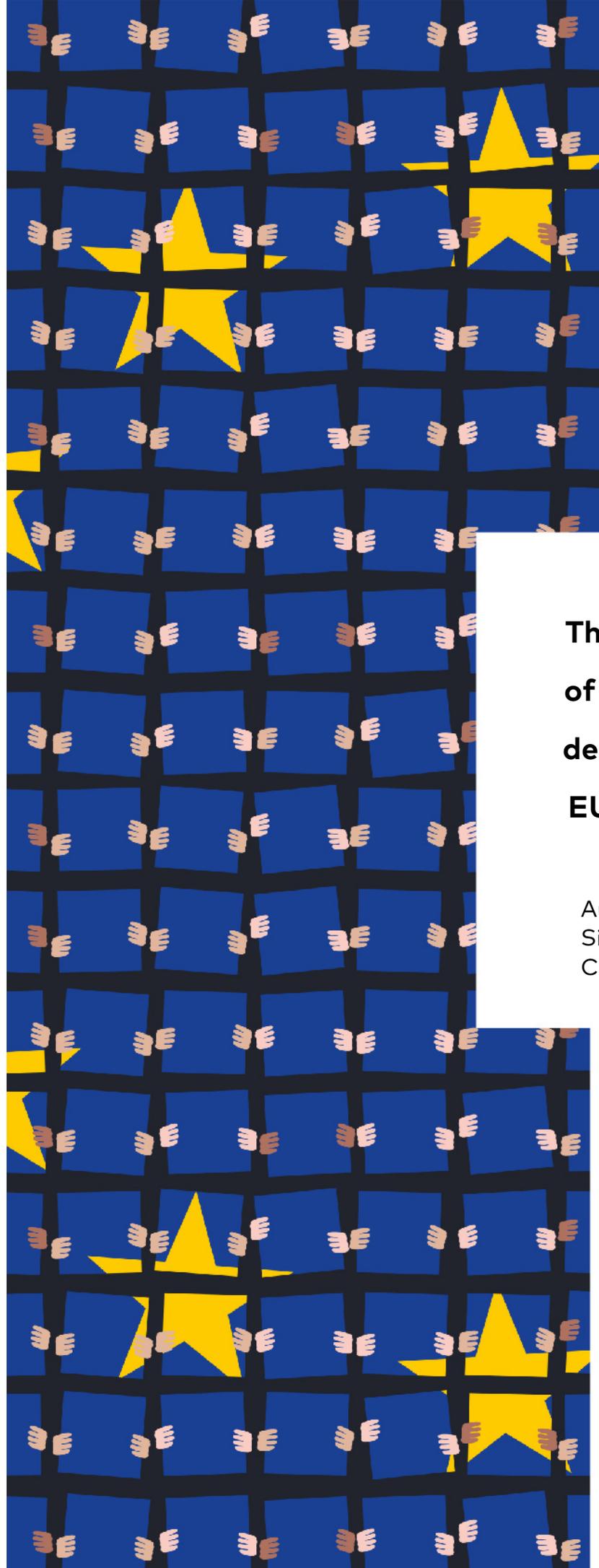




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## The Conference on the Future of Europe: Lessons learned for deliberative democracy in the EU\*

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# Studio Europa Maastricht POLICY BRIEF

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## **Abstract**

When the European Union (EU) held the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) from May 2021 to May 2022, citizens certainly had a lot to discuss – from the lessons learned in health policy from the ongoing Covid-pandemic over the efforts in fighting climate change to a changing geopolitical environment. Yet, while many studies have been concerned with what was talked about, we were more interested in the nature of citizens' discussions. The CoFoE – and in particular its four citizens' panels – was a first supranational experiment of deliberative democracy and an innovative approach to address concerns over the EU's democratic deficit. In taking such a perspective, this Policy Brief presents the results of five semi-structured interviews conducted in the spring of 2022 and evaluated based on a set of ideal-theoretical criteria for good deliberation. Our analysis leads to a set of five proposals for improvement of the CoFoE's process, which are put forth for consideration in any future citizens' deliberations of a European scale.

