for Belgium and the Netherlands – citizens do expect feedback on their input.

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### **Does the exercise aim to engage in communication, dialogue, and awareness-raising about European affairs, or does it seek to facilitate participation in EU decision-making?**

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Proper feedback is vital for the success of the project. If citizens went into these consultations expecting their contributions to be taken up by leaders, only to then learn that their participation was irrelevant to debates and decisions at the European level, their long-standing perceptions of politicians as unresponsive and unrepresentative, and of the EU as distant and developing beyond their control, are likely to be reinforced. This could then also diminish their support for European integration.

It therefore matters a great deal how national and European politicians respond to the results of this round of ECCs. Even more so, potential future consultations must set clear objectives from the onset so that people can understand and trust the initiative. Does the exercise aim to engage in communication, dialogue, and awareness-raising about European affairs, or does it seek to facilitate participation in EU decision-making?

Without a clear distinction between these two goals, the follow-up to the ECCs has been underwhelming so far. In many countries, discussion about the consultations has been suspended as the campaign for the EP elections gets underway. National media in the member states has hardly shown any interest in the initiative. While some individual events received coverage, the synthesis reports generally did not. Perhaps this is not surprising: events

tend to attract more media attention than publications. Some interviewees, however, also put it down to the ECCs' results not being so different from what they had expected or knew already via other sources. Thus, in their view, the ECCs provided no big 'headline' findings for the media or political parties to pick up.

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### **The follow-up to the ECCs has been underwhelming so far.**

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The ambiguity surrounding the exact goal of these consultations might have helped to bring all member states on board (as described in the EPC-Democratic Society ECCs Evaluation Report<sup>16</sup>), but will not necessarily suffice to maintain their political interest in the process. Those countries which perceived the ECCs as merely a repeat of previous exercises seem poised to continue in these efforts – for example, the consultation processes and presentations about the EU in German schools. Member states for which the whole idea was new, such as Portugal, have also expressed interest to do more in the future in this regard. The Czech Republic intends to organise ECC-style events in the run-up to the Czech European Council Presidency in 2022. Yet, overall, no immediate plans to continue the consultations have been laid out systematically by the member states.

Even President Macron, the 'father' of the initiative, has not referred to it since the discussions at the 2018 December Summit. This silence could see the European Citizens' Consultations file archived with all the other democratic and open government initiatives which have so far failed to make much of a difference.

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### **No immediate plans to continue the consultations have been laid out systematically by the member states.**

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It is also true that even if the member states had introduced the consultations as a new means of allowing participation in EU decisions, the ability to assess whether they had fulfilled their objective would still be difficult in the current system. Decision-making in the EU is complex and multi-layered. Promising a direct translation of citizens' input into policy outcomes is often unrealistic. From this perspective, it seems rather important to ask whether participatory objectives can be secured at all within the EU's existing institutional framework, using available channels or linking to established processes of influence. And if not, would political leaders consider reforming the system and granting it a more participatory dimension?

Ultimately, consultations do not need to merely be about giving people influence over policy processes and outcomes. Communication and dialogue with citizens is an equally important objective of the ECCs. The national reports reveal how little Europeans know about the EU, but they also show how much they crave information on this subject. People's unfamiliarity with the EU was reflected in the fact that a great deal of the proposals raised by citizens were for things that already exist. Examples include qualified majority voting in the European Council (rather than unanimity), a Europe-wide broadcasting news channel, and countering refugee flows by providing support in the countries of origin. This suggests that even when citizens have thought about an issue in enough detail to come up with a proposal, they do not necessarily know what the EU has been doing in this area and could use guidance, for example, from expert fact-checkers, when brainstorming policy suggestions.

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## Communication and dialogue with citizens is an equally important objective of the ECCs.

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Consequently, both participatory and awareness-raising objectives are relevant. European citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand both a greater say in the democratic political process and more knowledge and information about the EU. However, the two goals are distinct from each other. The 2018 ECCs have not properly distinguished between these two objectives, and so their ability to deliver meaningful results has been undermined.

### *The how, who, and what*

Knowing the goals of a consultation can also help the organisers to align their objectives with the means available, both in terms of process design and budget. The experience of the 2018 ECCs has raised several questions about the practical choices involved in designing consultation processes:

- **Should discussions consist of a Q&A session with a politician or expert, or should they use a deliberative format?**

A top-down format might be more useful if the aim of the consultation is to communicate or establish a dialogue or debate on the EU with its participants. The speaker would deliver a certain message and participants would have the chance to respond to it, ask follow-up questions for clarification, or request further information. The intention behind such a format would be to convey information, rather than seek people's opinions or positions on issues.

