



Assessing the European Citizens' Panels: Greater ambition needed

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a 'new generation' of European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) to be conducted ahead of key legislative proposals.¹ Within just a few months, a pilot set of three ECPs had been established, taking place between December 2022 and May 2023 on the topics of food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility.

There is huge potential for the Panel format to incorporate citizens' perspectives into the legislative process, which stands to result in more robust and democratically legitimate EU-level policymaking. However, as the end of the current politico-institutional cycle approaches, the conclusion of these first Panels begs the question: Will this development in citizen participation at the EU level last beyond the political commitment of this von der Leyen Commission? At this time, it remains unclear whether these Panels will be included in the next Commission's mandate and if they will transform from a political project into an institutional process fully embedded in the EU's policymaking cycle.

Despite the rushed, political nature of the exercise, the Commission managed to establish a core working methodology for the ECPs that can effectively inform key legislative proposals. In a technical way, the ECPs can function as complementary (and can add bottom-up elements) to the Commission's consultation system. However, a number of additional steps are needed to make these Panels a fully functioning process that could reach the ambition of improving the quality of EU democracy.

The Commission should **fully formalise and institutionalise the process** and thus embed it into its internal procedures as part of the EU legislative process. If this happens, the ECPs have the potential to improve the quality of legislation, as well as to keep the Commission in check, testing whether its thinking is in line with citizens' general expectations.

The institutions can – and should – build on the existing process by further **improving the methodology** in six categories: better topic selection and framing; improvement to the deliberative format/style; greater independence, impartiality, and diversity in the experts; broader representativity of citizens; wider public awareness; and increased time to conduct the Panels. Overall, the ECPs help to reveal **the added value that citizen participation can have for EU democracy** at a time when multiple transnational challenges call for more democratic answers. But, the ECPs are only a first step in a longer journey towards making the Union's everyday policymaking process more participatory.

While the 'new generation' ECPs were a welcome exercise in bringing citizens closer to EU policymaking, rather than resting on their laurels, the Commission must now look ahead to future Panels. However, in moving forward, the EU institutions must have more ambition when it comes to citizen participation, building on successful elements of the ECPs but not limiting themselves to the constraints of the format when it comes to connecting citizens to EU processes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Andrey Demidov is a project manager in the project 'New Democracy - protecting and rethinking democracy' at Bertelsmann Foundation, Germany.



Johannes Greubel is Senior Policy Analyst and Head of the Transnationalisation Programme at the European Policy Centre.



Perle Petit is a Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions programme at the European Policy Centre.

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The authors of this report observed all three ECPs, as well as interviewed people involved in organising the Panels to supplement their knowledge and understanding of how the Commission's policymaking process worked.

List of acronyms

CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe
DG	European Commission Directorate General
DG COMM	Directorate-General for Communication
DG CNECT	Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
DG SANTE	Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety
ECI	European Citizens' Initiative
ECPs	European Citizens' Panels

1. Introduction

More than a year has passed since the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) concluded its unprecedented deliberative exercise that put citizens front and centre in the discussions on the future of the EU.² An inter-institutional effort by the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council, the CoFoE brought citizens together in four transnational citizens' panels to discuss several topics in view of developing a series of recommendations on the future of Europe.

Despite concerns³ that there would be little or no further action after the participatory experiment, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen promised during the closing event of the CoFoE on 9 May 2022 that this exercise would not be just a one-off, stating to the citizens present that: "You have proven that this form of democracy works. And I believe we should give it more room, it should become part of the way we make policy. This is why I will propose that, in the future, we give Citizens' Panels the time and resources to make recommendations before we present key legislative proposals."⁴

Her pledge announced a notable step forward in how EU institutions (in this case, the Commission) conduct policymaking and the level to which they involve citizens – as it was the first time in EU history that the Brussels' executive agreed to create space for input from transnational Citizens' Panels in the formulation of new legislation. Despite the novel development that this initiative represents, it represents only the latest (albeit the most potentially ambitious) chapter in a long process of experimentation with participatory processes on the European level, of which the CoFoE (2021-2022) was undoubtedly the most ambitious. Bringing EU decision-makers and citizens to the same table, the CoFoE produced a final document with 49 recommendations and more than 300 proposals for the future of Europe.

The Commission's 'new generation' of ECPs on key legislative proposals is the first direct follow-up to these recommendations and a noteworthy development in the Commission's longstanding efforts to close the gap between citizens and European decision-makers. It also marks a new step in the process of establishing citizen participation as an integral part of the EU's policymaking toolkit.

Overall, the aim of the current Commission is for these ECPs to become a regular feature of the Commission's policymaking process. But after the conclusion of the first pilot ECPs and at the end of the 2019-2024 politico-institutional cycle, with the upcoming European Parliament elections already in sight next year, we are at a crucial point in time to ask whether these efforts can live beyond the political commitment of the von der Leyen Commission to become an established institutional process?

The paper scrutinises the ECPs across three dimensions:

1. Institutional design, i.e. what are the institution's objectives when conducting these Panels, and how do they fit into the Commission's current policymaking cycle?
2. Methodological design, i.e. did the Panels lead to tangible outcomes, which can be useful for decision-makers and how can the process be improved?
3. Political effects, i.e. what is the Panels' political value and how do they fit into the Union's broader institutional landscape and existing participatory infrastructure?⁵

Overall, this research shows that the Commission, within only a few months, managed to establish a prototype for citizen engagement on key legislative proposals. These pilot European Citizens' Panels constitute the backbone of a process that has the potential to provide specific added value to a set of specific objectives, namely, to connect the institutions to citizens and result in more robust EU-level policymaking. Furthermore, involving citizens in EU institutional policy formulation in this way, also in the future, can foster greater democratic legitimacy for EU policymaking, which would improve the quality of EU democracy. But while the concept has been tried and tested in both the CoFoE ECPs, and the pilot 'new generation' ECPs, a number of additional steps are required to make these Panels a genuine contribution to EU democracy. To this end, the Commission should develop the ECPs' design by (1) formalising and institutionalising the Panels and embedding them into the Commission's (and the EU's) formal policymaking structure, (2) improving the ECP methodology, and (3) exploring how citizen participation can add value to EU democracy beyond the Commission's Panels. This paper looks at these three areas in detail and provides concrete recommendations for the future.

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2. European Citizens' Panels: What, when, how

Drawing on the core methodology of the CoFoE European Citizens' Panels, the Commission launched a 'new generation' of European Citizens' Panels, with a view to having regular ECPs as part of the Commission's participatory toolkit. Since December 2022, three such Panels have been conducted on the topics of food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility.

These Panels brought together approximately 150 randomly selected citizens per Panel to discuss a topic linked to an upcoming Commission policy file, to formulate recommendations and feed into and complement the Commission's legislative activities. In each Panel, the deliberations were focused on a guiding question related to a specific upcoming policy.

Each Panel met over three sessions from Friday to Sunday, with Sessions 1 and 3 taking place at the Commission's facilities in Brussels, and Session 2 held virtually. Like the CoFoE, the deliberative method focused on consensus through the sharing of experiences rather than via conflict and debate.

For each of these Panels, the Directorate General (DG) directly involved with the concerned legislative file, jointly with the Commission's Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM), led the design and work of the Panel together with a consortium of specialists in deliberative processes and engagement.⁶ Each Panel was supported by a Knowledge Committee, comprised of a member of the relevant policy DG and a number of selected experts, who worked with the consortium to guide the methodological choices of the Panel.

Each session was divided into both plenary and working groups, with simultaneous translation into all 24 official EU languages. The plenary was the main arena in which citizens received information from experts, while the working group set-up tasked small groups of citizens with narrowing down sub-topics to produce 1-2 final recommendations per group. **Session 1** focused on connecting the citizens to the topic and introducing the structure of the institutions' policymaking process via plenaries with expert input and initial working group breakout sessions. **Session 2** was conducted online and was primarily made up of working group sessions, in which the citizens discussed broad 'topic blocks' that were rotated between groups to refine their ideas. In **Session 3**, the last session of each Panel, all recommendations were finalised within the working groups. They were then collated, presented by citizens in plenary, and voted on.⁷ Overall, across the three ECPs, a total of 67 policy recommendations were produced, which were handed over to relevant policy DGs.

Follow-up to these ECPs is currently being planned – although details are currently scarce. Feedback events with the citizens are being organised in which the Commission will present how they have used the ECP

European Citizens' Panel 1: Food Waste

Discussing food waste to inform the recast of the waste framework directive on the provisions on food waste.

Guiding question: "What actions should be taken by EU Member States, actors in the food supply chain, citizens, and other private and public stakeholders in order to step up the effort to reduce food waste?"

Conducted between: December 2022 – February 2023.

Public consultation held between: May 2022 – August 2022.

Directive adopted: 5 July 2023 (Food waste reduction targets – overview).

Co-led by: DG COMM & DG SANTE.

European Citizens' Panel 2: Virtual Worlds

Discussing Europe's approach to virtual worlds, informing a dedicated communication.

Guiding question: "What vision, principles, and actions should guide the development of desirable and fair virtual worlds?"

Conducted between: February – April 2023.

No public consultation held.

Communication adopted: 11 July 2023 ('An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds: a head start in the next technological transition').

Co-led by: DG COMM & DG CNECT.

European Citizens' Panel 3: Learning Mobility

Discussing the issue of learning mobility for a planned non-legislative recommendation of the Commission.

Guiding question: "How can we make opportunities for learning mobility a reality for everyone?"

Conducted between: March – April 2023.

Public consultation held between: February – May 2023.