## **Background**

From May 2021 to May 2022, the European Union (EU) organised the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Consisting of 800 citizens from all 27 EU member-states, the CoFoE marked the first attempt to implement a forum of deliberative democracy on a European scale. The intention of the CoFoE was the formulation of concrete policy recommendations that at the end of the Conference were submitted by the participating citizens to the EU policymakers. Amidst scholars and observers, there have been intense and controversial discussions about the idea of having European-wide deliberations among a diverse selection of European citizens. While it is too early to evaluate whether the CoFoE and its results will have a formidable impact on future EU decisions and policies, the Conference can also be investigated from a different analytical starting point: As an innovative approach to address ongoing concerns about the EU's democratic deficit by allowing the direct participation of citizens in formulating future EU policies. In embracing such a perspective, this Policy Brief evaluates the CoFoE's deliberative process and goes on to recommend its future institutionalisation along a set of five deliberative criteria. Although relying on various scholarly resources, this report is primarily based on the results of five semi-structured interviews conducted in the spring of 2022 with actors involved in different stages of the CoFoE.

### **The EU's democratic deficit**

The current debates about a democratic deficit of the EU focus on two main issues: Firstly, the EU's institutional character and, secondly, the lack of a common European public sphere and identity. Concerning the former problem, the EU is often accused of lacking transparency in its policy processes. This is mostly criticised with regard to the influential role of lobbyists and interest groups in the EU's decision-making procedures, but also addresses the problem that the EU's entire structure is perceived as too complex and thus, many citizens face difficulties tracking and comprehending its daily politics and policies (Follesdal &

Hix, 2005; Schmidt, 2013). Additionally, many scholars criticise that the European Parliament (EP) lacks competences typically to be found within parliamentary democracies. It is often argued that the EP needs more power and resources in the EU's legislative and budgetary processes, in directly appointing the Commissioners or in monitoring the activities of the European Commission and the Council (Nugent, 2017; Smismans, 2016).

Regarding the lack of a common European public sphere and identity, scholars often point out that without a common language, a European-wide public media and political debate or authentic pan-European elections, its democracy cannot function properly (Follesdal & Hix, 2005; Schmidt, 2013). Therefore, scholars argue that the lack of a European public sphere contributes to the low turnout in EP elections (Smismans, 2016). This is mostly the case because of invisible political parties on the European level and too little direct communication between European politicians and the local citizens in the EU member-states (Schmidt, 2013). The fact that European elections are considered to be less important by many citizens illustrates these deficits well as the EP is the only EU institution which is directly elected by all citizens (Smismans, 2016). Based on this analysis, many proposals for reform have been made. However, both on the institutional structure of the EU as well as the lacking European identity and public sphere, large-scale short-term solutions seem unrealistic. Just as it is impossible to construct a new sense of European identity in a short time, institutional reforms of the EU require changes to its treaties – unlikely in times of increasing Euroscepticism among European governments and the civil population.

In order to show that it can provide answers to citizens' concerns and ambitions about generation-defining tasks such as climate change or digitalisation in a world ridden by multiple crises (Joint Declaration on the Conference of the Future of Europe, p. 1), the EU initiated the CoFoE as a platform for direct participation of citizens in EU policy making. Instead of delaying important reforms concerning the EU's democratic performance, new venues are created to avoid a stalemate in the EU's evolution and the processes

guiding it. Hence, the CoFoE did not only serve as a new platform for citizen deliberations on concrete EU policy, but also provided the opportunity for discussions on a new round of institutional reforms. It can be said that the CoFoE functions in a dual way to reduce the EU's democratic deficit: On the one hand, it enables direct citizen participation in EU policymaking through the use of deliberative practices and, on the other hand, the outcomes of these practices have the potential to spark further reforms of the EU's institutional structure towards more democratisation.

### **The Process of the CoFoE**

The two main elements of the CoFoE were the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) and the Conference Plenary. Set up by the Joint Presidency of the CoFoE (consisting of the Presidencies of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council), the four ECPs were the CoFoE's main venue for deliberations based on which policy recommendations were then formulated. From all EU member-states, 800 citizens were selected to participate in the CoFoE. Even though this selection of citizens was mostly randomised, five different categories were considered: nationality, socio-economic backgrounds, education, gender and age (Conference Observatory, 2022). The 800 participating citizens were equally distributed among four different ECPs, each taking place in a different European city and covering distinct hot topics of EU politics (see Table 1). Each of these four ECPs consisted of three sessions: While the first session (always taking place in Strasbourg) was dominated by external experts presenting the general topics of each panel to participants, sessions two and three encouraged the citizens to engage in deliberations on specific political issues in subgroups of 12 to 14 people. This resulted in the formulation of concrete 'recommendations' for future EU policies (CoFoE, 2022; Conference Observatory, 2022).

