

The European Citizens' Consultations deserve pride of place at von der Leyen's Conference

Paul Butcher
Policy Analyst

Corina Stratulat
Head of European Politics and Institutions
programme and Senior Policy Analyst

Good news for European citizens! European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen wants “a new push for European democracy”, including a two-year ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’, in which citizens shall “play a leading and active part”.¹ Von der Leyen’s proposal endorses her predecessor’s 2017 resolve to “debate, not dictate”.²

Such continuity of message is welcome. But President von der Leyen can go further – she should ensure there is also continuity in the European Union’s (EU) efforts to build up a European civic space. Specifically, she should take into account the European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs), which were held throughout Europe as recently as 2018 and early 2019.³ Recalling the ECCs and building on their results would demonstrate that Brussels is committed to a meaningful process of EU democratic renewal – not just collecting a panoply of one-off initiatives.

So far, unfortunately, any outcome from the ECCs – whether in terms of process or policy substance – has been largely absent from political discourse. The impression is that the exercise has already been forgotten.⁴

But forsaking the ECCs means squandering a remarkable effort. In less than a year, and at a complex political moment marked by crises, populism and high-stakes elections, all 27 member states⁵ got involved and organised thousands of national events; the Commission hosted an EU-wide online survey consisting of questions formulated by a Citizens’ Panel; and hundreds of thousands of European citizens participated and provided information about their priorities, proposals and demands. This should not be disregarded.

Von der Leyen’s Conference offers the perfect opportunity to come back to the ECCs. Citizens’ participation is likely to be part of the Conference’s method; it may also be a topic on the agenda. Regardless, the experience of the ECCs will be

relevant. Their results provide telling insights into citizens’ views on all the most prominent current policy debates. How the process played out can also inspire new thinking about the evolution of European democracy.

Closing the loop from the first round

First stop – the ECC reports, which were published by the member states and collected by the Council of the European Union prior to the December 2018 summit. These reports find that European citizens are concerned about issues such as climate change, migration, European values, the rule of law, and the lack of unity in the Union.⁶

No great surprise, perhaps. But the predictability of these findings does mean that the Consultation results nicely reflect the existing EU policy agenda. They do not present any new or potentially sensitive issues. Politicians should therefore feel encouraged to draw attention to their current efforts in these areas, highlighting how they correspond to the concerns citizens raised. Reform-minded policymakers in particular can use this popular input to increase the pressure for meaningful change in their respective fields. The priorities and proposals determined by the ECCs should be linked to ongoing policy processes, like von der Leyen’s promise to reform the asylum system and put forward a European Green Deal within her first 100 days in office.⁷

Next step, the communication challenge. It is essential that the EU institutions demonstrate how people’s input via the consultations has been taken on board and reflected in policy, and this will require a concerted communications strategy. Citizens must be kept informed about the concrete, existing policy processes related to the issues close to their hearts. The alternative – allowing the ECCs to fall into obscurity – will only reinforce perceptions of the EU as distant, unresponsive and beyond their control.

Designing future rounds

Citizens expect better! Demand for more consultations or citizens' participation in decision-making was mentioned explicitly in half of the national reports and, in several countries including Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Slovenia, people even called for the ECCs to become permanent. Europeans want more information on the EU, and they want a greater voice in its functioning.

In response to this demand, the Conference on the Future of Europe should not just follow up on last year's ECCs but also consider how to implement future rounds, taking into account the lessons learned so far. The most urgent of these are as follows:⁸

- ▶ Seek a more unified and coherent format, so that the results are more easily comparable – even if this means that some countries or actors refuse to participate. A usable output is more valuable than widespread uptake but no common features and little in the way of common identity.
- ▶ Specify the initiative's objective from the outset. Its goal may be to raise awareness about the EU, or to provide policy input – whatever it is, it should be spelt out. Both aims are relevant, but there should be a clear distinction between them to avoid raising unrealistic expectations.
- ▶ Make the subject of the Consultations as precise as possible, avoiding general topics like 'the future of Europe'. Especially if the aim is to collect input for decision-making, a narrower topic – ideally one that is already on the EU agenda or in the policy process – will allow for more useful input and specific proposals.

Following each round of ECCs, the EU institutions should consider inviting citizens' representatives to Brussels to present their ideas and respond to what is currently being done in the subjects they raise. A 'European Citizens' Assembly' could also be explored as a method of obtaining further popular feedback, with a randomly selected group of people discussing the details of a specific topic. The citizens' assembly model has already been successfully implemented in several countries, and the Citizens' Panel on the Future of Europe in Brussels on 5-6 May 2018 proved its applicability at the European level.

Striking the deal

The idea of fostering citizens' participation through the ECCs goes far beyond von der Leyen's Conference on the Future of Europe itself. Involving citizens in the Conference discussions will be important, but its aim should be to kick off something far more long-term. The experience of the ECCs in practice has shown that the instrument has potential, but formal buy-in from the European institutions is required for it to be effective and worthwhile.

It is not expertise on how to refine consultation methods, or how to make the EU decision-making process more citizen-friendly, that is missing. A Task Force of experts from NGOs working on deliberative democracy at European and national levels could easily be established to deliver solutions in this regard. No, what is still lacking is an interinstitutional agreement that the EU and its member states are committed to the ECCs, and to seeing them as a catalyst for the evolution of European governance. Drafting and approving such an agreement should be one of the Conference's priorities.

The work towards this end should start now, and it must involve all relevant actors. The ECCs should be at the core of the new EU leadership's thinking about the theme of dialogue with citizens; they should appear prominently on the agenda of the Commission and subsequent European Council summits; and the European Parliament should grill all the Commissioner nominees on this subject, to make sure that it becomes a transversal portfolio for the entire College. Other EU bodies, like the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Committee of the Regions, should also be brought into the fold – their insights and reach in the member states will be invaluable for a rerun of the ECCs in the future. Civil society stands ready to contribute too.

We have the perfect line-up, and, in the Conference on the Future of Europe, the perfect opportunity. All that remains is the political will – and with citizens' expectations running so high, can the new European leadership afford to let the chance slip away?

The support the European Policy Centre receives for its ongoing operations, or specifically for its publications, does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. Supporters and partners cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

¹ von der Leyen, Ursula, "Opening Statement in the European Parliament's plenary session by Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for President of the European Commission", Strasbourg, 16 July 2019a.

² Juncker, Jean-Claude, "Speech by President Juncker at the Plenary session of the European Parliament on the debate with the Prime Minister of Ireland, Leo Varadkar, on the Future of Europe", Strasbourg, 17 January 2018.

³ For more details on the European Citizens' Consultations, see Stratulat, Corina and Paul Butcher (2018), *The European Citizens' Consultations: Evaluation Report*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

⁴ See Stratulat, Corina and Paul Butcher (2019), "Citizens expect: Lessons from the European Citizens' Consultations", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

⁵ The UK decided not to participate given its decision to leave the EU.

⁶ Council of the European Union (2018), *Citizens' Consultations – Executive Summaries*, Brussels.

⁷ von der Leyen, Ursula, *Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024. A Union that strives for more: My agenda for Europe*, 16 July 2019b, p.5.

⁸ For more details on the lessons of the first round, see Stratulat and Butcher (2019), *op. cit.*