Non-legislative recommendation expected: Q3 2023 (no further information at time of publication).

Co-led by: DG COMM & DG EAC.

recommendations, and an inter-DG group is being established to promote the ECP format internally within the Commission. Information about these efforts is expected in due course.

3. The EU institutional context and design

This part provides the EU institutional context in which the ECPs on key legislative proposals operate. It (1) outlines why these Panels were designed and explains what added value they could bring, (2) analyses the Commission’s objectives and priorities regarding the Panels, and (3) assesses the current state of the Panels’ institutionalisation within the Commission’s policymaking structure in light of the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 and the start of a new legislative term.

Overall, the Commission set the right initial priorities when establishing these ECPs: it devised an institutional process that has the potential to improve the quality of the legislative output and enhance outreach to citizens. Furthermore, the pilot ECPs demonstrated that this type of exercise can add value to policymaking and institutional thinking by allowing citizens to actively contribute input to the formulation of legislation. However, to make the Panels a sustainable practice and ensure their added value to the legislative process, there is a need to further formalise the Panels by embedding the format into the Commission’s internal procedures. In this way, the ECPs will be able to fulfil their participatory ambitions and transform from a political objective into an institutional process.

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3.1. COMPLEMENTING EXISTING STRUCTURES: WHAT ADDED VALUE CAN EUROPEAN CITIZENS’ PANELS BRING?

Following the Commission President’s announcement to hold ECPs on key legislative proposals, only a few months later, the Commission announced⁸ that it would hold at least three panels in 2023: on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility.

As such, the Panels complement the existing participatory toolkit. In the preparation of legislative initiatives, it adds to the Commission’s public consultations to give stakeholders – including citizens – the chance to have their say on a given topic. In this way, the results of the

ECPs can feed directly into the Commission’s impact assessments and thus affect the final policy choices the Commission makes in its initiatives.

The Panels are designed as a consultative element of the Commission’s internal preparatory legislative process. They are part of the information-gathering stage that precedes legislation to facilitate evidence-based policymaking. Hence, in line with the Treaty provisions on the Commission’s monopoly of legislative initiative, the Commission conducted these Panels on its own and not as part of an inter-institutional endeavour – despite criticism of this solo implementation, particularly from the European Parliament.⁹

In this institutional context, the ECPs can bring extensive added value to the Commission’s existing policymaking processes in three areas: (1) enriching democratic participation in policymaking, (2) improving the quality of legislative output, and (3) enhancing outreach to citizens and raising their awareness about how EU policymaking functions.

First, ECPs can enrich EU democracy by inserting additional participatory democratic processes into the Commission’s bureaucratic policymaking structure. By assembling a microcosm of the EU’s diversity via the method of random selection, the Panels can improve the access of ordinary citizens to the Union’s policymaking process, which is normally reserved for highly institutionalised and resourceful stakeholders. In doing so, the Panels can help tackle the problem of structural inequality of access to policymaking. By bringing randomly selected citizens into the heart of policymaking, the ECPs can open the ‘black box’ of this process and, thus, increase its transparency.

Second, the participatory process could also improve the quality of the legislative output, contributing to the Commission’s quest for more evidence-based policymaking. By providing lawmakers with new bottom-up perspectives that reflect the concerns and wishes of European citizens, the ECPs involve a larger variety of actors in policy formulation, which increases their evidence base. In addition, these actors, i.e. regular citizens, represent a group that is usually under-represented in the law-making process.¹⁰ Ensuring higher involvement of citizens in this way, the Panels can “bring a wider diversity of perspectives into democratic decision-making”,¹¹ hence also improving the inclusivity of the output.

Third, and more generally, the ECPs can also improve the outreach to and communication with citizens. As such, the Panels can lead to a better understanding by citizens about the EU, its functioning, and its activities – at least with the small group of citizens that is directly involved. Beyond that, media and civil society attention around

the Panels could boost awareness about and engagement with related online consultation processes, if these take place at the same time.¹²

3.2. WHAT WERE THE COMMISSION'S OBJECTIVES?

Against this backdrop, what insights does the Commission expect from citizens? And how do the results from the ECPs fit into the overall policymaking cycle?

An outreach and evidence-gathering tool

Interviews with officials show that, for the Commission, two out of the three objectives outlined above (enriching participation, improving legislative quality, improving outreach) were central. First, the ECPs were assessed as having the potential to improve the quality of legislation. Officials hoped the Panels could either provide new ideas to the Directorate-Generals (DGs) involved or at least function as a check on whether the Commission's thinking aligns with citizens' general views.

Second, the Commission saw the ECPs as a 'public diplomacy tool', fulfilling an outreach function to citizens. As such, interviewees assessed that the ECPs could give citizens a taste of policymaking, which could make the institutions (the Commission in particular), more relatable and somewhat demystify the EU's work.

Democracy-related considerations (i.e. aiming to improve the democratic quality of the system) seemed less of a driving force in the Commission's own assessment at this stage. These perceptions of the key objectives and added value of the ECPs highlight that the Commission understands the Panels predominantly as a consultation tool, meaning simply one element in its consultatory infrastructure.

Internal advocacy

An additional objective of the Commission services preparing the Panels was to foster internal support for the continuation of the ECPs. However, as interviews showed, despite political buy-in, there has been considerable scepticism among officials both within the Secretariat General and several DGs on the added value that citizen participation can provide to the policymaking process. Therefore, DG COMM and members of the former CoFoE Secretariat, who were leading the preparation of the Panels, have been seeking to convince their colleagues within the institution of the advantages of using this type of participatory exercise. The pilot ECPs should thus set a precedent for future Panels, convincing Commission DGs of the contribution that citizen participation can have and encouraging them to engage with the process.

This objective has been particularly essential to those within the Commission advocating for the Panels, as so far, the Panels are more of a political project, without any formal institutionalisation into the existing framework for legislative processes. Therefore, without sufficient

support or institutionalisation, a change in the political leadership following the 2024 European elections may well result in the Panels being abandoned or dropped as a legislative tool.

A key decision by the Commission was to use what 'worked' in the CoFoE context (see part 4), and in this way set a precedent, while step by step 'socialising' a number of DGs into using citizen participation as an integral part of preparing key legislative proposals. According to a Commission official, the general feeling was that this was not the time to experiment with the methodology, but rather to apply the existing model derived from the CoFoE ECPs and take advantage of the positive experience made in the context of the CoFoE framework (in which the ECPs were overall considered to have been successful by the Commission) in order to establish the 'new generation' of panels as soon as possible.

3.3. A FUNCTIONING ELEMENT OF THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS?

Given that they are still a political project, it is not surprising that the ECPs are characterised by a very low degree of institutionalisation. This is the key area in which the Commission needs to make progress if it wants to make the process more meaningful and impactful. Currently, the Commission is already working on first steps aiming to institutionalise the process by providing guidelines for their officials on the successful use of this type of Panel. However, the Commission should go further by including ECPs as a regular consultation tool in its better regulation guidelines. In an attempt to institutionalise the ECPs, three elements should be defined more clearly: (1) When are proposals 'key'? (2) When in the process should they be used and to what end? (3) How to follow-up on the Panels?

When are proposals 'key'?

In autumn 2022, the Commission announced it would hold ECPs on the topics of food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility (see text boxes 1-3).¹⁵ The selection of these three issues as cases for the pilot ECPs was entirely political. Although the Commission declared that the ECPs would be linked to 'key legislative proposals', it did not choose any flagship proposals for these first Panels but rather chose less prominent topics. This experience shows that there is a need to clarify which legislative proposals qualify as key proposals. Although the three topics could be considered 'key' in that they are (loosely) linked to some of the proposals that citizens brought forward in the CoFoE,¹⁴ there was no grand design for the choice of topics, as interviews with officials revealed.

As the selection of topics was made on the political level, two elements were primarily considered. The first criteria was the timing of relevant files. As the ECPs were a political priority, they needed to be concluded as soon as possible in 2023 in order to still be considered in the legislative activities of the current Commission mandate. The chosen files, therefore, had to be planned

for mid-2023 at the latest. Second, the Commission made its selection based on what it considered interesting for citizens and which topics would be guaranteed to deliver practical results. These considerations led to the selection of the three legislative topics.

In future, the decision of whether an ECP is held should be initiated by the DG(s) concerned, looking at whether citizens' input could be useful in gathering evidence and ideas for policy development. The final decision should then lie with the Secretariat-General of the Commission, in line with the institution's legislative planning to identify which processes carry the political weight to consult with citizens, as well as which Panels would provide the most added value to the connected policy file.

Overall, the Commission should use this format selectively, only for very important legislative initiatives. In this way, two criteria should apply. First, the proposal should be a flagship proposal that is essential for one of the central strategic priorities anchored in the Commission's political guidelines.¹⁵ Second, the chosen policy must have citizens as a key stakeholder group, with issues that are of particular concern to the wider public (i.e. legislative proposals whose impact is particularly visible to citizens or are high on the public agenda). In this way, the Panels would give citizens a direct opportunity to have their say on policy innovations that concern or affect them most.

At what point should citizens get involved?

As a general rule, the Panels should involve citizens early on in the policy cycle¹⁶ to give them a say in how policies are designed by the Commission. In broad terms, this goal can be said to have been achieved in the case of the three pilot ECPs. Citizens were a part of the policy formulation for a specific policy file by means of input to the institution's consultation process. In all three Panels, citizens did manage to provide input to the Commission's legislation – even if their involvement came relatively late in this process.¹⁷

Overall, the three Panels had to follow a very tight timetable, and the related (non)legislative proposals were intended to be published by the Commission mere weeks after the Panels had ended. This tight timing meant that citizens' input generally came far too late, as the proposals were already in a very progressed state by the time the Panels were conducted. The ECPs were, therefore, taking place rather detached from the legislative formulation – an issue which officials were aware of but which was considered a necessary compromise against the political objectives of implementing these first Panels as soon as possible.

