

# Moving Europe Together, one citizens' agora at a time

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# Executive summary

In the context of the Moving Europe Together (MEET) project, 8 Local Citizens' Agoras (LCAs) were held between September 2021 and January 2022 in 5 member states (Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Romania). The events were carried out on the basis of a standardised model of deliberation about core policy themes on the agenda of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE).

The Reporting Forms submitted by organisers and the Feedback Forms completed by participants at these LCAs suggest that the experiment of implementing citizens' events in different EU countries using a methodology that has common elements works well. The results are comparable across the LCAs, both in terms of process and content. Moreover, their outcome can be scrutinised against the recommendations of the CoFoE's European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) and the input to the Multilingual Digital Platform (MDP). As such, these LCAs feed content into the CoFoE process, beef up the national dimension of the Conference, and offer lessons and best practices to help the Union upgrade its participatory toolkit for the future.

With regard to **process**, the 8 LCAs reveal that EU citizens crave opportunities to exchange with others on key (European) issues. The demand for new channels to bring people into EU decision-making processes was recurrent in all the agoras. The LCAs show that deliberative exercises can effectively respond to the popular demand for more participation, as well as raise people's awareness about complex issues of EU-wide relevance. Moreover, the presence of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) at the LCAs was greatly appreciated by the citizens because it made them feel like politicians care about their opinions.

However, the MEET partners struggled to secure MEPs for the entire duration of their agoras. The citizens would have liked more time for discussions both among themselves as well as with parliamentarians. They also asked for more expert support in the future to help them better understand the topics at hand before entering deliberations. Finally, a more generous project budget

would have likely helped secure more diverse (and even representative) samples of participants, especially in countries that do not have long-standing experience with participatory processes.

As for the **content**, all 8 LCAs successfully produced concrete recommendations on 4 CoFoE-related themes: democracy, the green transition, health policy and foreign policy.

Not all of the proposals collected fall within the scope of the EU's competence. Furthermore, on several recommendations, legislation has already been adopted at the European level. The absence of public awareness about existing EU policies signals a break in communication between the Union and its citizens. Indeed, some participants were open about their lack of EU knowledge and explained that the Union was too bureaucratic for common citizens to comprehend. Still, that the EU is already acting on issues that citizens deem important could mean that Brussels is not always as out of tune with what people want, as some polls might suggest.

Most LCA recommendations mirror the proposals, ideas and suggestions made by other fellow EU citizens in the ECPs or via the MDP. This correlation indicates that Europeans tend to agree about the issues that matter to them and the necessary policy responses. But some differences also transpire, especially regarding EU foreign policy. Heated debates in Brussels testify to the sensitivities around this topic and emphasise the need to sustain inclusive discussions to find common ground. While the LCA recommendations target the EU level, citizens also seem to recognise and consent to areas like health policy remaining a national competence.

8 more LCAs are planned in the context of the MEET project. The results collected so far will be taken into account when implementing the remaining agoras. Their outcome will further contribute to the CoFoE and also expand the project's pool of data for more conclusive findings for future similar initiatives.

# 1. What is MEET?

Last year, the European Policy Centre (EPC), with the kind support of the European Parliament and King Baudouin Foundation, launched the Moving Europe Together (MEET) project. MEET promotes direct and interactive engagement between Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and European citizens through online and offline discussions about core policy themes on the agenda of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Halfway into the project, this Interim Report brings forward key preliminary findings of both the process and content of the deliberations held so far. These initial results will supply useful input to the second part of the project, the CoFoE and the more general efforts to reform European governance.

Despite the aspiration to grant EU citizens a leading and active role, the Conference process was set up from the beginning in a way that does not systematically involve people at the local, regional and national levels nor links different tiers to each other in deliberations and decisions. This gap inspired the idea behind the MEET

project: to supplement and reinforce official participatory CoFoE elements with **an additional local layer of citizens' consultations**. More specifically, MEET planned 16 so-called Local Citizens' Agoras (LCAs), organised by civil society organisations (CSOs) in 8 member states. The results are to be transferred to the national and EU levels, feeding into the Conference process.

In addition, MEET is testing a **standardised model of national deliberations**, which all member states included in the project are implementing. By developing a common methodology for organising the national events, MEET offers valuable lessons and best practices for future similar initiatives. The objective is to demonstrate that it is not only possible but also more effective to use a comparative approach across the EU, rather than giving the member states free rein to carry out one-off and uncoordinated citizens' events. The data collected in this project will also contribute towards the Union's ongoing search for new means to upgrade its participatory toolkit.

## 2. The groundwork

To put its vision into practice, MEET first identified the member states that would become part of the project and complement the Conference's main focus on the European dimension with distinctive local and regional dimensions. Its budget could only cover 8 countries, and the selection was made to account for a wide geographic scope (i.e. East–West, North–South), different population sizes, various levels of experience with participatory democracy, and diversity of opinions. The availability and interest of CSO partners in the 8 countries were also factors. The final selection consists of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Romania.

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**Civil society organisations can help the EU reach out further and more easily to all segments of society at the local and regional levels, including in places that are often omitted from discussions about European issues.**

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The project also established a **network of 7 CSOs** in these 8 member states (see Figure 1, page 5). All partners are well-established and reputable organisations with strong and vast experience in organising citizens' deliberations and a proven track record of successful

project delivery. MEET envisioned this EU-wide network of CSOs as a platform for the members to exchange and learn from each other about the project, the CoFoE and the European democratic problem more generally. The expectation is also that the network will outlast the Conference and the MEET project, expanding and becoming a multiplier in future initiatives regarding citizens' involvement in European policymaking. MEET is firmly convinced that CSOs can help the EU reach out further and more easily to all segments of society at the local and regional levels, including in places that are often omitted from discussions about European issues.

