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“After COFOE, we cannot allow our democracy to make a step back”

Conference - A way forward for citizens panels

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Let me start with a moment of reflection on globalization. Modern world is not only a world of states, other participants have also already taken a seat in it – corporations, NGOs, citizens movements. They all generate flows producing globalization. It used to be mainly trade, today can be digital, related to climate change, services, disinformation, financing, religions and cultures in broad terms. The nature of our today's world and the variety of flows make it obsolete to limit decision making process to states only. So, when we give a hard look to citizens' panels we have to remember the bigger picture.

In the EU, already since Maastricht Treaty we looked at new ways of making the Union not only for citizens, but also by citizens. We have developed gradually the system of consultations, the Lisbon Treaty created European Citizens' Initiative, there are European Citizens' Dialogues, even the transparency register for lobbying includes key group of citizens' organizations.

Members of European institutions have expanded their contacts with EU citizens, sharing, listening, making the decision-making process more inclusive. We have it at all levels of European governance.

I also think that since events in Seattle at the turn of the Millennium we have understood that it is unfair and not legitimate to offer citizens just the right to protest and not the right to decide. The latter actually should come first.

I also think that while empowering citizens is a global challenge, there is no reason not to see the EU in the vanguard of this democratic change.

In this context, last year brought something new, a breath of fresh air to our political landscape and the potential change to the decision-making machinery – Conference

on the Future of Europe. After COFOE, I cannot imagine our democracy making a step back.

We need this grand change in European democratic landscape, and we must accept that it will not be perfectly done, it will be a moving target, a process. But every journey starts with a first step. Now more steps are needed.

The COFOE experience proved that participatory democracy can strengthen the representative one. Actually, both working together, complementing each other are needed in this uncertain world.

COFOE allowed us to make first step towards this big meeting of the participatory and representative democracies. Citizens panels are a symbol of this encounter.

Now the idea of citizens panels is gaining ground rapidly and we must find a way to make citizens' panels a kind of permanent partner for representative democracy.

It goes without saying that the EU institutions cannot allow the citizens recommendations to be ignored, misused, politicized in an abusive way. European project would be deeply undermined if these recommendations were put on the shelf or in a drawer.

But I also believe that citizens' panels should allow for confrontation with politicians, with the real challenges brought to European decision making by national interests. Panels cannot discuss our future in a room isolated from the reality.

Citizens need to feel prepared to become a true shareholder of the Union, prepared to contribute to decision making, to shape the future and I am convinced that there is a big issue of European education behind that.

We should take seriously the need of European education, educating citizens about all aspects of European reality. People certainly feel better if prepared to participate. I also think that education through panels participation is a good path to deepen political accountability of citizens.

Efforts to make panels an efficient democratic instrument could be facilitated by previous participation of citizens in other already existing forms of citizens involvement.

Therefore, we need to take a step back and think about what to do, to make the quality of citizen participation in the panels as high as possible.

We could bring the panels' perspective to both the general European education and then specific education for those interested in being an active citizen.

We can establish citizens panel on an ad hoc basis, or on a permanent basis. They can be selected randomly or by citizens, or another body. Citizens have to decide how much and how they want to be involved in the decision-making process.

Our job as politicians and the EU institutions should be to give citizens the opportunity. They will decide if they want to use it and have a say. And be a player in a political process. So maybe panels could be seen as a flagship European project about involving citizens in political life. Maybe it could be a permanent part of the process of European political cohesion.

Engagement of citizens is slowly taking place in democratic countries. Mostly at local level. I think the next few years will consolidate this form and bring changes to decision making processes within the EU, created in a world that no longer exists.

While elections do allow citizens to participate in democracy, we need citizens' voices as a permanent factor in the EU decision making process, because citizens are bolder than politicians, happy with a hyphenated identity, more committed to European interests and less paralyzed by national interests.

They also need some space to talk about their main issues and concerns, which politicians do not always hear or want to hear.

Citizens panels were experimental, but it's needless to say that they also have an endless potential. There is no reason not to commit ourselves seriously to make some sort of Citizens panels or assemblies as permanent mechanism in the structure of the EU decision making. Our society is constantly evolving, and we need a resilient and flexible infrastructure to support the evolution, which would allow not only to adopt, but also to incorporate the views of the many, not simply the few. Citizens will feel ownership and responsibility of participation. I also believe that while thinking about introducing citizens' panels, we would also have to think about the need to review existing participatory tools and combine them with citizens' panels. Less

fragmented EU participatory system, that would be considered fair and equal to such a system, limited awareness of its users and its limited integration with EU decision-making – these are the main reasons that prevent us from becoming a Union of citizens.

And it is our job as the EP, together with other EU institutions to start the change, which will lead us to European Union that is fully responsive to the needs of citizens and involves them for real in decision-making, instead of being just a facade that looks pretty only in the treaties.

I think it is necessary for citizens to participate in all stages of decision-making - in creating the agenda and also responding to it if necessary. It can be both a forum to exchange ideas and also solution-oriented and have in mind the type of outputs that we will need to define.

Citizens want to be part of the decision-making process and said that themselves:

“We recommend that the European Union holds Citizen’s Assemblies. We strongly recommend that they are developed through a legally binding and compulsory law or regulation. The citizens’ assemblies should be held every 12-18 months. The EU must ensure the commitment of politicians to citizens’ decisions taken in Citizens’ assemblies. In case citizens’ proposals are ignored or explicitly rejected, EU institutions must be accountable for it, justifying the reasons why this decision was made”. This takes us to Treaty change. Citizens’ panels cannot automatically become the EU institutional framework. Without a Treaty change, the EU legal order cannot validly accommodate a deliberative process. And here comes the role of the EU institutions. The Commission must ensure that we do not deviate from what the public has told us, that we don’t forget what they wanted. A major role in this is also for the Parliament to constantly remind everyone around that the EU is for the citizens and to shape the debate. As MEPs and National Parliaments, we have also more to do at national level. Europe is not Brussels, it starts where we live.

During the Conference, citizens have called for ‘more’ Europe. I read it as a demonstration of the trust and faith in us, as an expectation that the Union that was brought closer to them, thanks to the Conference, will remain close and caring.

At last State of the Union, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that citizens' panels will become a regular feature of the EU's democratic life. We, Members of the European Parliament committed ourselves to deeply engage in it and deliver on its outcome. Now we simply need a good plan to transform its conclusions into a real change. But it should not be the European institutions imposing a new model of democracy, this must be done together. It is the time to make the EU representative democracy benefit generously from citizens based participatory democracy. I trust we learned from this Conference how to build the future of Europe in the most participatory way possible.

We should commit to keeping the Conference's torch alive. It would be a great political mistake to accept the Conference on the Future of Europe as a one-off event followed by moving back to the business as usual.