European Citizens' Panels (ECPs)	Broad topics	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
<b>Panel 1</b>	- A stronger economy, social justice, and jobs - Digital transformation - Education, culture, youth, and sports	Date: 17.-19.09.2021 Place: Strasbourg (France) Event: Expert introduction and formation of 'streams'	Date: 05.-07.11.2021 Place: Online Event: Formulation of 'orientations'	Date: 25.-27.02.2022 Place: Dublin Event: Formulation of 'recommendations'
<b>Panel 2</b>	- European democracy - Values and rights, the rule of law and security	Date: 24.-26.09.2021 Place: Strasbourg (France) Event: Expert introduction and formation of 'streams'	Date: 12.-14.11.2021 Place: Online Event: Formulation of 'orientations'	Date: 10.-12.12.2021 Place: Florence (Italy) Event: Formulation of 'recommendations'
<b>Panel 3</b>	- Climate change and the environment - Health	Date: 01.-03.10.2021 Place: Strasbourg (France) Event: Expert introduction and formation of 'streams'	Date: 19.-21.11.2021 Place: Online Event: Formulation of 'orientations'	Date: 07.-09.01.2022 Place: Warsaw (Poland) Event: Formulation of 'recommendations'
<b>Panel 4</b>	- The EU in the world - Migration	Date: 15.-17-10.2021 Place: Strasbourg (France) Event: Expert introduction and formation of 'streams'	Date: 26.-28.11.2021 Place: Online Event: Formulation of 'orientations'	Date: 11.-13.02.2022 Place: Maastricht (Netherlands) Event: Formulation of 'recommendations'

*Table 1: Overview over the four European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) of CoFoE (compiled by the authors)*

Then, from each of the four ECPs, 20 ambassadors were selected to present the recommendations of the citizens' panels to the so-called Conference Plenary. Next to those ambassadors, the Conference Plenary consisted of representatives of all EU institutions, national parliaments, local national politicians and civil society actors (CoFoE, 2022; Conference Observatory, 2022). Located in Strasbourg, the Conference Plenary held regular summits and further discussed and adopted the recommendations of the four different ECPs. Eventually, the Conference Plenary adopted a total of 49 policy proposals originating from the recommendations of the ECPs - formulated in multiple deliberative processes (CoFoE, 2022).

<b>Composition of the Conference Plenary</b>	<b>Sum of all representatives: 449</b>
Representatives of EU institutions	European Parliament: 108 Council: 54 European Commission: 3 Economic and Social Committee: 18 Committee of the Regions: 18
Representatives of EU member states	National parliaments: 108
Representatives of EU citizens	European Citizens' Panel: 80 (20 ambassadors per panel) National Citizens' Panel: 27 (one from each member state) European Youth Forum: 1 (President)
Representatives of EU member states' sub-national level	Regional authorities: 6 Local authorities: 6
Representatives of non-government organisations	Social partners: 12 Civil society: 8

*Table 2: Composition of the Conference Plenary (compiled by the authors)*

## What makes for 'good' deliberation?

Deliberation refers to communicative interaction in the form of an inclusive and reflected exchange. When Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1996) connected this concept with democratic decision-making processes, he created a sophisticated theory of deliberative discourse. The recent boom of citizen panels and other mini publics in places such as Ireland, Germany or the U.S. - attempting to replicate its preconditions as best as possible - speaks to the popularity of deliberative democracy. To that end, the CoFoE and in particular its four ECPs - with 800 citizens discussing in small subgroups various topics related to the future of Europe - can be seen as a first supranational European venue set-up based on the ideal-theoretical assumptions underlying deliberative democracy. Based on a critical review of insights by several prominent deliberation authors, Table 3 presents an overview of the most important criteria for 'good' deliberation (consensus, respect, equality, free flow of ideas, and outcome) and simultaneously outlines central points of remaining academic disagreement.