Between April and December 2021, the EPC team coordinating the project held three online network meetings (27 April, 9 September, 6 December) for the partners to agree on and jointly develop the **standardised methodology** for organising the LCAs.

When defining this standardised methodology, the EPC made sure to consider and accommodate not only the partners' diverse experiences in organising citizens' events but also the different participatory cultures and needs of the communities they are representing. For example, in some of the member states (e.g. Denmark, Ireland), deliberative democracy is custom, while it is still a novelty for others (e.g. Greece).

Drawing on the input received from partners during the first network meeting and bilateral exchanges, the EPC drafted a common methodology to simultaneously reconcile the project's demands, the network members'

## THE MEET NETWORK

## Network partners

**Belgium:** EGMONT

**Denmark:** We do Democracy

**France:** Missions Publiques

**Germany:** Missions Publiques

**Greece:** ELIAMEP

**Ireland:** European Movement Ireland

**Portugal:** Nossa Europa

**Romania:** Group of the European Youth for Change



overall preferences and capacities, and the reality of the Conference. All partners endorsed this joint methodology, which forms the basis for the 16 LCAs organised in all 8 member states.

Under this common framework, all partners are required to incorporate a number of elements into the design and implementation of their LCAs. More specifically, every partner must organise two LCAs, each dealing with a topic on the CoFoE agenda. They should also randomly select participants based on core demographic criteria (i.e. age, gender and socio-economics) and preferably consider additional characteristics. In terms of the structure, each LCA has to follow a format that alternates between plenary discussions and deliberation in small groups. All these common details are present in the design of the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) organised in the CoFoE context. The output of the LCAs must be in the form of recommendations that align with the debates of the Conference.<sup>1</sup>

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**To ensure that the results of the Local Citizens' Agoras are directly fed into the political processes and the Conference on the Future of Europe, a MEP should participate in every agora.**

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In addition, to ensure that the LCAs' results are directly fed into the political processes and the CoFoE,

a MEP should participate in every agora. To the same end, partners are also asked to register the event and recommendations on the MDP. A joint communication strategy developed by the EPC's communications team coordinates the member states' dissemination approaches. After their respective two LCAs have taken place, each partner will organise a final public event to discuss the results of the deliberations.

Beyond these common and mandatory elements of the MEET approach, partners have the **flexibility to make their own idiosyncratic choices** about the methodology behind their LCAs. In some instances, the framework only gives broad indications, such as the number of participants (15-25) or the length of the events (4-6 hours). This reflects budget limitations while also giving partners the freedom to opt for what best suits their participatory cultures.

Likewise, although the EPC provided guidelines regarding the core characteristics for the recruitment of citizens, partners can **add criteria that are pertinent to each member state** (e.g. country-specific ethnic or religious minorities, people's opinion on the EU). Moreover, partners are entirely free to decide whether or not to compensate participants and how (e.g. financially, reimbursing travel and board costs), and whether decisions should be taken by consensus or majority voting. Given the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19, partners also have the option of hosting their LCAs online, in-person or hybrid.

The EPC project team drafted **uniform reporting** forms to evaluate the events and participants' feedback. All partners are required to complete and send them back within a week after an LCA is held.

### 3. The setback

The MEET project was conceptualised with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind. As such, the EPC team planned for network meetings to take place exclusively online; and LCAs in-person, but with only a small number of participants and in full respect of sanitary rules. However, the unforeseen surge in **COVID-19** cases in the last months of 2021 and the emergence of the **Omicron variant** forced a number of changes to the project and initial planning. For example, several partners had to postpone their LCAs scheduled for November and December 2021. These deferrals shifted the project's timeline and pushed the publication of this report into 2022.

In that sense, the MEET project faced the same problems as the official CoFoE process. The postponements of

two ECPs (i.e. Dublin and Maastricht, from 3-5 December 2021 and 14-16 January 2022 to 25-27 February and 11-13 February 2022, respectively) and one Plenary meeting (i.e. 17-18 December 2021 to 25-26 March 2022) delayed the decisive phase of the Conference.

In order to avoid further deviations from the project timeline, partners were encouraged to **move their LCAs online**, which they eventually did. This decision was not only for safety reasons. Partners who organised their LCAs online reported very positive experiences, with a good turnout and lively discussions. According to the new planning, all LCAs will finish by 20 February 2022, which is also when recommendations can no longer be added to the MDP. Thus, as foreseen, the MEET results will serve as input to the Conference process.

### 4. Eight Local Citizens' Agoras in five countries

So far, the project has delivered **8 LCAs in 5 member states**.<sup>2</sup> Partners in Greece, Denmark and Ireland organised both of their LCAs, while partners in Belgium and Romania held one of the two by the end of January. 5 of these 8 LCAs dealt with the green transition (Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland and Romania), 1 with democracy (Denmark), 1 with health (Ireland) and 1 with foreign policy (Greece).