In the future, Panels should be held as early as possible in the Commission's legislative process, at a point where consulting with citizens would allow them to impact the content of the draft legislation. But such consultations should also not extensively extend the policy cycle. As such, the Panels need to be integrated into existing

timelines so that they can keep the legislative process as streamlined and effective as possible.¹⁸ The ideal way to reach these goals is to establish the Panels as an additional consultation tool that the Commission can activate in addition to and in parallel to the public consultation for the legislation.¹⁹

By becoming an integral part of the institution's consultation toolbox, the ECPs would be held during the public consultation period in which the Commission consults with stakeholders to add to the institutions' evidence-gathering exercise. Currently, only one of the three pilot ECPs – the Panel on learning mobility – followed this model, whereas the consultations for the two other files took place months before citizens were consulted. As a result, the possibility to impact legislation was considerably more limited in the other two Panels.

How to follow-up?

The Commission followed through on its promise to consider the Panels' findings when developing legislation and allowing other institutions to work with their results. The recommendations have been annexed to the legislative files, but this also demonstrates that the ECP results have had an impact on the content of legislation – despite the low level of institutionalisation and the late timing in the preparatory legislative process. Interviews found that Commission officials used the outcome of the ECP on food waste, for example, not just for affirmation but also as evidence for internal Commission decisions when choosing policy options for the given files. The Panels, therefore, show great potential for influencing the policymaking process of the Commission.

The buy-in from the involved DGs is particularly crucial for the follow-up to the outcome of the ECPs. This was not a given if one takes into account the initial scepticism on the part of some DGs²⁰ and the fact that the selection of topics was a top-down exercise. However, according to interviews, by the end of the Panels (albeit to different degrees depending on the involvement and engagement with the process itself by each of the DGs), the DGs involved have become promoters of the ECPs within the Commission, sharing their experience and advocating for the Panels in the decision-making process. With this 'socialisation' by the policy DGs, DG COMM hopes to encourage suggestions for topics from the DGs themselves.

However, there is room for improvement. With the current timetable, citizens' recommendations can only impact the final stage of decisions on the concerned files. As such, they can mainly function as 'affirmation' of decisions that have already been taken. Holding ECPs earlier in the policy formulation process (during the public consultation phases) would enable Panels to provide input to the design of policies and help decision-makers with (difficult) policy choices.

Furthermore, there is a need to streamline how the Panel results are used in the follow-up. In examining the files on food waste and virtual worlds that have been

published in recent weeks, it is clear that the DGs took the recommendations of the citizens into consideration – albeit to different degrees. Whereas the Communication on virtual worlds makes multiple references throughout the entire document to the results of the Panels and how they were taken into account,²¹ the Impact Assessment of the Waste Directive²² only notes that the ECP results have a “broader scope than the current initiative.” Rather than impacting the directive and the food waste targets themselves, the citizens’ recommendations will “support the overarching work of the Commission on food waste and serve as a guide to help Member States in achieving their target.” The impact of the ECPs on the file seems therefore, rather limited.

Finally, the institutional follow-up needs to go beyond referring to and annexing the ECP results to the policy file. It should also communicate to the public clearly how the results were used. Additional fact sheets and infographics on this will be essential for citizens – particularly those involved in the Panels – to understand how their work was and will be taken on board.

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From an institutional perspective, the ECPs are a process which already works towards its expected objectives. To get there, the Commission has already informally established the backbone of an institutional setting. But more can and should be done, including proper institutionalisation by defining an early timeline, clear topic selection, and more concrete follow-up. Such actions would embed the Panels in a clear institutional framework with the promise of greater impact than at present. In this way, closer involvement of citizens in policymaking could lead to more evidence-based policies that more accurately reflect citizens’ concerns.

4. How did the European Citizens’ Panels go?

Despite the rushed, political nature of the exercise, the Commission was able to establish a core working methodology and process for the ECPs which has the potential to effectively inform key legislative proposals. At a fundamental level, the Panels function as a specific tool for a specific context that intends to: (1) complement the Commission’s consultation system with bottom-up elements as an exercise in citizens’ engagement, and (2) deliver on the Commission’s political promise of bringing citizens closer to the policymaking process, reacting to the citizens’ demands in the CoFoE with a very concrete participatory measure.

In the following, the methodological design of the ECPs is assessed from the perspective of whether they functioned both with regard to their current limited purpose and the potentially more ambitious aims for the exercise. In order to strengthen and improve the format ahead of possible future Panels, it will detail the elements that can be considered successful (in terms of the wider context of how the ECPs came to be), before recommending what needs to be addressed by organisers to improve and finetune the methodology of the exercise for the future.

Some aspects of the ECPs performed well, primarily due to several lessons learned from the CoFoE experience. This type of format results in concrete proposals and generally has high levels of citizen engagement. At the same time, the Panels’ current methodology leaves much to be desired, with improvements needed in the following

areas: topic framing, deliberation style/format, expert selection and input, representativity, public awareness, and time.

4.1. WHAT WENT WELL?

a) Lessons from the CoFoE were taken on board

Although the ECPs were heavily based on the experience of the CoFoE (to the point of being considered practically a ‘copy and paste’ exercise of the core methodological framework), there were several developments that did improve the process – particularly regarding the framing of the exercise and how information was provided to citizens.

Framing: Compared to the broad topic clusters²³ of the CoFoE ECPs, the Commission’s ‘new generation’ ECPs²⁴ had a far narrower remit, focusing on one topic directly linked to an upcoming legislative proposal of the Commission. In addition to having a more concise topic (which was also a result of the format, i.e. being participatory exercises on key legislative proposals), the Panels on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility also had a guiding question which underpinned and framed the deliberations, to ensure that the citizens’ recommendations could focus on providing directly relevant input to the upcoming policy.

Information: A common criticism of the CoFoE Panels was that citizens received relatively little information on the process and the content of the topics during the sessions. Most of the information provided to citizens came during dedicated sessions where a select group of experts (mostly made up of academics) gave presentations on particular aspects of the topic cluster. In the ‘new generation’ ECPs, the information shared with citizens was curated by a dedicated ‘Knowledge Committee’, who controlled what, from whom, and when information was offered to citizens. Consequently, more information reached citizens ahead of the Panels, and there was more direct input from experts into the working group sessions.

For each Panel, a Knowledge Committee was established, consisting of between five to eight members. In each iteration, the Committee was comprised of at least one person from the relevant policy DG, and the rest included selected experts from academia, EU organisations, and national and international organisations. The Committee experts were chosen by the policy DG, in (varying levels of) cooperation with the consortium of actors who were contracted to help with the organisational aspects of the Panel.²⁵ The purpose of the Knowledge Committee was to develop the methodology of their respective Panel, devise a guiding question to direct discussions, manage the citizens’ initial deliberation by coming up with topic blocks to narrow down the scope of the discussions (in session 2); selecting input-givers (as expert input came from both members of the Knowledge Committee and a number of additional experts); and preparing elements of the expert input.

An information kit was sent to participants prior to the first session of the Panel, which sought to explain the exercise, the process, and provide background information related to the subject. Written by the respective policy DGs and reviewed by the Knowledge Committee, the information kit was used to inform the citizens ahead of the Panel and to inspire deliberations during some of the working group sessions. Citizens appeared to find this useful, although the kit was only distributed shortly before the start of the Panels, meaning that citizens did not have enough time to absorb or reflect on the information contained within the document.

b) The Panels led to results

The ECPs on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility succeeded in terms of resulting in 20+ proposals per Panel,²⁶ which relate to the respective topic and the Commission’s policy file. Although all of the citizens’ recommendations were adopted, each one was voted on in plenary to determine the level of support per recommendation based on different support scales.²⁷ In this way, in the final list of recommendations, the Commission has an in-depth view of the citizens’ attitudes towards any given recommendation, allowing for comparability against the results of other stakeholder consultation processes. The Panels, therefore, show the potential to function as a valuable compass, not just for the Commission’s policy formation, but also for the work

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c) Participants’ buy-in

Like in the CoFoE, citizens’ engagement with the ECPs was high in each of the three pilot Panels. Throughout the sessions and across the three Panels, citizens spoke about their greater understanding of their own ‘European’ identity and the work of the EU institutions. As is often observed in such participatory exercises,²⁸ the interest of citizens in the Panel topic visibly rose over the course of the sessions. Citizens arrived at the second and third sessions with information clearly independently gathered from their own research, informing themselves about issues (often from a national perspective).

Another point to highlight, more specific to these ECPs as opposed to a phenomenon observed in this type of participatory exercise in general, was the citizens’ level of engagement with the format itself. In plenary sessions across the Panels, citizens offered suggestions and constructive criticism on how to improve the Panel design itself. This was particularly noticeable in the ECP on learning mobility, in which citizens actively and openly questioned the purpose and methodological choices of the Panel (for example, asking the exact purpose of the voting, considering it was based on a graded scale rather than passing a threshold).

4.2. WHAT SHOULD BE IMPROVED?

In the following section, the ECPs are assessed against minimum criteria for improvement to fully meet set objectives in six areas that need adjustment, including: topic framing, deliberation style/format, expert selection and input, representativity, public sphere awareness, and time. These assessments are followed by recommendations on how problematic areas can be addressed in order to advise on how to further consolidate and advance the ECP methodology.

