

CHALLENGE EUROPE

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# The European Citizens' Consultations: Will the member states make them count?

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**MAIN RECOMMENDATION** ▶ Explicitly link discussions about the EU's next policy agenda and priorities with the results of the consultations in the run-up to the European Parliament elections.

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## WHAT TO DO:

- ▶ Keep the conversation going.
  - ▶ Turn the talk into action.
  - ▶ Make it a regular feature.
  - ▶ Aim for better coordination and coherence.
  - ▶ Set clear objectives.
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If necessity is the mother of innovation, a stroke of luck must be its father. The story of the European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs) confirms this proverbial insight. The ECCs might have emerged in response to the European Union's (EU) long-standing need to fix its growing problem of democratic legitimacy, but it was the push that French President Emmanuel Macron gave to the idea of organising citizen consultations across the EU that turned the odds in favour of this new, large-scale experiment in European democratic reform. Whatever helped to make the ECCs a reality in 2018, the burning question as the process draws to an end in May 2019 is whether the member states will now make it count.

To do so, they should explicitly link their discussions about the EU's next policy agenda and priorities with the results of the consultations in the run-up to the European Parliament (EP)

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elections. Keeping political attention on the outcome of the process will ease the way for new ideas about necessary improvements to

the instrument and its incorporation into a broader reform of European governance.

## Hoping for change

The past decades have seen many attempts to improve and sustain citizens' participation in European affairs. At times, this search for a better quality of democracy in the EU has inspired substantial institutional reform processes across Europe, for example, as a result of the Lisbon Treaty, which affected the role and powers of national assemblies (the yellow and orange card procedure), the European Parliament (extending co-decision), and the citizens themselves (the European Citizens' Initiative). But all these efforts have so far proven insufficient: to this day, most European citizens still perceive the EU as distant and unaccountable.

The public's dissatisfaction is well-documented in the Eurobarometer polls. Yet their lack of enthusiasm for European politics is not a demand for 'no Europe' so much as a call for a 'different Europe'. Citizens want change, and this was precisely what President Macron promised when he suggested giving "people a voice" and the opportunity to influence the Union's future through "citizens' conventions".<sup>1</sup>

His proposal was inspired by the 2017 French elections, in which he unexpectedly won the presidency and his *En Marche!* movement secured an absolute majority at the *Assemblée nationale*. This happened largely thanks to a grassroots initiative that collected the concerns and priorities of the French electorate through thousands of local meetings and used them to shape and legitimise the *En Marche!* campaign. The success of this bottom-up method of formulating political positions encouraged

Macron to suggest replicating it at the European level, in the hope that it would help with the Union's own democratic dilemmas.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the idea of discussing the EU with European citizens is in itself nothing new. The European Commission, for example, has been organising Citizens' Dialogues in the member states since 2012 as a means of allowing people to ask EU politicians questions, make comments, and share their visions for the Union. Little wonder then that Macron's initiative quickly won the support of Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the Commission, who saw it as dovetailing with the institution's existing 'Future of Europe' discussion.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike any previous democratic reform efforts, however, the ECCs have been driven by national governments and relied on the active involvement of all the member states rather than being merely another EU institutional tweak and fix. As such, the ECCs aimed to shake up European democracy by new, popular means.

Still, the member states were not immediately won over by the initiative. On the one hand, the fears and frustrations prompted by Trump's America and the reality of Brexit underscored the need to re-energise the Union after years of crisis.<sup>4</sup> The return to economic growth, the decline in unemployment, and the easing of the migration crisis opened the door to revisiting the profound and unresolved challenges that had been tearing the Union apart before 2017. Acceptance was also growing that the

wider public would have to be more closely involved in decisions about the future of European integration. On the other hand, most capitals insisted that, if they were to adopt Citizens' Consultations as a way to shore up public support and seize the opportunity for European reform, they needed flexibility both in the details and the timeframe of how they were to be implemented.

The process, which all 27 EU member states ultimately endorsed at the informal European Council Summit on 23 December 2018, followed two tracks:

1. At the EU level, the Commission would host an online survey, available in all EU languages, consisting of questions formulated by a Citizens' Panel. In parallel, the Commission would also increase the number of Citizens' Dialogues to reach 1300 by May 2019.