**Participation rates** at these 8 LCAs ranged from 12 participants in Ireland to 28 in Romania. Turnout was equally varied – from 39% (24/62) in Romania to 100% (25/25) in Greece. Some partners explained their high dropout rate as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, notably those with higher participation rates, the citizens were financially compensated (Belgium, Greece) or had their travel costs reimbursed (Denmark, Belgium). Besides the agoras held in Denmark and Belgium, all events took place online.

Regarding the **selection of participants**, all network partners endeavoured to convene a sample of citizens defined by the core criteria specified in MEET's common methodology (see section 2). In addition, the partners who held their events online (Romania, Greece and Ireland) used regional indicators to ensure participation from across the country. The Belgian partner also recruited on the basis of the citizens' opinion about how important the EU is for their future. Finally, in Ireland, the partner included participants from the LGBTQIA, Traveller, Roma and Gaeltacht communities.

Two different **selection methods** were used for the 8 LCAs organised until now. The Greek partner used a specialised agency to recruit participants in a randomised manner. Four other partners – Belgium,

Denmark, Ireland and Romania – opted for an open call via their own network of CSOs, public offices or other institutions (e.g. municipalities, universities), randomly selecting participants themselves.

The **format** of all 8 LCAs was a mix of plenaries and group sessions. They tended to open with an introductory discussion on a specific topic and involve one or several MEP(s). In group and plenary sessions, the participants would then identify common themes or challenges linked to the topic. For the top priorities, they would subsequently elaborate concrete recommendations and vote on them in a final plenary. The length of deliberations varied from 4 hours in Ireland, Romania and Greece to 7 hours in Denmark. In Ireland, organisers even opted to split their agoras into two 2-hour sessions. In this case, a rapporteur from among the organisers summarised the citizens' recommendations at the end of the first session. These then served as a basis for discussions in the second session.

Concerning the role of the **MEPs**, in all cases, they informed participants about the CoFoE and covered issues linked to the topic of the respective LCA, which corresponded to their field of expertise and work. They also answered questions from the citizens and, based on the reports received, this interaction was lively. In Belgium, the MEP functioned as a point of information during the day: available whenever the citizens needed information, but without interfering in the deliberations. In the first Greek LCA, the MEP gave direct feedback to the citizens at the end of the debate. Additionally, some partners (Belgium, Ireland) provided briefing material ahead of the events, whereas in Denmark, organisers started off the day with an expert lecture.

Partners also diverged with regard to their **decision-making method**. Only one (Romania) decided to use majority voting (i.e. top 3 concerns and/or recommendations), whereas the other CSOs opted to find consensus among the citizens. Yet, here again, the approaches varied. Partners in Greece and Belgium

did not plan for a formal vote to be held at the end of the event, choosing instead to define consensus by the absence of opposition. Conversely, partners in Ireland and Denmark held a consensual vote on the recommendations before concluding their agoras.

## 5. Preliminary findings

To evaluate the 8 LCAs held so far in 5 member states, this Interim Report draws on the data collected by the partners in the Reporting Forms and the Participants' Feedback Forms devised by the EPC team. The results are discussed below in terms of (5.1.) the LCA process and (5.2.) content.

### 5.1. THE PROCESS

Overall, the two types of reports show that holding citizens' events in different EU countries using a methodology with common elements works. All agoras organised until now followed a deliberative logic embedded in a succession of plenary and in-group work, allowing citizens to discuss topics interactively, learn from each other, and jointly develop concrete ideas and recommendations. Partners were able to identify topics that align with the CoFoE agenda, and the citizens engaged with the themes constructively and in a manner that promotes democratic engagement. All of the LCAs and their results were registered on the MDP. As such, and as intended, the MEET project offers input to and helps beef up the national dimension of the CoFoE.

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Beyond these achievements, there are three specific findings and elements of the LCA process that are worth highlighting because they offer **lessons and best practices for the future**: (5.1.1.) the selection of participants; (5.1.2.) the democratic function of citizens' events; and (5.1.3.) the participation of MEPs in the LCAs.

#### 5.1.1. The selection of participants

While all the partners focused on the core demographic criteria outlined by the MEET project (see section 2) to select their participants, they struggled to convene diverse samples. This was at least partly due to the

method of recruitment they employed. Given budgetary restrictions, only the Greek partner opted to use a specialised agency to select participants. However, to save costs, only a very limited number of specifications were made (e.g. gender, age and place of residence). The other partners handled the recruitment internally via open calls. As such, they targeted diverse participants but did not actually receive many registrations or see a high turnout.

Ultimately, securing solid representations of categories like women and young people from different corners of the participating countries – as the partners did – is crucial. However, the final samples of participants did not truly overcome classic biases nor include 'unusual suspects'. Instead, the participants were more likely to be already politically engaged and pro-EU rather than part of under-represented groups with different and/or more extreme views in their respective national contexts. The LCA results must therefore be read through these specific lenses.

The response rate and turnout of the participants depend on the different countries' experience with participatory exercises. Organisers can feel more comfortable gathering citizens, and citizens more open to engaging with such initiatives in places where they have already done it many times before. It is perhaps no coincidence then that in Denmark – which is familiar and well-versed in citizens' participation – our partner managed to recruit the most participants. They accomplished this even without carrying out a citizen lottery with an external digital data analysis company like they would have if the budget allowed it. Partners also justified lower-than-expected turnouts due to "online event fatigue" amid the pandemic (Ireland) or the choice of venue. For example, in the case of the second Danish LCA, participants were asked to travel to a city (Aarhus) other than the capital (Copenhagen), thereby affecting the turnout.

