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Defence of Democracy: A Discussion on Democracy and the Path Ahead for a Culture of Participation

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On the occasion of the European Commission's release of the Defence of Democracy package (DoD) on 12 December 2023, the Egmont Institute – together with the G1000¹ – organised a debate focused specifically on the Commission's recommendation on the participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making. As part of the Egmont Institute's wider outreach mandate under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU and building upon G1000's longstanding expertise as an innovator in the Belgian democratic landscape and beyond, the purpose was to explore the road ahead for this recommendation, under the Belgian Presidency and beyond through the adoption of the next strategic agenda by the June European Council and the consequential Commission priorities.

LOOKING BACK

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)² – a major reformative democratic exercise – was concluded on 9 May 2022, less than 2 years ago. Despite the uphill battles it faced before, during, and after, its impact on European democracy should not be underestimated: it effectively shed a light on a new way of governing and a reciprocal commitment to and from citizens around the EU. Although many people were sceptical at its inception and remain so, the virtue of participatory democracy became widely accepted when the chance was given to bear witness to the way citizens deliberated and formulated very realistic, well-balanced recommendations. Even before the release of the DoD, the CoFoE achieved an important feat: the integration of

European Citizen Panels in the process of policy design – albeit a recent development, difficult to be overturned after a clear commitment to them by Commission President Von der Leyen in the 2022 State of the European Union.

The EU-level is however not alone in recently taking important steps forward in creating a culture of democratic participation. Looking specifically at the case of Belgium, the Ostbelgien model made the German-speaking community in Belgium the first to enshrine a permanent citizens' assembly in its decision-making process. Other regions in Belgium followed suit, eventually resulting in the federal level adopting a regulation in 2022 that allows sortition to take place from the national register, as well as the Federal Parliament integrating a chapter on citizens' panels and mixed assemblies in its statutes. This complements other achievements such as the first Belgian federal citizens' panel hosted under the auspices of the CoFoE, a grassroots national citizens' panel on political party financing, as well as a national citizens' agora on just transition hosted by the responsible minister, among other examples.

2024: A YEAR OF POLITICAL CROSSROADS

With these recent developments in participatory democracy in mind, what does the present look like? Although the integrity of some of them might be questioned, 2024 stands to be a year of elections, with nearly half of the world's population having the chance to cast their vote. In the EU alone, elections will take place across the continent for the European Parliament,

and on the national level in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, and Slovakia. Democratic observers mention, however, a feeling of unease heading into this electoral year: there is a decrease in citizens' levels of trust in political institutions, and populism is widespread in the political theatre. Can citizen engagement be part of the answer to these challenges? In addition to the above examples from changes in the EU and Belgium, practices of innovative engagement with citizens on a wide range of topics can be found in countries such as Ireland, France & Germany, and even in challenged democracies such as Poland and Hungary.

Can the Commission proposal bring about meaningful change, as the EU is often referred to as a standard-setter which member states might look to when struggling to improve on their own?

Two initial reflections follow hereafter. First, (more) attention should specifically be dedicated to establishing a participatory strategy at the local level, in municipalities. Second, the importance of quality and agreed standards cannot and should not be underestimated. Otherwise, the entire virtue of deliberative democracy is vulnerable to being hijacked by those with less good intentions. To a lesser degree, CoFoE already bore witness to this through the wide variety of contributions labelled as participatory processes without little scrutiny to their nature. It is therefore indispensable for the EU to indeed be a standard-setter in this domain, to avoid such abuses. Furthermore, the most immediate change will be achieved by providing sufficient support to local processes, as this is where citizens feel most empowered to make their voice heard.

Yet, sufficient attention should also be paid to having several target groups in mind, as not all demographic groups respond in the same way for a call to make their voice heard. In making democracy fit for future challenges, young people – who make up over 25% of our population – should not be forgotten. Although many different models exist, and many participatory processes might still be organized ad hoc, this has its

advantages and opportunities as well: most importantly, as there is not a one-size-fits-all model to encourage a culture of participation, different models might offer a different appeal to different demographic groups. However, these models should have some elements in common: most importantly, these processes need to provide a clear sense of purpose and be meaningful to all who engage with them. The aspirations of citizens who want to make their voice heard need to be taken seriously. Furthermore, by exposing young people to participatory processes where they feel heard, the chances are they will respond positively to those values and actively foster a culture of participation.

THE ROAD AHEAD: NOT JUST THERE YET...

There is a general mood that democracy is not in great shape, and that innovative ways of engaging citizens are much needed. Beyond creating a culture of democratic participation, the educative role of participatory processes cannot be underestimated. They provide a vital contribution in making institutions, especially for the lesser-known EU, more relatable. On top of making citizens more familiar with the functioning of the EU, this may contribute to addressing the lack of trust that was mentioned earlier. As trust in the process is built, by making it more accessible, trust in the outcomes will increase consequently. Furthermore, citizen participation will open the possibility to contest outcomes.

How can this work then be continued?