Criterion	Explanation
Consensus	At the heart of deliberation theory lies coming to a mutual understanding based on consensual reasons or shared values and interests but non-excluding compromises or voting processes. But is not a challenge in a safe space rather than consensus the ultimate goal of deliberation?
Respect	A safe and positive group atmosphere enabling free, open and direct interchange through active listening.
Equality	Three facets <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Extensive and inclusive participation in discussion</li> <li>2. Self-facilitation and limitation of group control</li> <li>3. A fair representation of views without bias</li> </ol>
Free flows of ideas	Beyond the mere absence of coercive power (no threat of sanction or use of force), the aim is a lively and engaged discussion.
Outcome	How relevant is productivity and progress within a group for deliberative processes? Is the process itself or the outcome its end goal?

**Table 3: Criteria for 'good' deliberation based on Bächtiger et al (2018), Good et al. (2012) & Mansbridge et al. (2006)**

(compiled by the authors)

### Consensus

At the very heart of deliberation lies *the ideal of consensus*. Deliberative democracy follows the assumption that we can achieve a higher legitimacy of outcomes in politics and, subsequently, acceptance for democratic systems by arriving at collective consensual positions on given issues. Such consensus can be created on the basis of a critical reflection on the "forceless force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1996, p. 305). In the search for common ground, participants exchange ideas and arguments trying to convince each other of their respective position – ultimately arriving at collective consent.

### Respect

*Mutual respect* highlights the importance of a safe and open group atmosphere allowing for productive and lively deliberations. Multiple accounts have shown the desirability of groups with a high degree of respect and other positive features of group atmosphere such as mutual trust. Facilitators (i.e., professional leaders of a discussion) could for instance encourage 'actively listening' to other participants as a measure to ensure respect and understanding. This, however, does not mean that self-interest as an important component of decision-making and negotiation processes should be underestimated or even deemed undesirable within deliberations.

## *Equality*

When talking about *the principle of equality* within deliberation three facets are of importance: First, the aim should be the most extensive and inclusive discussion leading to the presence of as many relevant ideas and perspectives as possible. However, if participants are of unequal expertise they might be excluded as they lack the required specialist knowledge. Second, the facilitator should be as 'invisible' as possible allowing the group to discuss freely and limiting the danger of group control. While the presence of a facilitator might also provide for advantages such as an increase in focus, in an ideal scenario he would not be needed at all. Third, views should be fairly represented to avoid a potentially biased outcome caused by either a powerful facilitator or by a few comparatively powerful participants.

## *Free flow of ideas*

There can be no threat of sanctions or use of force impacting deliberative processes. *Consensus* as their ideal end point, is thus not determined on the basis of external criteria but is to be achieved solely by exchanging reasons. However, that in itself may not be enough for 'good' deliberation: Additionally aiming for *the free flow of ideas and discussion* creates a lively and engaged atmosphere vastly increasing the deliberative quality. Furthermore, a sole focus on reasons as a means to achieve consensus neglects the important *role of emotions* within deliberative processes. While emotions may lead to a closing down of communication in the form of resentment, they also possess the potential to enrich deliberations with new ideas and perspectives through e.g., the telling of personal stories.

## *Outcome*

We share the view that - when analysing deliberative processes in practice - 'good' deliberation refers to meeting the criteria outlined above at minimal costs *while making progress towards a sound decision* (Mansbridge et al., 2006, p. 18). In other words, while a successful process is a desirable goal in itself, *the outcome of*

*deliberation* – or significant progress towards it – matters as well. Hereby, outcome can refer to two distinct indicators of 'good' deliberation: First a change in participants' policy opinions or their views of others. Potentially, this results in a greater tolerance for other points of view, more trust for policymakers as well as feelings of increased legitimacy of and satisfaction with the decisions taken. Second, deliberative outcome can also be interpreted as its direct consequence for political processes and policy decisions. Consequently, when we speak of deliberative outcome, we refer to its impact on both the individual participants as well as the broader policymaking processes.