The results so far clearly show that resources matter for the choice of recruitment method, especially in countries that do not have long-standing experience with participatory exercises. If the MEET project had a more generous budget, it would have likely secured more diverse (and even representative) samples of participants for the LCAs. The citizens' input would then be more representative and generalisable, too.

### 5.1.2. The democratic function of citizens' events

Despite these challenges, the feedback collected from the citizens at these 8 LCAs reveals that the participants had a very positive experience. Most respondents across the member states covered so far rated the LCAs as “excellent” or “good”. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of such events when reading citizens' explanations of why they accepted to participate. As some of the Belgian citizens put it: “elections are not enough anymore”, “I feel concerned by decisions taken on the future of Europe”, and “I want to make my voice heard in the climate crisis”. “I want to get involved and take a stand for a better future in the European Union and my country”, added a Romanian.

A Danish citizen's motivation is equally compelling: “I'm invested in how citizens can affect and impact governance. As citizens living in a democracy, we have a duty and responsibility to voice our opinions and hold those in power accountable. Politics matter, especially when politics reaches beyond borders and impacts a lot of people. With the challenges we face now, using our civic duty counts more than ever.” Essentially all of the feedback suggests that those who joined the LCAs were very interested in the topics, eager to know more and keen on exchanging with fellow citizens.

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### Not only do Europeans crave opportunities to exchange with others on key (European) issues, but deliberative exercises can also fulfil that societal need.

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For example, when asked about what they liked most about the LCAs to which they contributed, Greek citizens reported “the pluralism of ideas and opinions”, “the dialogue and interaction”, and “the fact that I could share my views with others”. Similarly, Belgian participants appreciated the “ability to meet other people of different ages, coming from various places, and [working] together towards one same goal”. This mirrors the feedback of a Romanian citizen saying that “it was pleasant to better understand the perspective of young people on sustainability”. Likewise, a Danish citizen enjoyed “meeting new people with qualified opinions and getting new input and perspectives on [the] EU and democracy in general.” These reactions confirm not only that European citizens crave opportunities to exchange with others on key (European) issues, but also that deliberative exercises can fulfil that societal need.

For many, the LCAs were also insightful. An Irish citizen said that the LCA helped him realise that “digital transformation and climate change in our world is crucial – and depending on what part of the country you reside in, it can be felt at different levels

and create difficulties”. The Greek citizens said they learned “a lot about the EU” and “the way the European Parliament works”, “more details about the Green Deal and the goals of the EU against climate change”. They also explained that thanks to the discussions, they understood that “there is no common foreign policy due to the national interests of each state” and that “for long-term sustainability, we should approach the environment, the climate, the economy and the society as totally connected parts of the same entity”.

Even those citizens who did not mention any concrete learnings explained that the LCAs offered them “more new ideas” (Belgium), as well as “more new perspectives and reflection on existing knowledge” (Denmark). Thus, deliberative democracy seems to be an effective way to raise Europeans' awareness about their Union and complex issues of EU-wide relevance.

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### Deliberative democracy seems to be an effective way to raise Europeans' awareness about their Union and complex issues of EU-wide relevance.

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Across the 5 member states and irrespective of the duration of the 8 LCAs (i.e. from 4 to 7 hours), the citizens suggested that future LCAs carve out more time for in-group debates. The network partners generally made a conscious effort to balance the time allocated to plenary sessions and group deliberations. To a large extent, this proposal is likely an indication of the strong popular demand for opportunities to express themselves and exchange about subjects of topical interest. Many participants said they very much looked forward to the next LCA and future similar opportunities, revealing a healthy appetite for deliberation across member states. Allocating more time for in-group work might therefore not fully address this citizens' request. Instead, organising more citizens' events is probably the right answer. However, the partners should still revisit the agendas of the remaining LCAs and try to carve out some additional space for discussions.

### 5.1.3. The participation of Members of the European Parliament

The standardised method requires all the partners to secure the participation of an MEP at their events. However, in almost all of the cases, securing the presence of an MEP for the entire duration of an LCA proved difficult. No MEP could agree to participate in the second Danish LCA. MEPs' busy agendas and lack of experience with citizens' events go some way towards explaining this challenge. Their engagement ranged from 1 hour (first Danish and Romanian LCAs) to the entire proceedings (first Greek and Belgian LCAs). MEPs participated for 2 hours at the second Greek LCA



and both Irish LCAs. In order to make up for such limited commitment, the Irish partner accepted a video message from a second MEP at one of their LCAs, while the first Danish agora counted on video contributions from two additional MEPs.

The Participants' Feedback Forms reveal that an overwhelming majority of the citizens greatly appreciated exchanging with the MEPs. "It is extremely important to see decision-makers at the same table with young people", said a Romanian participant. According to a Greek citizen, that an MEP would join the event and "answer all our questions without complaining" showed that "he cared about our views". A Belgian citizen also mentioned that the MEP's presence "gave hope to the people that their opinion will be listened to in the future". "It was nice to be acknowledged by an MEP", "hear her perspective", and have "more transparency about what the EP does", added citizens participating in the first Danish agora. These statements suggest that the idea behind the MEET project – to create interaction between EU citizens and politicians – is important for Europeans and can be fostered, even within short timeframes and with limited resources.