In turn, a deliberative format seems necessary if the objective is participation in decision-making, as this would allow citizens to discuss topics among themselves

and potentially reach a conclusion without guidance from a politician or other 'authority' figure. In this way, the conclusion is more likely to be an authentic reflection of citizens' own priorities. Deliberations may also give citizens the chance to learn more about the topic of discussion, exchange points of view on the subject with the other participants, and eventually arrive at a position that is more informed than initially. This process is desirable if the goal is to collect input for the purpose of legislating, since a better-informed contribution is likely to produce a higher quality outcome.

- **Should the events be organised by governments or civil society organisations?**

Given how the process was implemented this time, including CSOs did not in itself offer any guarantee that the events would be better than the government-organised ones. In cases where the CSOs were organisations with experience and interest in citizens' participation, they made an effort to include more ambitious methodologies, such as audience selection, online platforms, deliberative focus groups, and so on. But CSOs working on European issues generally relied on the tried-and-tested formats like panel discussions and Q&A sessions.<sup>17</sup> The lesson, then, would be that involving CSOs with experience and expertise in citizens' participation probably leads to an improved consultation design – but contracting a CSO just because they have an interest in EU affairs will not necessarily produce anything more interesting or useful than whatever kind of events the governments would have implemented.

The other lesson seems to be that if the civil society sector is to have a more meaningful and broad engagement, resources also matter. Better funding opportunities should definitely be foreseen next time around, and more should be done to strengthen civic energies through pan-European civil society networks, in which the organisations involved can exchange best practises, seek and provide support to each other, and maintain momentum for the exercise.

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## This round of ECCs suggests that events with open access tend to attract the pro-EU 'usual suspects'.

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It is often the case that events organised by governmental actors are subject to some scepticism or distrust from citizens who perceive them as attempts to spread government-friendly propaganda or 'brainwash' them. Although this aspect was not readily apparent from this project's interviews or desk research, it is possible that CSO involvement could make participants more likely to trust the process by taking it out of the government's hands. In addition, CSOs can help to give a sense of urgency to the priorities and concerns that people raise, in a time when governments might

be reluctant to come forward with proposals for major reforms. Climate change, economic and social issues, migration, security, and the rule of law were often brought up by European citizens in the ECCs. These concerns are not only shared by most member states' publics but are also transnational in nature and scope, thus requiring transnational solutions – something citizens also recognise, based on the results documented in the national syntheses. Civil society organisations or movements can have a big impact on these issues by lending their specific expertise on these topics and raising their salience and EU-wide relevance in national and multi-national events, thus giving force to people's voices, especially at EU level, where action in response to these problems is arguably most realistic and effective. In so doing, civil society's contribution can become an important resource, as opposed to just being noise on the side of the political process.

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### **Choosing appropriate formats is not a question of creativity, but rather of whether the means fit the purpose.**

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#### **► Should events be open to all, or should organisers make efforts to ensure more representative audiences, such as via audience selection?**

This round of ECCs suggests that events with open access tend to attract the pro-EU 'usual suspects'. The chosen policy priorities are an indication of that, but it also emerges from the reports of those countries which have monitored the profile of their participants, and the limited diversity of the citizens at the events was a common complaint in the interviews. Some events, like those in the Netherlands and certain meetings in France and Germany, consisted of participants hand-selected from a set of applications or chosen by a polling company, thus guaranteeing a group of participants that was more diverse in terms of gender, age, and occupation. More specific audiences, on the other hand, seem more appropriate the more specific the topic of the discussion is, and especially if the objective is participatory. For example, a discussion on the Common Agricultural Policy can benefit enormously from a larger number of farmers and agricultural workers in the room. Conversely, the broader or more controversial the issue – for example EU Treaty change or genetically modified organisms – the more desirable it seems to have an audience that is representative, or at least as diverse as possible.