In this contribution we hold the process of the four ECPs within the CoFoE against the ideal-theoretical criteria for 'good' deliberation as outlined above. For this purpose, we conducted a total of five semi-structured interviews with three citizens, one facilitator and one external observer involved in various stages of the CoFoE's citizens' panels in the spring of 2022. The findings of these interviews will be discussed in the subsequent section.

### **Evaluating the ECPs' deliberative quality**

A comprehensive assessment of the CoFoE and its outcome cannot be made at this stage given the event's recent nature. Although the recommendations and the final report of the CoFoE have been published, their impact on European policies is still to be determined, so that the CoFoE's full effects will have to be monitored and (re-)evaluated in the future. Yet, a first evaluation of the ECPs' deliberative quality can be made using both the different criteria outlined above, as well as the results extracted from the interviews conducted during the course of the CoFoE. However, it is important to note that a more extensive survey on the experiences of the participants during this process remains indispensable.

## *Consensus*

As established above, the theory of deliberative democracy holds that positions reached by consensus among all participants are not only more satisfactory but also more legitimate. When different positions compete in the arena, with each participant defending them to the best of their ability, it is the strength and persuasiveness of the arguments presented that will provide the most satisfying outcome and the final position to be adopted. The discussions among the citizen panellists within the CoFoE, while respectful, were also characterised as lacking a real adversarial, controversial, or even critical nature. Rather than reaching a common position through vigorous argumentation, several participants noted that general agreement emerged fairly quickly during the discussions, with very few instances of dissenting voices. While the possibility exists that there simply was not a lot of disagreement between citizens, the underlying reason might also be that not enough diverging opinions were represented in the discussions. Therefore, rather than being the result of a genuine confrontation of opposing viewpoints, where the most persuasive idea prevails, some of the recommendations perhaps are positions reached by an overly consensual group.

## *Respect*

If deliberations are to be fruitful and lively, mutual respect is an essential characteristic of a discussing group. Further, it is a fundamental condition for allowing each participant to freely express their own ideas and positions. Our interviews provided some insight into this, with many participants in the group discussions describing the overall atmosphere as positive, respectful, and open-minded. However, some participants also noted an atmosphere that can be described as almost too respectful. Indeed, in line with our discussion on consensus, some concerns were raised about the lack of opposition or confrontational positions in some of the discussions.

## *Equality*

An assessment of the criterion of equality must consider the three facets described in the previous section: First, in order to enhance the quality of deliberations, extensive and inclusive participation in the discussions - aiming at bringing together as many perspectives and ideas as possible - is required. Many of our interviewees noted a lack or a very restricted amount of information offered to the citizens prior to the debates, rendering divergences in the level of expertise between participants unavoidable. This can be seen as a real constraint in the quality of deliberations as debates and discussions between uninformed parties may not only be lacking in depth due to a discrepancy in knowledge of the subject but may also lead to erroneous conclusions that do not do justice to the discussed topic's complexity. However, we have to acknowledge that this element confronts the organisers of any attempt at deliberative democracy with an essential trade-off: Between the depth of a debate, and its accuracy in representing the general population. On the one hand, a certain level of knowledge is required in order to have quality debates, in depth discussions and achieve comprehensive recommendations. On the other hand, deliberative democracy seeks to involve participants who are an adequate depiction of the overall population. As it cannot be said that the average citizen holds immense knowledge about the EU's inner workings, the interviews conducted suggest that in this respect the citizens arriving to the citizens' panels might have been a representative sample of the EU's overall population. However, even if this element can be justified and understood, it raises the broader question about the extent to which the general EU population is informed about the ways in which they are being governed. A well-informed population is required for the proper establishment and functioning of any type of democracy - whether it be deliberative, direct or representative.

The second element put forward by Mansbridge et al. relates to *self-facilitation and group control* (2006). They believe that the free flow of ideas is enhanced with an 'invisible' facilitator to the discussions. During the citizens'

panels of the CoFoE, each debating group was chaired by a professional facilitator whose mission was to ensure good conduct of the debates. While this in theory could be seen as detrimental for the quality of the discussions in the framework of the Conference, in practise the presence of a more active facilitator might have been beneficial: It seemed to help steer the discussions towards a more productive direction, while making sure that the speaking time was equally distributed among participants, as it is to be expected that some participants feel more comfortable with expressing ideas and opinions than others in an arena such as the four ECPs.