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However, while valued, the role of the MEPs in the LCAs was not perceived by the citizens as necessarily helpful in raising their awareness on European issues. According to a Danish citizen, "given the problems discussed in groups with other citizens, the MEP's input wasn't that useful". For a Belgian participant, the MEP's contribution was merely "environmentalist propaganda", while an Irish citizen suggested that "hopefully, this may be more interactive in the future as a way to pose questions to our MEP." Indeed, assigning more time for Q&As with the MEPs at the remaining LCAs could greatly help the citizens understand the issues they are meant to discuss.

Most of the participants in these 8 LCAs asked for future similar initiatives to bring in experts or field actors to help citizens navigate the complexity of the chosen topics. As mentioned, Danish, Irish and Belgian partners did offer background papers, research suggestions and/or an expert briefing. In general, however, it seems that the citizens would have liked more systematic expert support in understanding and debating the topics at hand. Their request shows that citizens grasp the importance of being informed about a subject *before* entering discussions and making decisions.

## **5.2. THE CONTENT**

The 8 LCAs organised so far resulted in recommendations that the partners documented and uploaded to the MDP. According to the feedback received, these conclusions and proposals resulted from rich and lively discussions between the participants. One organisation even reported that citizens "expressed their appreciation to be chosen" for such an exercise.

In the few instances where participants were initially hesitant to contribute to the discussion, they became more comfortable once the facilitator tactfully brought them into the conversation. The partners reported respectful discussions and a positive atmosphere in all cases, despite diverging opinions or, at times, passionate exchanges (Ireland).

In most countries, no specific demographic splits transpired in the input. A few partners mentioned an age divide (Ireland, Belgium) or regional differences of opinion (Greece). Economic issues (e.g. taxation, Denmark's contribution to the EU budget) proved somewhat divisive for the Danish citizens, although the debate still remained constructive. Participants did not struggle to contribute even if the themes discussed were complex and required expertise or they felt that they did not know enough about the EU. Once they got going with their discussions, most participants said they would have liked to continue working on the proposals. In many LCAs, citizens exchanged email addresses or created virtual groups (i.e. via WhatsApp or Facebook) to stay in touch after their agora had finished.

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### **Participants did not struggle to contribute even if the themes discussed were complex and required expertise.**

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All 8 LCAs analysed here succeeded in producing **concrete recommendations**. These are discussed below by theme: (5.2.1) democracy; (5.2.2) the green transition; (5.2.3) health policy; and (5.2.4) foreign policy.

#### **5.2.1. Democracy**

The first LCA organised in Denmark dealt with the topic of democracy. The participants came up with 10 recommendations and statements on the topic.

Underpinning the deliberations in Denmark was the citizens' perception that they "lack knowledge about the EU in general" and that "the EU is too bureaucratic for the common citizen to comprehend."

This insight is in line with the results of the second ECP on "EU democracy/ values and rights, rule of law, security", held in the context of the CoFoE with

200 citizens from across all member states. In both the Danish LCA and ECP 2 of the Conference, the citizens stated that they did not know enough about the Union and that EU policymaking is too complex. Recommendation 15 of ECP 2 acknowledges that “it is currently hard for citizens to understand the roles and functions of each institution of the European Union.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, it asks for the names of the EU institutions to be changed to better reflect the functions they perform. In a similar vein, recommendation 33 calls on the EU institutions “to use a more accessible language and avoid using bureaucratic terms in their communications”.<sup>5</sup>

Given this reported problem of public awareness of the EU, the citizens in the Danish LCA and the CoFoE’s ECP 2 emphasised the importance of having **more information**. In Denmark, the participants stated that “access to EU-related material, information and opportunities should be easily gained” and “the EU must become a part of everyday political dialogue – through local and national debates”. Similarly, ECP 2 on democracy recommends “that the EU provides more information and news to European citizens” (31)<sup>6</sup> and “that education on democracy in the European Union should strive to improve and achieve a minimum standard of knowledge across all Member States.” (24)<sup>7</sup> Also on the MDP, supporting “common public discourse through EU-wide civic broadcasting and media portals”<sup>8</sup> and “better information for citizens on European democracy” rank high as proposals within the democracy topic.<sup>9</sup>

Danish citizens also touched on the issue of **transnational media and information** when speaking about the “possibility for common values and democratic systems across borders”. To this end, they suggested that “citizens of the EU need to be more understanding of each other’s differences. But at the same time, the EU needs to support processes that enhance this way of thinking – that is, the EU needs to advocate for more diversity within its structure”. From this perspective, **education** is key, too.

Like so many other citizens involved in the Conference, the Danish participants in the MEET agora voiced their desire for **more opportunities to contribute to EU decision-making**. “Democracy is only democratic when citizens participate in it”, they argued, so “there needs to be more structured citizen engagement in EU policymaking – perhaps there should be a requirement to have at least one citizen assembly in the decision-making process”. They even stated their “interest in creating a European Citizens’ Council”. In addition, they also suggested that “results from previous citizen projects need to be more available – better knowledge of these projects and the good they do could inspire more citizen participation”.