Since the European Citizens’ Panels organised in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe were seen as a success, there was little desire to rethink the

core methodological design of the format. Therefore, the same problems that were observed in the CoFoE also emerged in the ‘new generation’ of Panels. While the use of the CoFoE format allowed the Commission to implement the pilot ECPs quickly, it should, therefore, not rest on these so-called laurels. The ECPs need to develop their own identity as exercises in citizen participation in their own right, with an adapted methodology designed to accommodate their specific place in the Commission’s policymaking process. It is important and vital to rethink the ECP methodology with the understanding of the format’s new focus – i.e. being directly connected to a specific upcoming policy file – with the CoFoE ECPs as an example or as inspiration, not as a foundation to be based on, as has been the case so far.

TOPIC – REFINED SELECTION, FOCUS, AND FRAMING NEEDED

While it was clear that the topic selection for the first three ECPs was dictated by the limited amount of time available to conduct these Panels ahead of the new Commission mandate and the practicalities of the current legislative calendar, the topic choice and framing were still an area of concern in these Panels.

Topic selection and focus of guiding questions

ECP on food waste

Despite the topic of food waste being the most tangible and accessible of the three Panels, the context in which it took place and its connection to the actual policy was lacking. While the policy file relates to food waste targets, the guiding question did not concern the discussion of the targets themselves, focusing instead on how targets would be implemented. This was due to the (acknowledged) fact that the Panel came too late in the policy cycle to impact the drafting of the directive. However, the Commission argues that this is the reason why the question does not relate to the policy, as the recommendations were seen as serving the purpose of influencing later work on actual policy implementation, thereby having an impact in a different way than expected.

ECP on virtual worlds

For this Panel, the topic was abstract yet highly specific, with an element of technicality that made it difficult for citizens to grasp exactly what a ‘metaverse’, as compared to ‘augmented’ and ‘extended’ reality, is, as well as the relevance of this technology in relation to “creating attractive and fair European virtual worlds” (as per the background information featured in the ECP Information Kit). Given that this ECP related to a highly evolving, complex topic and, at the same time, aimed to address a fairly vague guiding question, participants struggled to move forward in their deliberations, compounded by the fact that they did not have sufficient expertise to deal with such a technical subject.

ECP on learning mobility

The topic of the third Panel suffered from a different challenge, that of limited relevance. Learning mobility relates to a small and already fairly privileged group in the EU and does not constitute what could be termed a ‘general problem’ in the same way as, for example, food waste. Many participants in this Panel, therefore, found it difficult to fully connect with the topic and see the purpose of the exercise.

Although selecting topics that each require different types of deliberation for developing recommendations could be useful in terms of experimenting with the format (which was somewhat the case in this pilot stage of the ECPs), all three topics brought to the fore their own problems. In addition to ensuring that the ECPs are held on ‘key’ legislative topics (as detailed in part 3), **at a fundamental level, ECP topics must be comprehensible to citizens.** Providing the basics of the ECP topics (i.e. enough information to allow for informed debate) must be achievable in a limited period of time to serve the Panel’s purpose in the Commission’s policymaking cycle. Having a clear problem or issue for citizens to grasp could also serve to further connect participants to the topic, for instance, through the selection of more divisive or contentious topics, which would further stimulate more intense discussions.

Topic framing

The overall objective of Citizens’ Panels was explained better during these Panels than during the CoFoE ECPs. Given that the ‘new generation’ ECPs aim to inform EU legislation, each Panel started with an explanation of the Union’s decision-making process, laying out where and how citizens’ input would be used in the drafting of legislation (with a mapping of how the institutions function and how the EU policymaking and decision-making process work). However, the contextualisation remained deliberately vague as to how citizens’ input would concretely impact the Commission’s legislative proposal. The explanation provided was focused on the purpose of the ECPs as an exercise within the Commission’s policymaking structure in general rather than concentrating on the Panel itself and the specific policy file it concerned.

Although each of the ECPs had a narrower topic and a linked guiding question, the experts’ input and facilitation did not anchor the citizens’ deliberations to the Panel’s policy file. The connection between the ECPs’ guiding questions and the actual policy files was not clear, which made it difficult for citizens to fully comprehend what was expected of them. For instance, despite ‘food waste’ being the most tangible of the three Panel topics, the context in which this ECP took place and its connection to the waste framework directive was not established. In addition, the guiding question was not always clearly connected to the policy file itself (see previous section).

DELIBERATION STYLE/FORMAT – GREATER CONSISTENCY AND RECOMMENDATION SHARING BETWEEN CITIZENS

All of this is not to suggest that the citizens' work was in vain. The results of their deliberation could still serve the purpose of influencing later efforts on actual policy implementation. However, as has been determined through interviews, the stated purpose of the Panel (i.e. citizens' deliberations inputting into the drafting of legislation) was not necessarily the way in which the input provided by citizens was actually used in the end. This shortcoming might well be connected to the pilot nature of these Panels, which means that the follow-up has not yet been institutionalised and therefore is yet unclear. With evolving institutionalisation, this aspect should be improved in future rounds.

The connection between the policy file and what citizens are asked to produce needs to be obvious, as citizens need to be clear about the specific purpose of the deliberations and how they will aid the Commission's work for each of the Panels. Therefore, the moderators and facilitators of the Panel need to **constantly reference back to the guiding question throughout the sessions** to keep the deliberations on course and the participants focused on the specific policy input aims of the Panel. In addition, the guiding question needs to be featured prominently in the materials (such as the info kit) that are provided to the citizens.

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The issue is not only the connection between the policy file and the guiding question (and therefore the citizens' deliberations) but is also how this link is communicated to citizens. **How the citizens' work will be used should be communicated clearly and transparently to citizens by moderators and institutional representatives** to manage expectations, both during and after the process. Feedback events for citizens are currently being planned and will be central in managing expectations and providing transparency on the process that follows. In this context, it will also be important to remind citizens that the implementation of a legislative act will, particularly in the case of a directive, not be in the hands of the Commission but – after co-decision – rather depends on the member states.

Since there was little desire to rethink the core methodological design of the Panels, the same problems that were observed in the CoFoE were also visible this time around – in particular, a lack of consistency across deliberations in the sub-groups and the insularity of the recommendation-building process.

Consistency across deliberations in sub-groups

In each of the Panels, citizens were divided into twelve working groups. Across the three weekends, citizens stayed in the same groups with the same facilitators. Across and also within the individual Panels, these working groups generally operated very differently from one another, meaning that the standard of deliberation was directly tied to the strength of the facilitator and the facilitation format – which was almost identical to the CoFoE setup. While there were broad guidelines about how to conduct the breakout days, the organisers left it to the facilitators to determine the facilitation format and to bring in their own moderation/facilitation style.

While there are some advantages linked to a high level of flexibility, like facilitators being able to adapt to the dynamics of the group and the personalities of the participating citizens, the lack of concrete guidelines meant that the quality of deliberations was not consistent across the different working groups, affecting the overall quality of recommendation and the reliability of how they were developed. In some working groups, for example, facilitators provided a detailed overview of what would be done in each part of the day's discussion, offering citizens a clear picture of the tasks and objectives they would be working towards. In others, facilitators provided fewer details, not explaining to citizens what exactly their discussions were leading towards, unsurprisingly leading to frustration and confusion on the part of the citizens.

In future, when designing the Panels, organisers should **encourage greater consistency in the deliberation by having a basic deliberative framework for facilitators to use across the working groups.** Doing so would lead to more structured and comparable results across the different working groups. It is important that this framework outlines how the facilitators explain the purpose of both the specific parts of the working group sessions, as well as how the citizens' work features in the wider recommendation-building process. Citizens must be able to understand the purpose of their work throughout and see how their group's efforts connect with the rest of the citizens' work, increasing a sense of ownership across the entire Panel, not just per working group. To support this, the framework should recommend how the ECP's guiding questions should be referred back to throughout the different sessions, to ensure that citizens remain focused on providing input that is fully relevant to the respective policy file.

Insular process

Throughout the Panels, the same citizens in the same small working groups, often in similar linguistic or cultural clusters due to practical restrictions (including interpreter costs and practical limitations), built their recommendations with little interaction with other groups. Although in the second session of the ECPs, 3-4 topic blocks were rotated between the working groups so that each group could provide initial input on all topic areas, the formulation of the recommendations took place at a later stage. In the same way, the input from the 'feedback' given by groups to each others' recommendations was fairly static, and only in a few cases, were any recommendations significantly adapted following this type of input sharing.

This approach led to the duplication of ideas, meaning certain recommendations overlapped. The Commission did not see this as a concern, as this – according to them – showed that the deliberations were successful since citizens were reaching similar conclusions based on the same information. The citizens who were working on equivalent recommendations were frustrated by this, though, only discovering this duplication of work towards the very end of the Panel process.

A primary concern is, therefore, the insular nature of the deliberative and recommendation-building process. Attempts to address this issue (i.e. exchanging proposals between working groups) happened too late in the process, at a time when recommendations were in a well-developed state. As a consequence, citizens did not like being presented with new recommendations that they had not previously worked on and found it difficult to connect to the new sub-topic and ideas they were supposed to finalise.

The Panel organisers should continue to find ways to allow as many citizens as possible to work on each recommendation, to ensure that the final set of recommendations represents the views of the entire Panel. This could be achieved by **mixing the groups and exchanging the recommendations between groups early on and at regular points throughout the process, to guarantee that a greater number of citizens works on each of the proposals**. This is all the more important considering that there is no voting threshold in the final stages of the citizens' work, with every one of the citizens' recommendations being taken forward by the Commission.