First, the European Citizens' Panels will seemingly continue. However, political commitment might change, and they do not have a foundation in the (current) Treaties. Different proposals are being formulated. Ranging from the possibility for newly-elected MEPs to question the designated Commissioners on how deliberative processes will be integrated in their work, to the proposal for a European Agora in a recent resolution by the European Parliament,³ each of these proposals is worthy of consideration on its own merit. However, most of these proposals originate from a single actor,

whether institutional or not. CoFoE, in contrast, was a joint endeavour of the three EU institutions. In an EU that is already complex to navigate for those interacting with it on a regular basis, such interinstitutional initiatives might avoid eventually losing sight of the forest for the trees in the participatory space. The expected citizen engagement centre (revamping the Have Your Say-platform) might provide a step in this direction. In any case, it is vital for such reforms to go beyond addressing organised interests and to address citizens directly. For this, a citizens' check by authorities might be considered. Such a check could result in the recommendation that participatory processes need to be hosted to incorporate citizens' reflections in the policy-formulation/implementation.⁴

Furthermore, the Council Presidency has a role to play. Belgium, building on its reputation as a democratic laboratory, will be the first Council Presidency to integrate its citizens in a national deliberative panel, which will have 60 citizens discuss the topic of artificial intelligence over the course of 3 weekends. Furthermore, many more participatory events will take place on both local and regional levels. Such a focus on citizen engagement would not have been imaginable when the country last held the presidency in 2010.

... BUT DIFFICULT TO OVERTURN.

After recent positive experiences with participatory processes, experts within and around the EU institutions are acknowledging that citizens can and should be consulted on serious issues, as it results in the formulation of reasonable, considerate recommendations on the matters. One of the files on which citizens from the EU and beyond could be heard is the enlargement file.

If the tanker is turning in the direction of citizen inclusion, it will be very difficult for the EU to overlook the role that civil acceptance – and the associated importance of EU citizens feeling heard – will play, if a repetition of the constitutional trauma is to be avoided. Whether treaty change is on the horizon or not, the EU is facing pivotal times with tough decisions. Paradoxically, this

makes it an opportune moment to hear citizens about some of the trade-offs involved, how to balance on the tightrope between the end of the world and the end of the month. Including citizens in these decisions can both raise awareness and increase legitimacy of the choices made that impact them most, which is, purely from a democratic perspective, perhaps a silver lining to these challenging times.

Can and should Belgium go beyond its initiative of hosting a citizens' panel during its Presidency by facilitating negotiations amongst member states on how to implement the DoD-recommendations and contribute to building an EU-wide culture of participation? That remains a question which might only find its answer once the Presidency comes to a close at the end of this semester. It is however already certain that it has made – another – remarkable contribution to advancing democratic innovation by placing such an emphasis on citizens' participation throughout its mandate.

ENDNOTE

Perhaps only at the beginning of the road to a culture of participation, stepping stones are being put in place for a more inclusive and stronger future of EU democracy. Whether or not it will entail a mention in the next EUCO strategic agenda, further implementation of citizens' panels by the Commission, or novel initiatives by the European Parliament, the EU can show the road ahead in democratic innovation and foster a culture of democratic participation hand-in-hand with best and novel practices in its member states. Regardless of the political level, politicians around must ask themselves whether the processes in place are fit for purpose if they are not able to entice citizens to engage with policy-making. The outgoing European Commission has planted the seeds for a culture of democratic participation. Now is the time for a political message on the highest level that continuation of such participatory processes matters for the democratic legitimisation of the political choices faced by the EU and its member states.



It cannot be expected that this road will be without challenges, however. A fair dose of scepticism surrounds these innovative practices, and not everyone shares the appetite to give them a try. Stakeholders have vested interests, and venturing in this new direction might upset long-lasting relations. Democracy is never achieved, always a work in progress. It is thus essential to build a narrative of democracy that starts at the grassroots. Continuing to experiment with and implement different models of citizens' engagement will have to remain at the forefront, not just to conquer the sceptic minds, not just to ensure their own continuation, but as an answer to innovate and strengthen our shared democratic space. Luckily, democracy is not a scarce good, where increasing the role of one stakeholder – in this case the citizen – decreases the role of another. On the contrary: democracy is dynamic and expendable, and therefore

grassroots initiatives that continuously knock at the door of policymakers to build this awareness are vital.

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Endnotes

- 1 G1000: “Belgian platform for democratic innovation” - [G1000](#)
- 2 CoFoE: “The Conference on the Future of Europe was a citizen-led series of debates and discussions that ran from April 2021 to May 2022 and enabled people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future. The Conference was the first of its kind: as a major pan-European democratic exercise, with citizen-led debates enabling people from across Europe to share their ideas and help shape our common future. This was done via an innovative Multilingual Digital Platform where any European could share ideas, and both national panels and European Citizens’ Panels.” - [Conference on the Future of Europe - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)
- 3 EP Resolution: European Parliament resolution of 14 September 2023 on Parliamentarism, European citizenship and democracy (2023/2017(INI))
- 4 A similar instrument has been implemented on the youth level. For more information: [The EU Youth Test/Check: what is it and why should it be implemented in all Member States? | European Youth Portal \(europa.eu\)](#)





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