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AFCO hearing: 'European Union as a democratic construct'

“We are all in the same European boat”

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We are having this meeting in a moment when it is difficult not to admit that once again the Union is at the crossroads.

On one hand, there is a great demand for the renewal and rejuvenation of the European Union. The world has changed, the way we, citizens, member states, institutions would like to see Europe working has evolved.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an embodiment of that demand, which was met, thus far, with great supply in the form of Citizens' recommendations.

At the same time we are facing on the national level the attempt, by the populist politicians bending democracy to their political needs, to „disaggregate” this demand. Recently, with the „right international” meeting in Madrid, this attempt went beyond the level of the member states and national parties.

Instead of real solutions to the emerging and existing expectation for a more united Europe that would be able to face the challenges, the cynical political representatives provide the placebo of constricting European space and the reversal to nationalistic political spaces.

It is accompanied by curtailing democracy through attacks on the rule of law, opposition and independent organizations.

These two trends: toward more integration and toward disintegration exists along each other.

And thus it is legitimate to ask how dangerous in the short and the long term this development can be.

It was very frustrating for me, yesterday during the European and national parliaments' meeting in the framework of the Conference to hear some politicians claiming that to

strengthen representative democracy in Europe we need national parliaments represented at European level.

And the argument was that in the Council there are only governments that often do not represent the whole political spectrum when they come to Brussels.

So instead of strengthening or improving the control of national parliaments over the European policies at national level it was proposed to ensure direct representation of national parliaments at the level of European institutions.

I am against such understanding of European representative democracy and of this way of strengthening it.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been, thus far, an inspiring example of democracy in action. People spoke. They have tasted democracy afresh, in the company of others.

The Conference made it possible for democracy to become not an individual exercise at the ballot box, but a communal experience on the European level.

I see that the more the citizens taste the power of their engagement during Citizen Panels, the more involvement they want.

This is why I am with those who say we should not see the Conference as a one-off event. We need to reflect on a durable institutional mechanism that would allow the representative democracy to be strengthened by the participatory one.

I think we should insist that the Conference Platform for those willing to connect should stay with us - but it will not be enough. There is a recommendation on the table put forward by Citizens' Panel 2 to make the Citizens Assembly a permanent feature, a mechanism that would assure the standing of citizens and the accountability of institutions.

This „up-grading” of citizens' role could constitute a viable mechanism of dealing with democratic deficit in the EU. But I have my doubts whether this is sufficient to make the EU a citizens-oriented and citizens-owned. We need more reflection on what else

can be proposed in order to make citizens exercise their influence and hold entities that represent them accountable in more direct way than we see it now, through European Parliament's election.

Now, the task before us is to translate the experience of the Conference into an improved European democratic construct so that it serves for the next generations of EU citizens.

This is why we should thus seriously commit ourselves to make citizens incontournable interlocutors of the institutions, thus boosting the legitimacy of the Union as a whole.

I think that the Conference, and especially the panels, have awakened a dormant potential among the people, the appetite to really have a say in the European affairs. Thus we should not give in to this temptation to discontinue the Conference.

I would also like to bring back to our deliberations about the future of Europe the issue of European demos, in the past often used by eurosceptics.

Some of you might remember discussions after the big 2004 enlargement about how to create a European demos. That was seen as a precondition for farther integration.

It is true that there was this naive thinking that a European demos can be "established" from above.

Today, the question is whether European demos, 65 years after the Rome Treaty, is emerging bottom up.

Last European elections brought across Europe the same bottom up provoked debates about climate, European values, rule of law. Pandemic was another challenge that put us all into the same boat. Now the Conference can be seen as a sort of crucible in which the European demos is taking shape. As a bottom up process.

I have the impression that we are observing a nascent feeling of „Europeanness" and European identity among the ordinary citizens, in particular the young ones. We clearly see citizens less, if at all, concerned with national interests and more open to the hyphenated identity than national politicians.

But I agree that we cannot take it for granted. I also understand that Citizens' Recommendations aim at strengthening it.

We should not allow this feeling of our „being in the same European boat” fade away when the Conference ends. Many of us share this view. Ensuring a proper follow up to the Conference will matter strongly in this context.