Admittedly, mixing groups would complicate the organisation of the working groups and most likely dramatically increase the interpretation costs, but one can assume that the scope of deliberation and, hence, the quality of the outcome would improve significantly. Unnecessary duplication of efforts would also be avoided.

A cost-effective measure would be to have additional feedback sessions during the plenary. Like similar efforts in the CoFoE, the small-scale feedback sessions between working groups did not work as intended, with little development of recommendations post-

feedback. However, in the ECP on learning mobility, citizens presented their proposals in plenary ahead of voting, and other citizens were given the opportunity to ask clarification questions directly to the citizens representing the working group. Citizens were visibly engaged, asking questions and offering their thoughts on the recommendations.

Despite also requiring ample time, adding the possibility to provide feedback or offer points of contention in this way would enhance the quality of recommendations and make sure that the process is seen as a collaborative exercise involving all ECP participants and reflecting thinking across the Panel.

In future, the Panel organisers should thus **provide an opportunity for the plenary to ask questions and offer comments and criticisms on the recommendations of other groups ahead of final working group deliberations**. Feedback shared in this setting should be incorporated into the final discussions before the recommendations are finalised and adopted. Despite also requiring ample time, adding the possibility to provide feedback or offer points of contention in this way would enhance the quality of recommendations and make sure that the process is seen as a collaborative exercise involving all ECP participants and reflecting thinking across the Panel.

EXPERT SELECTION AND INPUT – MORE INDEPENDENCE, IMPARTIALITY, AND DIVERSITY

The level of expert input in the ECPs was a clear improvement compared to the CoFoE, with more interaction between experts and citizens. However, there were still problematic issues in terms of the independence and impartiality of experts, the range of voices/viewpoints, and the space for interaction between citizens and experts. Fundamentally, expert input should primarily focus on providing citizens with all the basics about the Panel topic to enable them to engage in detailed discussion about the finer points of the topic. In addition, experts should explain specific issues about the topic that are relevant for Europe and EU citizens, as well as offer contrasting and alternative viewpoints to enrich and develop the citizens' understanding of the debates surrounding the topic – so that citizens are able to develop their own thoughts and opinions about the subject, bringing their own impressions and local perspectives to the deliberations. The purpose is not for citizens to become experts themselves but rather for them to be able to make decisions that are well informed.

Independence and impartiality of experts

Across the Panels, there were concerns about the lack of impartiality of experts due to the selection process. In each of the ECPs, the experts were chosen by the Knowledge Committee, which had the responsibility to secure and brief the experts, as well as prepare parts of the expert input to be shared during the Panels. The respective policy DGs led the work of the Committee, albeit to different degrees across the Panels. For instance, in the ECPs on food waste and learning mobility, there was a far heavier role for, and more obvious input from, the policy DGs (DG SANTE and DG EAC), which influenced the breadth of information that the citizens received. As a result, these Panels leaned towards experts with ties to the Commission or experts who would be directly affected by the result of the Panel – with the effect that at times there was little discussion of the greater ramifications of the issues at hand or more differentiated/heterogeneous information on the topic.

As a result, this had an effect on the citizens' recommendations. A clear example was within the ECP on food waste, where, on the last day of the final session, one of the citizens' recommendations was rewritten by DG SANTE experts just ahead of voting, without the citizens having sufficient time to discuss the edits. Another example from the same Panel was when a citizen returned to group deliberations after interacting with one of the experts during the break and cited the organisation that the expert was representing, suggesting that it should be referenced as the organisation to implement the recommendation.

Greater impartiality within the leadership and membership of the Knowledge Committee, and therefore greater independence in the expert selection, is imperative in future ECPs. The relevant policy DG(s) should continue to be represented within the Committee to ensure the link to the policy file, and to share the expertise of the Commission on the topic at hand. However, their number should be limited, and they should not be able to steer the expert selection or control the input that is given to citizens.

A clear set of guidelines for selecting experts (for both members of the Committee and input-givers) needs to be established. Attention should be paid to ensuring that a set of criteria is followed for selecting each expert (including ensuring that the full spectrum of stakeholder views are represented, civil society and underrepresented views), as well as the group of experts as a whole.

Experts should also be instructed to make their personal stances and motivations clear to the citizens. Full transparency is needed, with experts explaining where they, and the organisations they may be representing, feature in the debate on the issues related to the topic.

Organisers should **distinguish between expert sessions, which are about informing citizens with the help of impartial experts** (researchers, analysts)

and stakeholder sessions, providing information about the positions and priorities of affected stakeholders (such as industries, consumer groups, NGOs). This may help provide citizens with a fuller picture of the reality, while clearly distinguishing between expert views and stakeholder interests.

Range of expert voices

A related concern to the impartiality of and the selection process of experts was the range of voices/views represented in the Panels. During the sessions, citizens were not always presented with enough opinions or expert views to cover the various perspectives in the discourse around each topic.

The ECP on virtual worlds, however, functioned as the best example when compared to the other Panels. This ECP incorporated the widest range of expert voices, particularly including more alternative voices. For example, one of the experts was a visual artist who was asked to provide input on the potential use of metaverses – albeit for a shorter time than the other experts and without the opportunity for participants to ask questions like with the other experts. In this way, it is worth noting that although alternative voices were able to express their positions/opinions, they were featured less prominently than more 'traditional' experts (which, as seen in the CoFoE, tend to be from the academia). With this range of voices in play, there was the possibility of more divergent or contrasting input sessions with experts presenting opposing views. This worked well in terms of giving citizens various options of directions in which they could position themselves on the topic and illustrated the different facets of the issue areas to be considered in their deliberations.

In future Panels, **organisers should ensure a wide range of expert and stakeholder voices, including opposed voices and views.** This should be done from the earliest possible stage in the Panels, to ensure that the scope of issues and potentially different avenues to examine the topic are made obvious to citizens before they start their discussions. By doing so, citizens can form their own understanding and opinions, helping them to rely less on the input of certain experts and more on their thoughts about the topic.

Interaction between citizens and experts

There were two types of interaction between citizens and experts: in plenary and in the working groups (not including informal exchanges during the breaks and in the evenings after the day's work). Despite a number of opportunities for citizens to directly interact with experts (i.e. during Q&A sessions in plenary and debates in the working groups, where the experts rotated around the groups in person), citizens voiced complaints that there was not enough information from experts to improve the specificity and depth of their recommendations. For instance, in the ECP on virtual worlds, citizens struggled with the concept of what a 'metaverse' was, up to and including during the third session, where they were asked to finalise their recommendations.²⁹

Like in the CoFoE, where there was the possibility of checking information with a fact-checking service, in each of the ECPs there was a Knowledge and Information Centre that worked behind the scenes to answer citizens' questions and queries. These questions were gathered during the working group sessions (depending on whether the particular working group facilitator explained to citizens that they could make use of this service or not). The questions were either answered in text form, in person during the plenary (with the questions collated into topic areas), or by experts in the final working group sessions. However, as in the CoFoE, this service was opaque, without a clear explanation of who comprised this Centre and how the information was gathered. **The composition of the Centre needs to be transparent, as well as how and with what tools they develop the responses to the questions.**

In addition, the quality of some of the responses to the citizens' questions was inadequate and would often come too late after the initial query. For example, as observed in a working group in the Panel on learning mobility, citizens asked what learning mobility schemes or programmes exist for older citizens. Yet, the response from the Centre did not detail what currently exists in this respect. As a result, the concern of citizens was not addressed – much to the irritation of the participants in the respective working group. In general, the time it took for the citizens to receive answers to their questions from the Centre was also an issue. Often, the deliberations had moved substantially further before citizens received a response, with the answer coming too late to influence/matter for their recommendation.

Therefore, **within the Knowledge and Information Centre, it would be advisable to have a dedicated fact-checker allocated to support each of the working groups** to streamline the information-request process. These fact-checkers could respond quickly to knowledge gaps and certain points of confusion, while more time could be taken by experts to answer the difficult questions (i.e. those that require a more nuanced or detailed answer). In replying to simpler requests, these fact-checkers could work independently, without the need for other members of the Centre to 'sign off' on each response – thereby shortening the process and providing the input that citizens' need quicker. In addition, the facilitators in the working groups must ensure that they properly avail themselves of this capacity, using the service as much as necessary to support the citizens discussions.

REPRESENTATIVITY – BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPANTS' NEEDS

The Panel participants comprised EU citizens from across all member states, with the selection process taking age (with a purposeful overrepresentation of younger voices, like in the CoFoE),³⁰ gender (male/female only), educational background, employment status, and urban/rural location criteria into consideration.³¹ As is often the case in this type of exercise, a certain percentage of

self-selection was observed in the ECPs, as well as an overrepresentation of more privileged citizens and an underrepresentation of marginalised communities.

Representativity of EU demographics

Broadly speaking, the basic selection criteria set by the Commission and consortium were met in the three ECPs. However, certain groups were overrepresented, particularly citizens with high levels of education and a demonstrable interest in the Panel topic,³² as well as a partial selection skew towards participants with a relatively positive image of the EU. This is a common risk in such exercises, as participants who have a pre-existing interest in European affairs are more likely to accept the invitation of an EU institution to participate in a citizens' panel than citizens who are indifferent or who have a negative impression of the Union.

