

Title: A Conference on the Future of Europe Fit for Purpose in a COVID-19 World

This article is based on [Digital Democracy could Engage Citizens in Europe](#) by Assya Kavrakova and [Design, Engage, Impact: The Improved European Citizens' Initiative Leads the Way to a Stronger, Citizen – Centered European Union](#) by Assya Kavrakova and includes the detailed proposals on methodology, provided by ECAS as an annex in [Recommendations for the Set up of the Conference on the Future of Europe by 12 European Civil Society Organisations](#).

The Conference on the Future of Europe was the “buzz word” in Brussels at the beginning of the year, setting up high expectations about getting citizens more engaged in policy making on the EU level, provoking some criticism about the approach, seen as too top down by many, and the insufficient involvement of the organised civil society and inspiring the imagination of think tanks and democratic activists of the concrete *modus operandi* to be followed.

Several months later, the Conference was mentioned only once during the first State of the Union address of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission on September 16, 2020 in relation to the potential to extend the Union’s competence in the health domain. Discussions on social media followed ranging from whether the Conference is still high on the EU political agenda to if it is feasible at all to expect a meaningful and inclusive Europe-wide consultative process in a COVID-19 reality.

While it remains to be seen what would be agreed upon between the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council regarding the shape of the Conference, one thing is sure – the Conference should build upon the experience and the lessons learnt from previous and current initiatives of citizen engagement.

There are practices at local, national and even European level, which have already proved to be working and can be useful examples to consider if the Conference would have to be “pandemic fit”. It is only by creating synergies among the different tool and methods of democratic innovation, that a real European public space as a public sphere of dialogue, debate, and co-production of decisions not only for but with the citizens of Europe will be created.

While the preferred format of citizens engagement will always be the combination of offline and online activities, there are also successful examples of democratic innovation, which rely predominantly on online collaboration. Latvia has an on-line platform – ManaBalss – for crowdsourcing legislation that is visited by over 70% of Latvian citizens annually, helping to shape the agenda of the Parliament. The Icelandic government has involved political parties, academia and civil society organisations in a multi-annual collaborative drafting with citizens of a new Icelandic Constitution, with a crowdsourcing forum ‘Better Iceland’ ([betraisland.is](#)) ensuring online deliberation and facilitating constructive suggestions on amendments, arguments, and votes for or against proposals.

The unique democratic innovation at EU level is undoubtedly the European Citizens’ Initiative as

the first trans-national instrument of participatory democracy which allows the European citizens to shape the EU policy agenda and its multilingual online collaborative platform ([the Forum](#)) supporting organisers in their journey.

All these examples and many other should inspire the European institutions to innovate, get full advantage from the ICT in order to ensure that the Conference will be “a new public forum for an open, inclusive, transparent and structured debate with citizens”¹, using a multilingual digital platform to maximise participation, accessibility and transparency.

The potential of digital democracy, although still largely under-researched, is enormous indeed, with positive examples at local and national level, demonstrating that it can provide added value to democratic engagement.

An [assessment done by the European Citizen Action Service \(ECAS\)](#) of 27 national case studies of co-deciding with citizens using ICT from around the world suggests that crowdsourcing tools, especially as a component of democratic innovation, can enhance participation by involving citizens and civil society beyond the typical stakeholders, including young people. It can also ensure a learning process for both citizens and decision-makers through a real-time exchange of views and opinions on the content and process of policies and policy-making. Fresh and innovative ideas for shaping policy based on the “wisdom of the crowd” can emerge, allowing “hidden” expertise into the debate. Finally, it increases the legitimacy of policy-making, which is an ever-increasing necessity in the EU.

Still, in order to explore the full potential of ICT in enhancing democracy, democratic innovations should go hand in hand with sound policies to ensure privacy, tackle the digital divide, promote new media and digital media literacy and combine on-line and off-line activities. Without those components, any framework for digital democracy is at risk of backfiring. This affects both the younger generations, who spend a lot of time on-line and are not interested in traditional forms of political participation, and the older generations. Moreover, decision-makers should use digital tools to interact with young people where they naturally are – in the digital space –instead of waiting for young people to engage in politics as currently practised.

Whether in a hybrid form or online, there should be a clear Blueprint for the Conference on the Future of Europe in terms of content and procedure if we want it to be a meaningful engagement process of co-producing solutions for Europe.

