

# Executive summary

The European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs) are a new experiment in improving the quality of democracy at the EU level by giving European citizens the possibility to express and exchange their opinions about the Union and its future. The idea, which was inspired by the French President Emmanuel Macron and has been implemented since April 2018, follows two tracks:

1. At the EU level, the European Commission has been hosting an online survey, available in all EU languages, consisting of questions formulated by a Citizens' Panel.
2. At the member state level, national governments have been in charge of organising consultations in their respective countries and synthesising the results.

The outcomes of the online questionnaire and the national syntheses will be discussed at the European Council in December 2018.

To independently monitor and evaluate how the ECCs were organised in practice, the European Citizens' Consultations Civil Society Network was established with the kind support of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Open Society Foundations. It has been working to build a sustainable network of civil society organisations from across the EU which are involved or interested in the process.

This report presents the results of the research and analysis carried out by the Network over the past seven months, as well as a number of recommendations for how to capitalise on the current round of ECCs and how to improve the way they could be executed in the future.

The analysis in this Report draws on information from the Network members about their countries' experience with the ECCs, interviews with civil society representatives and government or Commission officials, and desk research. To further illustrate the variation in the way the ECCs were carried out in each country, it also includes detailed examples from six member states: France, Spain, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, and Italy.

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A key finding of this report is that the member states have stuck to the flexibility principle which they all demanded in exchange for their participation. From the name adopted for the national events, the timeframe for holding these meetings, the chosen organisers, format, agenda, and reporting procedure, down to the rationale for joining the ECCs, each country has done its own thing.

This freedom has helped to ensure that all the member states felt comfortable enough to play an active role. But it has also led to a situation in which:

1. The ECCs lack a common identity to give them visibility, credibility, meaning, and durability over time.
2. The synthesis of the consultations may fail to produce a coherent message for policymakers to acknowledge and act upon, thereby weakening the ECCs' potential impact.

In parallel, the European Commission's online questionnaire sought to grant consistency and a supranational dimension to the process. Yet this did not materialise, partly because of the low response rate, and partly because most national ECCs preferred not to use it. The somewhat puzzling failure of the Brussels executive to promote the survey in the member states did not help either.

Moreover, the fact that the Commission internally conceptualised its participation in the process as part of its broader effort to discuss the 'Future of Europe' by organising Citizens' Dialogues has added to the confusion about the ECCs. Some member states merely re-branded Citizens' Dialogues as 'ECCs', which took away at least some meaning from the initiative.

Ultimately, the unstructured and under-funded process which unfolded through the ECCs never stood a chance of generating a critical mass of activities to fix the EU's democratic dilemmas. Nevertheless, if more citizens have had the chance to say what they think about the EU, talk to others about European affairs during or on the margins of the events, learn at least one new thing about the EU, and think about the Union from a new angle or a different perspective, while that may not be enough for fundamental democratic change, the ECCs will not have been in vain.

Several recommendations emerge from the experience of the ECCs so far, both for this round and for the future.

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For this round of ECCs:

- ▶ Member states and the Commission should ensure that the summary reports provide a detailed account of the consultations and are made public.
- ▶ Organisers of national consultations should use the momentum of the forthcoming European Parliament elections to strengthen the public debate, and the European Commission should invest more effort in promoting the questionnaire.
- ▶ The European Council should set a clear timeframe for the new leadership to follow up on reports, and EP candidates and civil society should ensure that attention is paid to the results.
- ▶ The current Commission should pass on the conclusions to the next Commission.

For future rounds of ECCs:

- ▶ The purpose of the exercise and its connection to the European level should be made clear.
- ▶ Citizens should be informed from the start about how the outcomes of the consultations will be used.
- ▶ The transnational dimension of the consultations should be enhanced.
- ▶ Organisers should make use of existing models of citizens' participation.
- ▶ There should be a good balance between a common format and diverse national practices.
- ▶ National discussions should include issues that currently feature on the EU policy agenda.
- ▶ There should be a public synthesis of results, which should include independent voices.
- ▶ Another Citizens' Panel should be held.

Looking ahead, any successful new engagement will need more than procedure. There must be a genuine culture of openness in and around the European institutions. It will also require a general shift from seeing similar approaches to large-scale EU democratic reform as single stand-alone projects to understanding them as system interventions that must be built up over time.

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