#### **► Should the topic of discussion be general or specific; open or set in advance?**

The general impression – reflected both in national reports and in interviews – is that the broader the subject, the broader the input. Thus, general topics are perhaps more suitable for communication events,

in which participants can ask questions and express their opinions about whichever aspects of the EU they want, thus freely volunteering their personal priorities. Conversely, a narrower topic seems appropriate if the purpose is to collect input for decision-making, as it is more likely to result in a useful conclusion. The experience of the Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland has demonstrated that long-term and in-depth discussions on very specific, and potentially controversial, questions result in detailed outcomes that governments can make good use of in policymaking.

Thus, to answer these and many other related questions, it helps to know what the goal is.

Those implementing such initiatives do not need to improvise from scratch or re-invent the wheel: there is plenty of know-how in this field. Choosing appropriate formats is not a question of creativity, but rather of whether the means fit the purpose, whatever that purpose may be.

The same goes for ensuring that future consultations are not as rushed and underfunded as the 2018 round was. Again, the precise level and direction of ambition will determine the appropriate level of funding to ensure a successful process.

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### **We may find that we have to rethink the ways in which things have been done for a long time; rethink models that have served us well for as long as we can remember. Perhaps we may even have to rethink the decision-making system as a whole to accommodate institutionalised channels of citizens' participation.**

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In conclusion, the guiding question is simply this: why hold these consultations? What do they seek to achieve in concrete terms? Answering the 'why' will help to answer the questions on the 'how', 'who', 'what', and so on.

Answering the 'why' can be sensitive, however. We may find that we have to rethink the ways in which things have been done for a long time; rethink models that have served us well for as long as we can remember. Perhaps we may even have to rethink the decision-making system as a whole to accommodate institutionalised channels of citizens' participation. Some assumptions might need to be revised, others abandoned altogether, while still others – brand new ones – might have to be put in place. Are we ready to do that?

### 3. The next steps

A new politico-institutional cycle will start after the European elections at the end of May. The new leadership will be setting its priorities in the months that follow, and it is vital that the continuation of the process initiated by the ECCs takes a prominent position on its agenda, cutting across policy fields and initiatives.

Before the time comes to hand over the baton, the current European Commission should publish and promote the final report on its online questionnaire. In addition, the Juncker Commission should pass on the conclusions from these ECCs to the next Commission when it is in place, which should build on the process and outcome during its term.

The new European Parliament, too, should play a more active role in the future. After all, many European political parties competing in the 2019 EP vote – both pro-EU (such as the Socialists and Greens) and Eurosceptic (like the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group) – have expressed support for the introduction of new deliberative or participatory fora, so the subject seems to be of interest across the political spectrum.

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**It is vital that the continuation of the process initiated by the ECCs takes a prominent position on the agenda of the new EU leadership.**

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The new EP's involvement can start with 'grilling' the Commissioner nominees. The hearings of the new Commissioners should be used to ensure that the issue of civic dialogue and participation does not end up in the portfolio of just one Commissioner, but rather appears on the agenda of the entire College. The Commission President should 'oversee' the process and make sure that it remains a priority throughout the mandate, for example by referring to the process and its results in the Mission Letters to the Commissioners and in future State of the Union speeches.

The issue should also be included on the agenda of future European Council summits, and the EU leaders should decide how concretely they want to take this forward and with what level of ambition. This should be specified in the Strategic Agenda when it is published. Communication is clearly a must – but with regard to the possibility of allowing more citizen participation in EU decision-making, how far are they willing to go? Is Treaty change the limit? What can be achieved short of Treaty change?

More coordination among all EU bodies will be required to ensure a coherent, efficient, and visible process. Crucially, this includes the European Economic and

Social Committee (EESC) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), which have extensive experience in engaging civil society actors and local and regional authorities in relevant events and outreach. Their insights and reach in the member states will be invaluable for a repeat of the ECCs in the future, and both Committees have demonstrated their eagerness to be at the forefront of any push for more citizens' engagement in the EU. Consider, for example, the joint call by the Committees' Presidents for a "permanent mechanism for structured consultations" that would continue the work of the ECCs and place them at the centre of a continuous process of EU dialogue with citizens.<sup>18</sup>

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**Preparation for future ECCs must begin straight away.**

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To facilitate this coordination and devise the best strategy for implementing future consultations, both for participatory and communication purposes, a Task Force consisting of experts, academics, EU and member state government officials, practitioners, CSOs, and other stakeholders should be established. This Task Force would meet regularly to share experiences and expertise, discuss how to improve the instrument, and create a design that would better integrate it into the EU decision-making process on a long-term basis. It could be coordinated by civil society actors to encourage thinking 'outside the box' beyond short-term political constraints.