This is linked to the third facet of equality, which calls for a *fair representation of different views*. While the presence of a professional chair might have facilitated the expression of all views present at the table, it is worth asking whether the views present accurately depicted the views held by all EU citizens. During the course of our interviews, some criticism arose related to the representativeness of the debates. Indeed, for example, the vast majority of participants to the Conference seemed to be pro-EU, with EU sceptical voices being hardly to not at all represented during the debates. This is significantly at odds with a reality in which many Europeans gave their votes to EU sceptical parties in past national elections. Therefore, the CoFoE may have lacked more critical opinions from Eurosceptics or also perspectives from minority groups present in every EU member-state. It is evident that - even if such an ideal state of equality is notoriously difficult to achieve - there is an obvious necessity for improvement.

#### *Free flow of ideas*

Closely related to the criteria of respect and consensus is the free flow of ideas. This criterion requires lively and engaged discussions among participants, where ideally all of each participant's opinions and ideas will be exposed and allowed to interact with each other. Such discussions can take the form of rational arguments or emotional narratives, both of which are, in different ways, powerful

tools of persuasion. In the context of the ECPs, and as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, some participants noted a sometimes-low participation or exposure to conflicting ideas or positions. This calls into question not only the engagement of the discussions, but also their liveliness. When discussing the liveliness of the deliberations, one of the elements that came to the forefront during the interviews was the language barrier, which undoubtedly makes communication less spontaneous and lively. Indeed, some of the challenges arising from the multilingual nature of the Conference, with the resulting translation difficulties and technical problems, undeniably compromised the quality of the discussions. While it is important to acknowledge this element, and while there was some criticism of the way this difficulty was addressed by the Conference organisers, we must keep in mind that such difficulties are intrinsic to the highly ambitious and supranational nature of the CoFoE - and by extension the EU itself.

### *Outcome*

Finally, the outcome of the Conference can be assessed through the two indicators put forward by Gould et al. (2012). A first outcome that can be investigated pertains to the individual participant and how taking part in the experience of the ECPs may or may not have changed their views on EU policies or on other participants. Ideally, they might have (re-)gained trust in policymakers or developed a higher sense of legitimacy of decisions taken by them. Indeed, citizens involved in the deliberations generally expressed satisfaction with their participation. As citizens and academics both for a long time have expressed their dissatisfaction with various aspects of the EU and its decision-making process, the CoFoE seems to possess a lot of potential to initiate a shift. This is at the very least true for citizens participating in the ECPs as they reported real excitement in partaking and feeling taken into account within the EU's decision-making process – bridging the gap many feel between themselves and politicians in Brussels. Hence, many citizens expressed that the experience contributed significantly to strengthening their sense of European identity and increasing their trust in policy makers and the European institutions.

The second indicator relates to the concrete policy effects this Conference may have, such as the translation of recommendations into EU legislation. At this point, it is too early to fully evaluate these effects as it is still unclear which CoFoE recommendations the EU institutions will take up and implement. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the institutions – especially the European Council - have been very careful from the outset to remain vague about their commitment to implementing these citizens' recommendations or to introducing them in a meaningful way into the EU's future legislative agenda (Fabbrini, 2020). The language used in the joint statement that triggered the Conference process (European Commission & al., 2021) issued by the three EU institutions, was full of ambiguities, reflecting the difficulties in reaching agreements between the main EU institutions on what would come out of this Conference. This does not only illustrate the turf wars that often occur within and in-between the EU institutions but, as a consequence, casts negative light on the expectations for concrete outcomes one may have after the Conference. In line with this, requests for more and better communication about the perspectives of implementing the recommendations into actual policies have been brought up by the citizens that partook in the experience. To their credit the EU institutions held a feedback event for the citizens at the beginning of December explaining the state of play regarding the implementation of their proposals.

It is important to keep in mind that even if these two definitions of the term 'outcome' are treated as separate by the academic literature on deliberation, in reality they remain intrinsically linked: An absence of real tangible outcomes in the form of new EU policies or even constitutional reforms might jeopardize the initial positive impact on individual participants who might feel that they have been wasting their time - some of them already fearing that their input will only remain symbolic.