A linked issue is the fairly demanding nature of the Panels (in terms of time, intensity of work, and travelling required by citizens), which also affects the representativeness of the selected citizens. Across the three ECPs, there was relatively short notice given to participants ahead of the start of the Panel. For instance, in the Panel on food waste, citizens received their invitations only two weeks ahead of the first session. Some citizens also had a long distance to travel to the sessions that took place in Brussels, adding to the Panels' schedules. This means that it was difficult to access typically underrepresented groups who are subject to particular time constraints (for instance, caregivers and workers with inhospitable hours such as weekend or night shifts). In addition, these conditions increased the likelihood that a higher number of people with an existing connection to the topic were more inclined to accept the invitation due to personal interest.

In future ECPs, the **participant selection needs to be made considerably further in advance, with specific demographic targets that would encompass a wide and representative understanding of the diversity of people living in EU member states** (with a focus on representing minority and underrepresented groups). Making the Panels less demanding (for example, having higher levels of flexibility with online sessions or having shorter but more frequent sessions) could also increase the prospect of having a more representative and diverse set of participants. Such changes could allow for people with less freedom over their time, including, for example, people with care duties or people who have difficulties travelling to Brussels (be it due to the distance or mobility issues), to take part in future ECPs. Therefore, **alternative options for the length and time of the Panels need to be considered**, with greater flexibility for citizens (suggestions for changing the time for the Panels are detailed below).

Representativity of the diversity of people living in the EU

During the CoFoE ECPs, representativity and diversity were frequently highlighted as shortcomings.³³ Given the methodological similarities between the exercises, the Commission's ECPs faced the same problems concerning

the representativity of citizens involved in the exercise. One issue that needs to be tackled relates to the question of how representativity and diversity are defined in practice. For the ECPs to be representative of the EU's diversity, there needs to be a wider understanding of the diversity of people who live in the EU.

Living in the EU and being part of the Union's future needs to become the criteria for eligibility. The current set-up does not take into account marginalised and underrepresented communities, for example, ethnic minority groups and residents without EU passports.³⁴ With around 24 million people living in the Union³⁵ who do not have EU citizenship but who are affected by the Union's policies, **eligibility to take part in the Panels should not be restricted to citizens with EU member state nationality**. Rather, the selection criteria should take into account a wider appreciation of who is affected by EU policy within the EU.

PUBLIC AWARENESS – MORE VISIBILITY THROUGH CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS AND PUBLIC EVENTS

In the ECPs on virtual worlds and learning mobility, 40+ media representatives from across the EU were brought to Brussels for session 3 (at the Commission's expense). Informed about the ECPs and allowed to attend all aspects of this final session, very little media coverage – either in Brussels or in member states – was visibly generated from these efforts. Another way in which the ECP organisers attempted to raise awareness of the Panels was by using digital media instruments, such as building an entire metaverse to host the second session of the ECP on virtual worlds or the creation of a specific Instagram filter to publicise the Panels. None of these attempts, however, gained much traction in the public sphere.

Overall, like in the CoFoE, there is little appetite for these Panels in the news – despite additional efforts to promote the ECPs in the public sphere. However, the Commission cannot just rely on the 'word-of-mouth' effect of conducting Panels, i.e. via citizens sharing their experiences at the Panel at the local level and in their own networks. This public attention deficit could be addressed through a more careful selection of the ECP topics. For instance, **there would be more interest in future ECPs if they dealt with significant and more political policy questions**. In addition, **having regular and highly publicised events connected to the Panels (for example, feedback events) could increase the overall visibility of the Panels**.

In this way, higher public awareness of the ECPs and their results could increase the 'pressure function' on the EU to deliver on objectives set by specific legislative proposals. With citizens involved in the process and public visibility, including after the end of the Panel, it is possible that the chances for certain legislative proposals to become legislation would be substantially improved.

TIME – MORE SPACE FOR DELIBERATION AND EXPERT INPUT

Many of the issues raised above are linked to one fundamental problem: lack of time. Following the CoFoE template of three weekend-long sessions in short proximity of each other, the intensive working days did not provide citizens with enough time to fully develop recommendations in the greater context of the policy file. It was challenging for citizens to fully familiarise themselves with all the facets of the topic in such a short time span, considering that most of them had very little prior knowledge of the issues discussed. Also, for enhanced expert input and more variety/mixing in the group work, the allocated time was insufficient.

Future Panels should foresee more time for deliberations and expert input. To this end, two options could be feasible:

1. Adding a fourth weekend session to allow for the extra time needed to deepen the exchange among citizens.
2. Having shorter (online) sessions on a more regular basis, which are less demanding for citizens, allowing them more time to develop their own understanding and opinions about the topic. This could also make the citizen selection more representative by putting less pressure on citizens who have, for example, care responsibilities or jobs with unsociable hours. For example, session 2 could be replaced with several shorter one-day and/or several evening (online) sessions, where participants could interact with experts before short brainstorming sessions. This would also allow the possibility to pass recommendations across and through different groups, improving ownership over the overall set of recommendations by a greater number of participants, which would affect the aforementioned concerns of deliberation quality.

4.3. UNLOCKING THE ECPs' FULL POTENTIAL

Through the first three pilot Panels, the Commission proved the concept and added value that the ECPs can bring to the legislative process. The ECPs technically met the Commission's own objectives (as outlined earlier in the paper) and functioned as a relatively isolated exercise in the sense that: (1) Panels took place within a few months of being announced, and each produced a number of recommendations relevant to the work of the Commission and (2) citizens and Commission officials involved generally bought into the overall logic and methodology of the Panels. To some extent, they also met the outreach function – at least in the small circle of citizens involved and their direct environments.

However, there is room for improvement in future by mitigating some of the ECPs' biggest flaws. In most cases, such improvement would merely require some methodological rethinking and general standardisation across the process – although these would, of course, incur greater costs in an already expensive exercise.³⁶ In this way,

further developing the ‘new generation’ of ECPs, as distinct from the CoFoE ECPs, would already be an important step in evolving the Commission’s ECPs’ own participatory

identity, with methodological choices made from the perspective of enhancing the link between the citizens’ input and the legislative proposal the Panel is tied to.

Table 1. Overview of recommendations for future organisers of ECPs

Topic	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that ECP topics are tangible and comprehensible, with wide relevance for citizens. • Provide clarity regarding the purpose and use of the citizens’ work of the specific ECP. • Establish a clearer connection between the guiding question and the ECP’s policy file itself. • Make constant reference to the guiding question during sessions to help focus citizens’ deliberations and ensure a connection between output and the ECP’s policy file. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage expectations by communicating throughout the process how citizens’ feedback will be used after the end of the Panel. • Communicate clearly about feedback events after the end of the Panel process.
Deliberation style/format	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage greater consistency across working group deliberations and recommendation building. • Implement a basic deliberative framework for facilitators to use across working group sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix the groups and exchange recommendations between groups early on and at regular points throughout the process. • Dedicate time in the agenda for citizens to comment on other groups’ recommendations in plenary ahead of final working group deliberations.
Expert selection and input	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure greater impartiality within the membership and leadership of the Knowledge Committee. • Ensure transparency in the composition of the Knowledge Committee’s Knowledge and Information Centre, as well as how they conduct their research to answer the citizens’ questions. • Guarantee the independence and impartiality of experts by implementing a clear set of guidelines for selecting experts (including criteria for ensuring a diversity of views). • Distinguish between expert sessions providing information and stakeholder sessions providing an overview of positions and interests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruct experts/stakeholders to make their personal stances and motivations clear to the citizens from the very start. • Involve a wide range of expert voices, including conflicting voices and views, from the initial expert input stages. • Dedicate a fact-checker per working group in the Knowledge and Information Centre (KIC) to streamline the information-request process, and to allow the KIC experts to focus on difficult, or more nuanced, questions from the citizens.
Representativity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise citizen selection further in advance of the start of the Panel. • Establish specific targets for the citizen selection with wider demographics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure greater flexibility by considering alternative options for the length and time of the Panels. • Review eligibility criteria to increase the representativity of Panel participants to be representative of EU demographics (focusing on underrepresented and marginalised groups).
Public awareness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage increased visibility of Panels in national and Brussels media. • Consider selecting significant and more political policy issues as Panel topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise regular and highly publicised events (including feedback events) after the end of the Panel.
Time	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include more time for deliberations and expert input. 	

5. Looking ahead: ECPs, citizen participation, and European democracy

Overall, the ECPs are a step forward in the EU's attempt to rethink its engagement with citizens and explore the added value that citizen participation can bring to European democracy. At the same time, however, the three pilot Panels are merely the start of the journey towards introducing more participatory elements into the Union's policymaking processes.

5.1. ECPs: ENHANCING DEMOCRACY IN THE EU?

In her 2022 State of the Union address, Commission President von der Leyen's reference to the Panels as a "regular feature of [the EU's] democratic life" indicates how the Commission sees the Panels as a permanent instrument that could enrich EU democracy. From this perspective, the Commission indeed acted as a forerunner among the EU institutions in terms of involving citizens more closely in policymaking at the EU level. The Commission's decision to quickly follow-up on the CoFoE by setting up this first 'generation' of Panels had two positive effects on EU participatory democracy. First, it further legitimised sortition-based deliberation as a working format for EU policymaking. Second, it set the first stepping stone in its institutionalisation within the Union's policymaking structure.

By organising these Panels on key legislative proposals, the Commission has shown that this format can produce results in both large-scale initiatives like the CoFoE as well as smaller-scale, specific policy goal-oriented initiatives. The experience of the ECPs demonstrates that for the Commission, the Panels will not be a one-off exercise, but a more regular feature once they are embedded into the Union's policy cycle – provided there is sufficient institutional buy-in within the Commission services to ensure that they become a fixture in the EU's policy drafting process. In summary, regular Panels can be effective as input to policymaking and can function as consultative tools if they are organised with sufficient attention to methodology.