These recommendations go in the same direction as the outcome of the ECP on democracy. ECP 2 recommends increasing “online and offline interactions between the EU and its citizens” (29),<sup>10</sup> “[creating] and [advertising] multilingual online forums and offline meetings where citizens can launch discussions with

EU representatives” (32),<sup>11</sup> and introducing citizens’ assemblies (39).<sup>12</sup> The participants in ECP 2 also made sure to specify that citizens should be closely involved when “the EU reopens the discussion about the constitution of Europe” (35).<sup>13</sup> On the MDP, too, one of the most-endorsed ideas is for “a reform plan for a citizen-based European democracy”.<sup>14</sup>

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## Across the EU, citizens seem to lack and crave more information on and interaction with the Union. Their calls for more and better channels of communication should not go unheard.

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Consequently, the results of the Danish LCA reveal that some European citizens’ perceptions and recommendations in the area of democracy are supported by how others – whether participating in ECP 2 or contributing to the MDP – feel. Across the EU, citizens seem to lack and crave more information on and interaction with the Union. Their calls for more and better channels of communication – for new ways to bring people into decision-making processes and raise citizens’ awareness about the EU – should not go unheard. These recommendations from both the ECP 2 and LCAs also suggest that the EU should respond in a more original and effective manner than simply producing yet another communication strategy.

### 5.2.2. The green transition

The Belgian, Greek, Irish, Danish and Romanian partners chose the green transition and sustainability theme for one of their agoras. The fact that so many project partners chose to focus on this subject goes some way towards underlying its significance. These LCAs brought forward many proposals, ranging from 9 recommendations on 3 key challenges in Romania to 30 recommendations in 7 categories in Belgium. Not all the proposals fall within the scope of the EU’s competence; for example, “to control consumerism” (Greece). Also, on several recommendations, legislation has already been adopted; for instance, the Greek LCA’s call for a “reduction of waste, in particular towards the prohibition of plastics”.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, overall, the recommendations collected on this subject offer a rich input to the Conference process.

Across the 5 LCAs dealing with this topic, **five commonalities** stand out:

First is the importance of **education**, with Greek participants explaining that there should be a “cultivation of environmental consciousness” among citizens. What is needed is “more transparency and easily attainable information” (Denmark). To that end, the agoras recognised the relevance of communication

and a special role for the media (Ireland, Belgium, Romania). They also highlighted the responsibility of the educational system (Greece) to promote environmental consciousness and offer, for example, special classes (Belgium), extracurricular activities and training for teachers (Romania). This is in line with what citizens at the ECPs discussed as well. Education was mentioned in all ECPs, but especially in the framework of ECP 3 on “Climate change and the environment / health”. ECP 3 dedicated several recommendations to environmental education in an entire sub-stream (1.2) and the subject ran through all the streams debated there.

Second, citizens from 3 agoras (Ireland, Belgium, Greece) drew links to **digitalisation**. Proposals included an “economic incentivisation for adopting cleaner technologies” (Greece), also in the context of “prioritising access to good quality broadband [...] [and] paying attention to any potential negative impacts on the environment” (Ireland). In addition, the Belgian citizens identified connections between e-commerce in the context of better regulation of online sales and express deliveries, an issue which the Danish citizens also picked up. Similar associations were not made, however, by citizens contributing to the MDP or participating in the ECPs.

Third, the citizens in the 5 member states proposed concrete and similar ideas of how to implement their recommendations. For example, many requested an **increase in funding opportunities**. The Romanian participants focused on making better use of existing funds. Meanwhile, the Irish citizens prepared four recommendations pointing in different directions: (i) better funding of impact assessments; (ii) a narrower focus of the Just Transition Fund; (iii) extra funding for eco-industries; and (iv) EU support for Ireland, specifically for the shortfalls caused by Brexit.

The Belgian citizens looked instead at the overall budget, asking for a larger share to be allocated to sustainable investments. The Danish and Belgian citizens asked especially for local production to be incentivised to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions related to transport. By and large, citizens emphasised the need to broaden incentives for sustainable action rather than use punishment (e.g. taxes, as mentioned sporadically at the Belgian and Danish LCAs). Increased funding schemes for sustainable action was also one of the main asks of ECP 3 and the subject of many proposals on the MDP.

Fourth, the issue of **governance** came up in all the LCAs dealing with the green transition. To implement their proposals, citizens mainly targeted the European level (Belgium). Functional oversight mechanisms, presumably on the European level, were also specified by citizens at the Greek and Romanian LCAs. A similar trend was observed in ECP 3, where citizens were specifically asked to develop recommendations for the European level.

Fifth and finally, the participants in the 5 agoras highlighted the value of **citizens’ participation**. All these LCAs forcefully recommended the continued,

active involvement of citizens and civil society in discussions about green issues. The Danish participants, for example, asked to “increase citizens’ engagement in decision-making within the EU”. The Belgian citizens proposed the “creation of a European Citizens’ Platform” to “control the action/inaction of political leaders” in this area. This pledge is shared by the Romanian citizens, who asked to see a more “active involvement of citizens in the monitoring and implementation of environmental actions”. The Greek citizens also spoke of “more sub-national mobilisation, galvanised by citizens’ pressure”, whereas the Irish participants advocated for “the creation of a forum comprising relevant stakeholders, i.e. civil society organisations, academics, private enterprises” specifically in the context of disinformation.

The issue of citizens’ participation is also recurrent in the ECPs. ECP 2 on democracy demands a more permanent mechanism of citizens’ participation in EU policymaking. In a similar vein, recommendation 27 of ECP 3 on the green transition and health stresses that “[c]itizens must participate in the decision-making process” and calls for more consultations with citizens at all levels – including the local level.<sup>16</sup> (This claim was also mentioned in the Greek and Romanian agoras.)