## **Institutionalising the CoFoE along deliberative criteria**

Taking into consideration the previously outlined criteria for good deliberation as well as their subsequent application to the process of the CoFoE, we pointed towards several flaws in its deliberative quality within various different areas such as the representation of diverging opinions or the free flow of ideas during discussions. Regardless of the good intentions behind this first attempt of involving citizens directly in EU policymaking, such a framework may fail in counteracting the democratic deficit if certain aspects such as high representativeness, knowledge-based deliberations as well as the bindingness of adopted recommendations, are not sufficiently assured. The five suggestions made in the following section are proposals which, if adopted in case of a repetition of the CoFoE or its citizens' panels, would contribute to the strengthening of their deliberative character of the CoFoE and by extension its efforts to be a valuable tool in diminishing the EU's remaining democratic deficit.

First, our interviews suggest that the **degree of representation must be improved**. Despite being relatively random, the selection of citizens seemed not well enough thought-through as for example the overrepresentation of citizens with an (overly) positive attitude of the EU appeared to result in an insufficient margin for critical voices – leading to a potential bias of the debates' results. Since the Conference aimed at grasping the interests, concerns, and opinions of all citizens on debated topics, such a homogenous selection curbs the representational character of the recommendations. Furthermore, while to a certain degree considered, a higher variety in socio-economical, educational or ideological backgrounds, leading to less consensual group dynamics would ensure more representativeness due to the consideration of various opinions and needs – ultimately leading to more all-encompassing recommendations. Besides, equality, as has been mentioned, requires a fair representation of views and is one of the essential criteria for good deliberations. Therefore, more selection criteria or a better selection process to combat possible biases or polarisation must be ensured. To guarantee that several societal groups have the possibility to

participate, more incentives for initially sceptical citizens as well as an expense allowance for single-parents or low-income households ought to be created. If such an event were to be implemented in a regular manner, the U.S. jury duty model might serve as a valuable source of inspiration.

Secondly, the process and outcomes of the CoFoE have shown the need for **better communication between the organising EU institutions and the citizens**. Offering more, better, and unbiased information to the participants before and during the Conference would contribute to the development of knowledge-based arguments that are crucial in such a setting. In addition, more, and better knowledge on the part of the citizens would contribute to freer flow of ideas, which can be regarded as a necessity for any good deliberation. It would increase the chances to reach consensus based on extensive discussions involving several perspectives and at the same time minimise the risk of participants' inability to speak up, engage and freely deliberate. To achieve this, the organising institutions ought to offer more extensive information on the relevant topics which must be given in reasonable amounts, intervals and a language that enables the citizens regardless of their educational background to absorb and use such knowledge during the deliberations.

Third, encouraging the participants to further engage apart from the setting of the ECPs would help in creating a more suitable and trustful environment for discussions. According to some of our interviewees, many participants of the panels mentioned that they would have wished for **more opportunities for the citizens to interact and socialise**. Therefore, encouraging and promoting informal meetings by organising various events or offering more breaks would arguably contribute to easier and smoother interactions in the working groups. It could improve respect between the participants and encourage the more reserved citizens to deliberate actively instead of holding themselves back. It is a known fact that socialisation of participants in any given institution or setting helps with negotiations or reaching common positions and contributes to the liveliness of debates. Thus, it would eventually contribute to equal participation in

the groups and enhance the free flow of ideas. There are several ways of encouraging such contact: As has already been mentioned, several time slots for informal activities could be offered to all participating citizens. In addition, the professional facilitators could help to organise meetings between the members of each working group. Such activities must not necessarily include great expenses on the side of the EU as there are many activities that are free of charge but merely need an organisational effort as citizens do not always take such initiative by themselves.