The process could follow a divergent-convergent model in order to include randomly selected citizens, and civil society organisations representing further citizens and their concerns, experts and institutional decision-makers in different phases and combining both online and offline methods.

The goal is to ensure inclusiveness and transparency throughout the whole process and a broad participation to the Conference from all parts of society but with democratic mandate holders having a final say on how to concretely input the recommendations into policy-making.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/commissions-contribution-shaping-conference-future-europe_en

The process should also take into account the role of the whole public sphere including the media as an important pillar of democracy and therefore of its future.

The following five phases are essential to ensure success.

The first phase - *preparation and setting up* - should include four main elements, to be carried out by the institutions in coordination with civil society organisations at EU level where relevant: clear, widespread communication at all levels on the objectives and process of the Conference, especially in order to manage people's expectations on the outcomes; creation of common guidelines on how the process will be conducted (languages, tools, etc.) that should be applicable to all EU member states; securing the financial resources at EU, national and local level to ensure that the process will be implemented in a sound and meaningful manner and setting up the infrastructure of the online and offline consultation to be implemented in the next phases – crowdsourcing platforms, applications etc.

The *identification (divergent) phase* should last about 8 months and should be open to receiving inputs from all citizens of EU member states and beyond where relevant, mainly by exploiting the potential of digital tools and platforms and the outreach and grassroots connections of civil society organisations in order to have the widest outreach possible in the most efficient way and removing obstacles caused by the digital divide.

In line with the objectives of the Conference, participating citizens and civil society organisations representing further citizens will be asked to submit their demands and concerns and to vote on priorities using user-friendly websites and mobile apps set-up during the preparation phase. The goal of this inclusive phase is to allow people to feel free to express their demands on issues that are not too technical (e.g. they would like to see the EU to have more competence on certain policies) or even to share the values that they would like to see better reflected in the current or future treaties.

Ideally the online platform to be used should be provided by the EU to protect citizens' identification (if they are afraid their ideas will be held against them in their countries). There are many ways in which digital technologies can help the categorisation of ideas, to filter out spam, and allow for full transparency of the process. However, it is important to also consider the human resources necessary to go through the contributions once collected online.

The third phase is the phase of *ideation (first convergent phase)* to include random representative samples of individual citizens, representatives of CSOs, experts during ideally up to 8 months.

This phase will use a method called *deliberative polling* (introduced by Professor Fishkin) - where randomly selected citizens broadly representative for the EU population and citizens representing civil society organisations, are invited to discuss ideas to address the issues identified in the first phase, to select the most relevant ones and to formulate recommendations. This will take the form of multiple face-to-face citizens' panels in different parts of the EU. CSOs and/or experts will be designated as moderators to guide the participants' thinking, encourage them to ask more questions and provide them with answers about the EU if necessary.

The process, discussions and results of these events should be transparent and documented on online platforms for other citizens to see them (still safeguarding the identity of the citizens involved). Financial resources must be taken into consideration as reimbursement of citizens' 'out of pocket' expenses including proven loss of earnings.

The phase of the *evaluation (second convergent phase) and decision-making* includes EU decision-makers (+ CSOs, experts) and lasts ideally up to 12 months. Depending on how clear the ideas of the third phase are, they can be assessed by citizens'/CSOs/expert/relevant stakeholders or directly by the decision-makers themselves.

If the recommendations are clear enough, EU decision-makers will evaluate the proposals and decide how these proposals will lead to legislative, policy and institutional changes and/or Treaty changes. For this, decision-makers apply a "comply or explain" approach.

If the recommendations from the third phase are still not concrete and conclusive enough, the evaluation can start from citizens/CSOs/experts through an online platform using simple evaluation methods (e.g. rating and comparison) which will allow each recommendation to be further analysed and graded.

The last phase is the one of *feedback and impact*. The Conference on the Future of Europe must end with the EU's clear communication to all citizens on what the impact of their contributions was and how the institutional actors have taken on the results.

It is important to also inform the citizens of all the phases of the process and to ask them for feedback on the process through a detailed survey. Furthermore, the EU should also envisage enough financial resources for an EU-wide informational campaign on the results – an important investment for future follow-up.

To reduce the gap between themselves and citizens, EU decision-makers should embrace democratic innovation and develop digital democracy tools for citizen engagement as an integral part of the Digital Single Market to transform their relationship with citizens into a partnership.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is a great opportunity to pilot different digital democracy methods, assess their effectiveness, improve them based on the lessons learnt and made them an integral part of the European democracy toolbox.