### 5.2.3. Health

One Irish LCA dealt specifically with “Health and social affairs”, generating 10 recommendations. The Belgian agora that discussed “Climate, environment & health”, while mainly focused on the green transition, also drafted a recommendation that refers to the need to “establish common and binding European standards on health”. According to the third interim report of the MDP, the subject of health has been one with the fewest contributions.<sup>17</sup> This might be surprising in the context of an ongoing pandemic but could also reflect the public perception that health policy is the preserve of member states.

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Several proposals documented by the Irish LCA mirror recommendations from ECP 3 on “Climate change and the environment / health”. For example, the Irish citizens suggested creating an “e-health card that stores the individual’s **health data**” and grants them full ownership over said data. This idea aligns with recommendation 41 of the ECP 3, which calls for “a European healthcare database” to be set up.<sup>18</sup>

Here, it is important to note that in the context of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, the European Commission has already announced the launch of the Cancer Survivor Smart Card: an e-health card summarising a patient's clinical history, facilitating care, and improving coordination around medical follow-ups. While this proposal is currently limited to cancer-related issues, it could become a useful steppingstone for such cards to be created in other areas, as widely suggested by the citizens in the LCAs and ECPs.

The Irish and Belgian agoras also proposed continuing **research**, building expertise and exchanging best practices, which aligns with recommendation 43 of the ECP 3 to allocate a "budget dedicated for joint research and innovation projects in the area of health" as well as strengthen European scientific institutions.<sup>19</sup> Once again, the European Commission has already established an EU Health Policy Platform, where health-related interest groups and stakeholders can communicate about public health concerns and share knowledge and good practices. The lack of public awareness about existing EU initiatives could signal a break in communication between the Union and its citizens. At the same time, that the EU is already acting on issues that the participating citizens deem important indicates that Brussels' institutions are not always as out of tune with what citizens want as some polls might suggest.

**Mental health** emerged as another issue of common interest. Recommendations 46 and 47 of ECP 3 suggest a stronger role for the EU in mental health by including the subject into school curricula and better communicating good practices within and across the member states.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the Irish LCA voted on having mental health services reimbursed when provided to European citizens while travelling abroad.

Finally, the topic of **prevention** makes the subject of recommendation 43 of ECP 3, calling for joint research to serve in the "long-term strengthening of preventive medicine". In a similar vein, the Irish LCA invoked the issue of prevention when it comes to childhood obesity, dementia and smoking.

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## European citizens appear to be looking for more coordinated action at the European level in the field of health.

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Overall, the Irish citizens, as their fellow European citizens, appear to be looking for more coordinated action at the European level in the field of health. However, they also seem aware of the EU's limited competences in this policy area. As such, their proposals aim to improve cooperation among member states,

increase funding, and/or establish mutual recognition of standards and services among member states instead of requesting the transfer of more health-related competences to the European level.

### 5.2.4. Foreign policy

The EU's foreign policy was covered by one of the Greek LCAs. The focus of the ensuing proposals align with that of the ideas put forward on the MDP and in ECP 4 on "EU in the world / Migration" but diverge at times in terms of the solutions proposed.

"We cannot speak about solidarity and unity in the field of foreign policy if it is not manifested in other policy areas as well", concluded the participants in this LCA. The Greek citizens noted **North-South divisions in economic policies** and argued that disagreements in these areas also "undermine the potential of closer cooperation in foreign policy". Although there is no direct causal relation between internal policies and EU foreign policy, internal infighting among the EU27 can indeed undermine the Union's global projection of power and potentially its coherence in foreign policy terms.

Similar concerns were raised via the MDP<sup>21</sup> and in the ECP 4. The latter's recommendation 26 demands "that Member States agree on a strong vision and a common strategy in order to harmonise and consolidate the identity and the unity of the EU".<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the Greek LCA suggests that "there is a lack of common understanding of problems and challenges, which is due to the absence of a European political identity". Therefore, the participants in the Greek agora recommended training to cultivate a **European identity**, which they see as a "prerequisite for a stronger Europe in the world". In reality, the EU is already working towards this aim. The ongoing Strategic Compass process seeks to foster precisely a "common strategic vision".<sup>23</sup> In addition, EU policymakers are already debating how to get there, proposing, for example, a European Diplomatic Academy.<sup>24</sup>

The Greek citizens may have focused on the importance of creating a common identity in EU foreign policy, but they also opted for a rather pragmatic approach in terms of European values, suggesting that "there needs to be a compromise between values and interests". They noted that it was hypocritical of the Union to "call for stricter measures and stronger responses to human rights violations by third countries while purchasing goods from these countries", all the "while similar illiberal approaches and attitudes exist within the EU as well".

The current EU-wide debate around **pragmatism** in terms of foreign policy and EU values is a heated and widespread one. Similar discussions can also be observed on the MDP and the ECP 4. However, instead of a pragmatic approach to values, ECP 4 supports a **human rights**-based foreign policy (recommendation 3),<sup>25</sup> paired with a stronger EU approach towards human rights violations within the EU (recommendation 5).<sup>26</sup> Such differences highlight

the tensions and sensitivities associated with the topic, suggesting that a resolution in this field will require further and inclusive debate and reflection.