As argued in Part 3, the democratic potential of the ECPs lies in them improving the access of citizens to EU policymaking, making the process more transparent, and instigating truly transnational debates on politically significant issues. So far, the three pilot ECPs have only partially lived up to these expectations.

The ECPs have undoubtedly introduced the complicated process of EU policymaking to ordinary citizens, as those citizens directly involved in the Panels not only had a chance to observe the process but were also consulted in the formulation of legislative proposals. So far, this space has been the reserve of other actors such as organised civil society representatives, social partners and/or other interest groups. Via the process of random selection, the

ECPs created the possibility for EU citizens to have a say on a transnational scale about the Union's policies that affect them. This offers citizens a novel opportunity to be more actively involved in EU processes, as their other opportunities for involvement are rather slim due to the lack of channels outside of traditional representative politics. From this perspective, the Panels made a first step in attempting to reduce structural inequalities – i.e. who has the right to access EU policymaking and expanding that access to citizens whose backgrounds or social positions do not guarantee to impact EU policymaking.

In addition, when compared to other participatory instruments, such as petitions or online consultations, the access-opening effects of the Panels are greater.⁵⁷ Existing participatory instruments are often biased towards certain categories of citizens – those who possess specific skills, enjoy access to technical means, and possess knowledge on how to use these instruments, including about the existence of such instruments. In this context, the Panels clearly tackle the problem of exclusion better and more effectively than other already existing participatory instruments.

As explicitly confirmed by citizens, the ECPs have also helped to open the 'black box' of what many citizens perceive as an obscure, closed, and largely invisible process of creating policies 'somewhere in Brussels'. Although participating citizens did not get acquainted with everything that happens behind closed doors, the Panels shed some light on the internal elements of the EU's legislative process and increased their knowledge of the remit of the EU institutions, legislative processes, and the steps of policy formulation. If the ECPs become a regularly employed instrument in the Union's policymaking toolkit, this effect can be further multiplied.

Even though the first iteration of the Panels provided an opportunity for citizens to access the Union's policymaking process (and future ECPs can continue to offer this opportunity), the democratising effects of the Panels should not be overestimated. The ECPs have so far been a gateway to EU policymaking for a small group of citizens within a limited time frame. It should not be dismissed that the Panels have shed light on just one step of the complex EU policymaking process residing within one EU institution (i.e. the Commission).

So far, the ECPs have not contributed to creating a broader transnational discourse around policy issues. Given the way in which they were organised, the Panels did not 'tick' the boxes necessary for this effect to transpire. First, the topics for deliberation were somewhat low-key and peripheral when compared to larger debate-triggering issues relevant to the EU context. The chances that the Panels on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility would generate a larger

European discussion were quite slim from the beginning. Second, the discussions in the pilot ECPs did not ‘hit the headlines’ of major EU or national media outlets on which these debates could have been (extensively) reported on. As such, they did not inform the non-participating public. The choice of topics likely plays an important role in generating visibility for such participatory exercises, with the potential to involve EU and national-level media more closely for targeted reporting.

Nevertheless, the ECPs, as a format of citizen participation, can function as a space in which meaningful transnational political controversy or disagreement could be resolved via genuine deliberation. The case of Ireland, where nationwide citizens’ assemblies have become a space for in-depth discussion on politically divisive topics such as abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights,³⁸ shows the debate-generating potential of such exercises. At present, the EU faces the challenge of coming up with more ambitious regulations, legislation, and policies that could tackle common European challenges such as the twin transition (green and digital), migration, or the Union’s strategic capacity in the international arena. The success of attempts to resolve these challenges will to a large extent depend on the EU’s ability to generate public awareness, support and acceptance of its decisions, an outcome that, in turn, depends on public involvement in debating the pros and cons of the proposed solutions. In this light, the capacity of citizens’ panels to trigger and sustain debates involving citizens from all over Europe, and to push the EU to act more ambitiously acquires even greater importance.

Overall, citizens’ panels, as a novel participatory format, have the potential to enhance democratic aspects of EU policymaking. It is important to note, however, that ECPs are a specific participatory tool designed for a particular purpose: providing input to legislative formulation primarily in a consultative capacity. To maximise their contribution to a more democratic policymaking process, it is crucial to go beyond the current format of ECPs and expand the role of citizen participation in the EU. The following section explores possible pathways to advance in this direction.

5.2. LOOKING AHEAD: NEXT STEPS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE EU

Beyond specific changes to the ECP format itself, what else could the EU institutions do to deliver on the democratic potential that citizen participation has for policymaking at the European level? The following section discusses concrete recommendations on how to further citizen participation efforts in the EU.

a) From institutionalisation to inter-institutionalisation

The proper institutionalisation of the ECPs into the Commission’s working methods will benefit the policymaking process – and indeed the Commission is undertaking first steps towards this end. However, full institutionalisation needs to go beyond just the

Commission as an implementing actor. As Commission proposals enter co-decision after their adoption, it is essential to also get buy-in for the process from the European Parliament and the (European) Council.

Welcome progress in this direction could be to bring on board all three EU institutions via, for example, an Interinstitutional Agreement.³⁹ To date, the Commission designed and held the ECPs on its own, without consultation or buy in from other institutions. The European Parliament, in particular, has been critical of this solo approach, hoping to be more involved in future transnational citizens’ participation practices in the EU.⁴⁰ An Interinstitutional Agreement could, therefore, help to foster a shared understanding of what citizens’ panels actually are, as well as why and when they are needed – without changing the basic rationale in which the Commission carries out the exercise. Not only could this Agreement codify the Commission’s commitment to process, use, and follow-up on the ECPs, but it could also define the co-legislators’ commitment to work with the Panel results if the standards of good practice set in the Agreement are met. This would visibly contribute to the institutional pledge towards citizen participation, and ensure that the results of the whole exercise have impact.

b) Building up the EU’s participatory infrastructure

The ECPs should be integrated into the wider participatory infrastructure of the EU.⁴¹ The creation of such an infrastructure requires three major building blocks: (a) shared understanding by the EU institutions of the meaning, purpose, and benefits of citizen participation in EU processes and a joint strategy for its development; (b) a clear definition of the functions, parameters, and spheres of application for various EU participatory instruments (i.e. ECIs, petitions, ECPs, etc.), and (c) the creation of a space for linkages between the various instruments.⁴²

The latter, for instance, might materialise via the connection between the ECIs as an instrument that puts a certain topic on the public agenda and the ECPs as the space where citizens deliberate the ECI topics. As such, the ECPs would not function disconnected from other instruments but rather complement existing participatory tools. Experimenting with digital formats of participation could also enhance participatory infrastructure, with the use of digital tools potentially visibly enlarging the scale of the Panels by facilitating better transnational exchange.

c) Determine the various uses of the ECPs

As decided by the Commission through its choice of format, the current ECPs deal with specific legislative files. The next logical step would be for the EU institutions to understand that ECPs can fulfil various functions in the Union’s policymaking process, not exclusively as instruments for collecting citizens’ knowledge and feedback on proposed measures of concrete policy files. Here, the next steps could include implementing Panels at different phases of policymaking,

conducting some on ‘bigger’ topics or EU priorities, and connecting the different levels of deliberation. Within the Commission, the Panels could contribute to the impact assessment, evaluation, or even implementation of legislation. The European Parliament and the Council could tap into different dimensions of the Panels’ added value, including testing public acceptance of certain initiatives or even inviting citizens to deliberate on larger political, not only legislative, questions relevant to the EU.

However, these Panels should also lead to further inter-institutional exercises on the fundamental political issues of our time. These could, for example, cover major transformative topics including Europe’s response to the *Zeitenwende*, the green transition or digitalisation. Such deliberation could “help increase awareness and generate EU-wide public pressure to develop concrete policy proposals.”⁴⁵

In addition, ECPs involving all major EU institutions could take place every five years to discuss jointly among local, regional, national, and European policymakers in tandem with randomly selected citizens, the EU’s potential strategic priorities for the upcoming five years. ‘Big Tent Fora’ such as these could have direct input into the process of identifying the Union’s potential strategic priorities for each upcoming politico-institutional cycle.⁴⁴

In other words, the EU institutions need to rise to a broader and more political understanding of the potential for these types of transnational Panels.⁴⁵ The upcoming European elections and the renewal of the EU leadership present an opportune moment to introduce such innovative approaches to policymaking.

Finally, the transnational level should not necessarily be the only level at which citizens deliberate over important EU issues. Beyond the ECPs, citizen deliberation on crucial EU topics should also move further down to national, regional, and local levels. Linking various levels of deliberation by running simultaneous transnational, national, regional, and local Panels on the same topic and organised in accordance with the same technical process principles prevents such initiatives from being merely a ‘Brussels’ exercise. The use of digital technology, such as online participation platforms could facilitate the process of linking debates at different levels.

d) Exploring the democratic potential of citizen participation for larger EU reform

The current context for the EU and its member states has intensified discussions on EU reforms. The ongoing “permacrisis”⁴⁶ and the war in Ukraine have raised important questions regarding necessary reforms, particularly in relation to potential new rounds of EU enlargement. Further expansion of the Union would require the reform of EU governance beyond a simple revision of decision-making modes (such as the introduction of qualified majority voting). It would demand massive restructuring of governance within key policy areas, such as agricultural and cohesion policy.

All these issues confront the EU with hard political choices. How would this reform be carried out and what role should and would citizens play in developing and advancing reform proposals? In this way, closer engagement of ordinary citizens in the EU reform debate, involving also citizens from potential future member states, will clearly be a turning point in the course of European integration and thus would serve to define its course.