A fourth recommendation stemming from the feedback received from our interviewees, as well as our own assessment and analysis of the CoFoE, is to try and **reduce the complexity of the discussed subjects**. Each of the four ECPs touched upon relatively different subjects, ranging from economy over digital transformation to education. These topics, although related to each other, are complex enough on their own to be sole subject of citizens' panels. Trying to treat several of them together adds unnecessary complexity to the discussion, increases confusion amongst participants, and overall, negatively affects the deliberative quality of the process. In addition, it may prevent confrontational and controversial discussions. Focusing on more specific subjects may prevent the citizens from overlooking important aspects or arguments, may offer more time to debate and examine in depth without needing to consider time limits required to address the other topics on the agenda. This may generate more representative and thoroughly discussed outcomes. In turn, not taking enough time to address the details or overlooking important aspects due to the broadness of the topic may negatively affect the quality and accuracy of the actual recommendations given. Thus, we believe that narrowing down the topics of discussion, with more concrete panels, is crucial for a successful future of the CoFoE.

One of the underlying purposes of the CoFoE was to give more power to the citizens, providing them with a space in which their voices and opinions can be heard and where they can directly have a say on the future development of the EU. Our final suggestion is related to this broad objective: **Adopting a more**

**permanent structure** with binding citizens' recommendations. Additionally, within this permanent structure citizens are supposed to have more control over the entire process and steer into a direction determined and preferred by them. The EU could, for instance, organise regular panels where it includes EU citizens in the choice of topics to prioritise, the selection of experts, and other procedural elements which are at the moment left to the discretion of the institutions. Such panels might take place annually deploying a similar framework as the CoFoE but could also be organised in a smaller format with greater specialisation of topics and smaller intervals between each panel. Put in practice, this would not only make the actual EU decision-making as well as the process of the Conference more democratic and legitimate but would also incentivize or even obligate citizens to get more involved with EU matters. The narrative that younger EU citizens are not interested in higher politics is not only false and short-sighted, (Cammaerts 2013 et al., p. 15) but dangerous: Taking up and thereby strengthening this depiction of citizens is detrimental to efforts trying to get them to be more satisfied with and involved in EU politics. On the contrary, moving forward with attempts at deliberative democracy and in doing so placing trust in the abilities of citizens, is a great way to create and encourage a real EU public sphere.

## **Conclusion**

In this final paragraph we want to take the time to formulate some broader concluding remarks not only on our research but also on the Conference on the Future of Europe itself as a first experiment of European deliberative democracy. While these remarks can only be of a preliminary nature given the CoFoE's recency, we nevertheless want to close with three ideas which we would like to put up for discussion:

First, the CoFoE seems to have stimulated some form of debate on the future and reform of the EU with politicians discussing, for example, a move away from unanimity as a form of decision-making in foreign policy. With its 49 proposals and over 300 recommendations the CoFoE has managed to reanimate,

not only within the European political sphere but among EU citizens, interest in and discussion about the future of Europe - at a time where that seems to be more necessary than ever.

Second, there seems to be a demand for a follow-up to the CoFoE – also reflected by the final recommendations of the citizens in May. While there already is some discussion on its concrete format –for example, whether or not a next Conference should be centred around one concrete hot-topic of European politics – our research and its results point towards one crucial aspect: An institutionalisation of the CoFoE towards a more permanent structure must include its improvement along the criteria for good deliberation and the five recommendations we outlined above. In line with this, two concrete follow-up measures of the CoFoE are worth observing closely: First, the feedback event that took place on 2 December 2022. Whether the CoFoE can ultimately be considered a success also depends on how well the EU institutions explain the implementation (or non-implementation) of the citizens' proposals. It remains to be seen how satisfied participants as well as external observers will be with these explanations. Second, Commission president von der Leyen announced in her State of the Union address in September that three citizen panels will be conducted in 2023. We will be closely watching the form that citizens' discussions will take as well as the role they will play on the topics of food waste, learning mobility and virtual worlds.

Lastly, we want to share one impression that we got listening to our interviewees as well as attending a variety of academic and political events centred around the CoFoE: There seems to be almost universal agreement about the fact that the citizens did a very good job during the CoFoE and that, consequently, its output is of a high quality. Hence, the lesson learned is that we must not be afraid to involve citizens much more prominently in debates not only about the future of Europe but also in day-to-day policymaking processes. For this, deliberative democracy and its fundamental ideas seem to be the best available tool to complement the already existing elements of our representative

European democracy. Hence, proceeding with the CoFoE in the future will be a challenge whose successful outcome not only depends on whether or not we believe in and embrace deliberative democracy but whether or not we believe in and embrace European citizens themselves.

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