Also noteworthy is that one of the most widely discussed proposals on the MDP and the ECP4 (recommendation 20) – to create a European army – did not come up during the Greek agora. However, the Greek citizens did mention another major issue in foreign policy: a “shift to QMV [qualified majority voting] is reasonable in terms of effectiveness and efficiency of the system but entails a lot of dangers, for Greece and other small and medium-sized countries.”

## 6. The way forward

The MEET project foresees 8 more LCAs to take place in Belgium (1), France (2), Germany (2), Portugal (2) and Romania (1) in February 2022. These agoras will deal with the green transition, the digital transition and democracy, which also correspond to policy areas on the CoFoE agenda. They will also follow the standardised methodological template used in the project so far. However, in light of the experience of the first round of LCAs, the adjustments listed below are appropriate, and many of them have been discussed with the partners in the network meeting of December 2021:

- ▶ aim for more diversity of participants by also recruiting from marginalised groups;
- ▶ allocate more time for in-group deliberations among citizens;
- ▶ ensure the (proper) involvement of an MEP in the LCA, including foreseeing Q&A time with citizens;
- ▶ bring in experts to help citizens better understand the topic discussed; and
- ▶ provide briefing material to citizens ahead of the LCA to raise their awareness about the topic at hand.

The EPC will again collect the results and recommendations of these 8 new LCAs and analyse them comparatively with not only the first 8 agoras but also with ECPs and MDP of the Conference.

In this sense, the Greek position on the EU’s decision-making method is more restrained than the views expressed on the MDP or at the ECP 4. Regarding the former, submissions overwhelmingly called for the abolition of the veto in foreign policy and a shift to majority voting.<sup>27</sup> Recommendation 21 of the ECP 4 demands that this becomes the case in all areas, except for changes to the principles of Article 2 TEU<sup>28</sup> and fundamental rights in the EU.<sup>29</sup> Similar proposals are also part of the debate in Brussels, albeit mostly linked to introducing QMV in the context of human rights-related decisions or common positions in the UN.

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**Regarding the recommendations ensuing from the final LCAs, a transnational event in Brussels at the end of the project will bring together the partners and citizens’ representatives from all 16 LCAs to synthesise the different proposals and propose a common list of recommendations for EU action to European leaders.**

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The additional LCAs will expand the pool of data for the MEET project to be able to conclude more decisively on the lessons learned and best practices for future similar initiatives. Regarding the recommendations ensuing from the final LCAs, a transnational event in Brussels at the end of the project will bring together the partners and citizens’ representatives from all 16 LCAs to synthesise the different proposals and propose a common list of recommendations for EU action to European leaders. This citizens’ ‘manifesto’ will be published ahead of the final event of the Conference on the Future of Europe, scheduled for 9 May 2022.

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- <sup>1</sup> For an extensive analysis of the European Citizens' Panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe, see Conference Observatory (2022), "[Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)", Brussels: European Policy Centre / Bertelsmann Stiftung / King Baudouin Foundation / Stiftung Mercator. See also *Conference Observatory*, "[Conference Observatory](#)" (accessed 28 February 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> This paper reports on the methodological and thematic findings of the project until the end of January 2022, when 8 out of the 16 planned Local Citizens' Agoras took place.
- <sup>3</sup> Regional divisions could be observed during the Greek Local Citizens' Agora on foreign policy, and especially on issues related to Turkey, between those who live close to the Turkish border and the rest.
- <sup>4</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021a), [European Citizens' Panel 2: "European democracy / values and rights, rule of law, security"](#), European Union, p.7.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.
- <sup>8</sup> Berger, Tom, [Gemeinsamer öffentlicher Diskurs durch EU-weiten bürgerrechtlichen Rundfunk und Medienportale](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 19 April 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> Baissat-Szlingier, Vincent, [Pour une meilleure information des citoyens sur la démocratie européenne](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 19 April 2021.
- <sup>10</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021a), *op.cit.*, p.12.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16-17.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.
- <sup>14</sup> Gohlke, Hannah, [A reform plan for a citizen-based European Democracy](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 22 July 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> See e.g. Directive 2019/904 on single-use plastics, or Directive 2015/720 on lightweight plastic carrier bags.
- <sup>16</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021b), [European Citizens' Panel 3: "Climate change and the environment / health"](#), European Union, p.12.
- <sup>17</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021c), [Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe: Third Interim Report](#), European Union, p.17.
- <sup>18</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021b), *op.cit.*, p.18.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.
- <sup>21</sup> See e.g. Rede, António, [Adoro querer ser europeu.](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 22 April 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021d), [European Citizens' Panel 4: "EU in the world / Migration"](#), European Union, p.11.
- <sup>23</sup> European External Action Service (2021), [A STRATEGIC COMPASS FOR THE EU](#).
- <sup>24</sup> See Brzozowski, Alexandra, [Own academy could help EU's diplomatic service find its footing](#), *EURACTIV*, 22 April 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021d), *op.cit.*, p.3.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.
- <sup>27</sup> See e.g. Deconick, Jean, [Abolishing/ getting rid of VETO-powers.](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 19 April 2021; Gallo Santacruz, Bruno, [Foreign Policy at EU level based on absolute majority, not unanimity](#), *Conference on the Future of Europe*, 19 April 2021.
- <sup>28</sup> Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union codifies the EU's core values, including the respect for human dignity and human rights, democracy, freedom and the rule of law.
- <sup>29</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe (2021d), *op.cit.*, pp.9-10.



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