To this end, the EU institutions and member states need to acknowledge the potential that citizen participation offers when it comes to re-making the foundations of the EU in a more legitimate and democratic fashion. In-depth and careful discussion is required to establish what available formats and instruments of citizen participation are best suited for the Union’s reform process, at what stage of reform they can be used, and how citizens’ input should be taken into consideration. How could the reform process incorporate innovative formats of citizen participation beyond the constitutional Convention and national ratification referenda? How could these formats be linked to the format prescribed by the Treaties, namely the Intergovernmental Conference? Are Citizens’ Panels an appropriate format for debating EU reform and more strategic EU decision-making? How can it be ensured that citizens participate in EU reform debates across different levels of governance and with improved access? These debates may precede the decisions made by the member states to test how the European public relates to certain proposals and reform options or, alternatively, be organised in parallel. They may become an integral part of the Constitutional Convention.

These are just several questions that require attention and serious engagement on the part of the EU institutions – should citizens be given a bigger role in the process? All in all, the EU institutions need to depart from seeing citizen participation as a technocratic tool for policymaking and take its political essence and meaning more seriously.

All in all, the EU institutions need to depart from seeing citizen participation as a technocratic tool for policymaking and take its political essence and meaning more seriously.

Overall, the European Commission’s pilot ‘new generation’ ECPs were a welcome exercise in bringing citizens closer to the EU policymaking process. However, rather than resting on their laurels, if the legacy of the ECPs is to continue into the next politico-institutional cycle, the European Commission must now look ahead to future Panels, while continuing to socialise the DGs internally and familiarise the other institutions with the format.

At this point, the main focus for the Commission should be to address the methodological flaws ahead of conducting any future ECPs and to simultaneously carve out a larger role for citizen participation in the EU's policymaking process. Real added value in terms of citizens genuinely contributing to EU policy can only occur if these Panels become a part of a wider participatory toolkit in the EU's policymaking process, with different participatory formats

used for different policy needs by the institutions. In this way, the EU institutions (not simply the European Commission) need to have more ambition when it comes to citizen participation, building on the successful elements of the ECPs but not limiting themselves to the constraints of the format when it comes to connecting citizens to EU processes.

- ¹ von der Leyen, Ursula (2022a), [Speech at the closing event of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), Strasbourg.
- ² Hierlemann, Dominik; Stefan Roch; Paul Butcher; Janis A. Emmanouilidis; Corina Stratulat and Maarten de Groot (2022), [Under Construction: Citizens' Participation in the European Union](#). Gütersloh: Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung; Stratulat, Corina and Johannes Greubel (2021), "[Una casa para todos': Observations from the first European Citizens' Panel of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#)"; Emmanouilidis, Janis A., Theodora Famprikezi, Johannes Greubel, Dominik Hierlemann, Perle Petit, Georg Riekes and Corina Stratulat (2022), [Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)
- ³ Citizens Takeover Europe (2022), The EU must follow up on its promises! (available at <https://citizenstakeover.eu/blog/the-eu-must-follow-up-on-its-promises/>).
- ⁴ Von der Leyen, Ursula (2022a), *op.cit.* A similar proposal was put forward before that by the High-Level Advisory Group of the Conference Observatory – see Hierlemann *et al.*, *op.cit.*
- ⁵ Hierlemann *et al.*, *op.cit.*
- ⁶ The consortium was made up of members from Mission Publiques, ifok, Danish Board of Technology, Deliberativa, Kantar Public, and VO Europe, all of whom were also involved in setting up and running the CoFoE panels.
- ⁷ Unlike the CoFoE, in which there was a minimum threshold for recommendations to pass in order to make the final list, every ECP recommendation was included in the final list. Citizens were merely asked to note their support on a graded scale to represent if/how strongly they agreed with the recommendation (for example, via a 1-6 scale).
- ⁸ Von der Leyen, Ursula (2022b), [2022 State of the Union Address](#), Strasbourg.
- ⁹ As a supporter of the CoFoE process, the European Parliament had its own, inter-institutional ideas on how to implement citizen participation at the EU level. At the same time, the institution felt that it should have been involved in the organisation of these Panels.
- ¹⁰ Greubel, Johannes (2022), [A new generation of European Citizens' Panels – Making citizens' voices a regular part of policymaking](#), Brussels.
- ¹¹ Chwalisz, Claudia (2020), [Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave](#), Paris.
- ¹² Anchored in the Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines, public consultations take place ahead of any legislative proposal that involves an Impact Assessment (IA) or for any evaluation of initiatives that contain an IA. Targets are all individuals and interest groups "whom it will affect, who will have to implement it and who has a stated interest in the policy". See European Commission (2021a), [Better Regulation Guidelines](#), Brussels.
- ¹³ While the topic of food waste was already announced in von der Leyen's State of the Union in September 2022, the other two ECP topics were announced later in the European Commission's Work Programme for 2023 (European Commission (2022), [Commission adopts its Work Programme for 2023: Tackling the most pressing challenges, while staying the course for the long-term](#), Brussels.).
- ¹⁴ CoFoE recommendation #1.3 touched on the topic of food waste (which was covered in working group discussions and on the multilingual platform). No proposals focused directly on metaverses/virtual worlds, but several proposals dealt with achieving a healthy, successful digitalisation. While no recommendations covered learning mobility specifically, exchange programmes were mentioned in several proposals, e.g. #48 and #49. Conference on the Future of Europe (2022), [Report on the Final Outcome](#), Strasbourg.
- ¹⁵ Such as, for example in the case of the current Commission priorities. Flagship projects such as the Green Deal or the New Pact on Migration could have been chosen as potential topics.
- ¹⁶ See also: Greubel (2022), *op.cit.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ The Panels could also take place during the Commission's public consultation period.
- ²⁰ As indicated in several interviews with officials and policymakers.
- ²¹ European Commission (2023), [An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds: a head start in the next technological transition](#), Brussels
- ²² European Commission (2023), [Impact Assessment Report accompanying the document Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste](#), Brussels.
- ²³ The four CoFoE ECP topics were: Panel 1 – Stronger economy, social justice, jobs, education, culture, sport, digital transformation; Panel 2 – EU democracy, values, rights, rule of law, security; Panel 3 - Climate change, environment, health; Panel 4 – EU in the world, migration.
- ²⁴ Stratulat, Greubel (2021), *op.cit.*
- ²⁵ The consortium was comprised of Mission Publiques, ifok, the Danish Board of Technology, Deliberativa, Kantar Public, and VO Europe.
- ²⁶ The ECPs on food waste and virtual worlds produced 23 recommendations each, and learning mobility produced 21 recommendations.
- ²⁷ Ranging from voting "in favour" or "against" to voting via a numbered scale to indicate levels of support.
- ²⁸ See for example Stratulat, Greubel (2021), *op.cit.*
- ²⁹ In this respect, the choice of Panel topic is of great importance here (as discussed in terms of topic selection above).
- ³⁰ I.e., one-third of citizens were less than 26 years old.
- ³¹ Based on attendance reports from Kantar (available on the Conference on the Future of Europe's website).
- ³² On the latter point, for instance, it was observed in more than one of the working groups in ECP 2 that, while introducing themselves, around three-quarters of the participants stated that they either currently worked in the IT sector or had studied IT at university level. The same day, in another of the working groups, one of the participants coincidentally turned out to be involved in the development of the internet in the '90s.
- ³³ Citizens Take Over Europe (2021), [Open Letter to Executive Board: Civil Society Organisations Call for Conference to Include Marginalised Communities](#).
- ³⁴ Session 1 of the ECP on virtual worlds took place on the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine, and five Ukrainian women were invited to share their personal experiences with the ECP participants. These women were asked if they wanted to join the ECP as participants – only one accepted (although she was counted as a French citizen in the breakdown of citizen participants). As a symbolic gesture from the Commission, it does raise questions about who else should be invited to take part in these ECPs.
- ³⁵ Taken from Eurostat statistics (available at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics, last accessed 25 July 2023).
- ³⁶ For example, the financial cost of the interpretation was cited as being a primary consideration (and restriction) by the Commission in the developments of the ECPs.
- ³⁷ Hierlemann *et al.* (2022), *op.cit.*
- ³⁸ Courant, Dimitri (2018), [Deliberative Democracy, Legitimacy, and Institutionalisation: The Irish Citizens Assemblies](#). Lausanne.
- ³⁹ Abels, G. et al. (2022), [Next level citizen participation in the EU. Institutionalizing European Citizens Assemblies](#), Gütersloh.
- ⁴⁰ See, for example, the debate of the European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs with Commission Vice-President Dubravka Suica on 1 September 2022.
- ⁴¹ Hierlemann *et al.* (2022), *op.cit.*
- ⁴² Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022), [The missing piece: a participatory infrastructure for the EU](#), Policy Brief 01/2022 (bertelsmann-stiftung.de), Gütersloh.
- ⁴³ Emmanouilidis *et al.*, (2022), *op.cit.*, p. 14.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁵ A proposal on the 'big tent fora' based on the Conference Observatory's recommendations included in Emmanouilidis *et al.*, *op.cit.* was put forward but tabled by the European Parliament in 2022 (European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs (2022), 2022/0212(BUD) 29.8.2022 BUDGET AMENDMENTS 2023 Budget (2022/0212(BUD)) Committee on Constitutional Affairs, pp. 5-6).
- ⁴⁶ Zuleeg, Fabian, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, and Ricardo Borges de Castro (2021). [Europe in the age of permacrisis](#). Brussels.



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.