The 2018 ECCs took place on a limited budget and within a short timeframe, limiting time for preparation and outreach. There were no dedicated funds for the ECCs in any country, meaning ministries had to allocate money from existing budgets. More resources should be made available to future consultations to ensure their effective set-up, promotion, and implementation. A dedicated budget for the project in each participating state's ministry would be beneficial in determining the appropriate level of ambition, and funds for a more effective EU-wide coordination effort should be included in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

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**Too long a silence could see the initiative fade into oblivion.**

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It is true that further action largely depends on the EU's new leadership and its readiness to put this subject at

the heart of its engagement with citizens and of the way it goes about taking decisions. Yet preparation for future ECCs must begin straight away: the first round in 2018 proved how the pressures of time can contribute to a lacklustre effort. A more ambitious model requires more planning in advance, not least to decide on the initiative's precise purpose. Reaching the point where coordination between actors is streamlined and effective may also take time – and as the results have not been discussed since the European Council Summit in December 2018, too long a silence could see the initiative fade into oblivion. When the new leadership takes office, it should revive the idea and set in train a process of reflection about the lessons learned from the 2018 experience and the ways in which implementation can be improved in the future. If it does not, citizens'

frustrations will increase; they will not lower their expectations from their leaders.

But when it comes to consulting citizens meaningfully and following through effectively, inspiration alone will not suffice. A proper engagement also requires the courage to consider such initiatives as system interventions that must be developed into a new mode of European governance over time and which is qualitatively better at translating our 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic goals into practice. Some fundamental steps in this direction have already been taken, the ECCs being one of them. Leaders now have the opportunity to continue building on this work. In doing so, they would prove that they can be responsive to their citizens' expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2018), [Standard Eurobarometer 90: Autumn 2018](#).

<sup>2</sup> See European Commission, [Citizens' Dialogues](#).

<sup>3</sup> See European Commission (2017), [White Paper on the Future of Europe: Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025](#).

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Macron (2017), [En Marche](#).

<sup>5</sup> Office of the President of the French Republic (2017), [Discours du Président de la République devant le Parlement réuni en congrès](#).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Belgium, Finland, and Lithuania.

<sup>7</sup> Except in Italy, where political factors – notably the crisis resulting from the March 2018 general election – prevented the organisation of ECCs. Also, the United Kingdom decided not to participate given its decision to leave the EU.

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union (2018), [Citizens' Consultations – Executive Summaries](#), Brussels.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, 15 interviews with representatives of government departments, European institutions, and civil society organisations involved in planning, hosting or participating in consultations. The interviews were carried out by phone, Skype, or in person between 14 March and 5 April 2019.

<sup>10</sup> "Across Europe, the average share of the vote for populist parties in national and European parliamentary elections has more than doubled since the 1960s, from around 5 percent to around 13 percent [...]. During the same era, their share of seats has tripled, from 3.8 percent to 12.8 percent." Norris, Pippa (2017), "So is the wave of populist nationalism finished? Hardly," [Washington Post](#).

<sup>11</sup> See also, Raines, Thomas; Matthew Goodwin and David Cutts (2017), [The Future of Europe: Comparing Public and Elite Attitudes](#), London: Chatham House.

<sup>12</sup> Norris, Pippa ed. (1999), [Critical Citizens: Global support for democratic government](#), Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Mair, Peter (2013), [Ruling the Void: The hollowing of Western democracy](#), London: Verso.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Peters, Yvette (2016), "Hollower democracy? Studying the consequences of a changing demos", in Ferdinand Muller-Rommel and Fernando Casal Bértoa (eds.), [Party Politics and Democracy in Europe: Essays in honour of Peter Mair](#), London and New York: Routledge, pp.197-213.

<sup>15</sup> European Council (2019), [The Sibiu Declaration](#).

<sup>16</sup> Stratulat, Corina and Paul Butcher (2018), "The European Citizens' Consultations – Evaluation Report", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

<sup>17</sup> For more details, see Stratulat and Butcher (2018), *op. cit.*, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> Lambertz, Karl-Heinz and Luca Jahier (2018), [Bringing the EU closer to its citizens: The call for an EU permanent mechanism for structured consultations and dialogues with citizens](#), European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.

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