2. At the member state level, governments would be in charge of organising physical events in their respective countries and synthesising the results.

They also agreed to discuss the national syntheses at the European Council in December 2018, which marked the end of the ECCs process for most member states. For some EU countries<sup>5</sup> and the European Commission, however, the endpoint is the Leaders' Summit in Sibiu in May 2019, which will debate the future of the EU and prepare the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

## Taking the plunge

The prominent role played by President Macron in proposing the idea and the Commission's efforts to provide an overarching framework might create the impression that the ECCs were a monolithic series of events fitting a defined template. But in fact, the hallmark of the initiative was diversity: in exchange for their agreement to participate, the member states were given a free hand to implement the events in whichever way best suited their aims, resources, and national practices. Thus, the ECCs effectively took place in 26 separate campaigns,<sup>6</sup> each with their own branding, format, timescale, and goals.<sup>7</sup>

The overall process had no official name. 'Citizens' Consultations' is the closest thing to a common branding, derived from the name used in France (*Consultations*

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*citoyennes sur l'Europe*") and shared by countries like Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Romania, and Austria. But in Denmark and Finland, for example, the term was 'Citizens' Hearings', while Germany, Lithuania, and Ireland called the events 'Citizens' Dialogues'. This latter name could potentially lead to confusion with the Commission's own events, although they were presented as distinct.

The rationale of the consultations also differed. From emphasising the need to involve citizens more closely in EU decision-making, sometimes explicitly referring to the forthcoming EP elections, through citing the need to identify the future priorities for the EU, potentially including reform, to merely seeking to raise awareness about the Union, the member states disagreed about the exact purpose of the discussions.

Moreover, events were mostly organised by national authorities with little involvement from civil society. Many were held in a 'top-down' format whereby government ministers 'consulted' the citizens by listening to their views and responding via a question-and-answer session or as part of a panel discussion. This is very similar to the set-up of the Commission's Citizens' Dialogues, and a far cry from encouraging people to debate Europe among themselves.

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In fact, although the ECCs were nominally about European issues, in practice, many discussions focused on domestic or global politics and ignored the Commission's online questionnaire, which had been intended to provide a common set of topics. In several countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, governments appear to have interpreted the ECCs as an opportunity to push their own political agenda.

This flexibility came at a price. With so much national variation, the initiative failed to acquire an identity and produced no clear criteria to judge its success. Media and other commentators have been quick to criticise the instrument for its lack of representativeness among audiences, restrictive topics, or poor promotion, and portrayed it as a tick-the-box exercise signalling token European commitment.<sup>8</sup> But this implies holding the ECCs to a standard that, in many cases, they did not even aspire to reach.

For example, the Joint Report prepared by the Austrian and Romanian Presidencies for the European Council<sup>9</sup> mentions a total of 1,700 events organised by member states. France accounts for a comfortable majority of this figure (i.e. 1,100)<sup>10</sup>, which could be taken to mean that other countries did not put in the same effort or commitment. Yet to do so would be to misunderstand their intentions.

The French ‘model’, which labelled anything from conferences to participatory theatre performances as ‘consultations’ via an open application process, was certainly an inspiration for some member states. However, others consciously rejected it in favour of a smaller-scale vision. In the Netherlands, for example, the consultations consisted of just five meetings, where citizens, hand-picked from a set of applications, discussed the EU’s future in depth, not with politicians but among themselves.

The ECCs should be considered in light of what they accomplished against the odds. The idea was conceived, organised, and implemented in less than a year. Achieving

the political will to embark on a process of consulting citizens at a time when Europe is facing a growing radical populist challenge, and risk giving voice to those views, was no mean feat. And yet the ECCs not only went ahead but actively involved all member states, thus expanding the scope of European discussions. In many countries, it was the first time that European issues had been prominently debated at the national level.

In that sense, the ECCs were a decisive – albeit small – step forward in the history of democratic and open government initiatives. What happens next will determine whether they can eventually yield transformative results.

## Carrying the flame

To ensure that the ECCs kick-start a meaningful process of EU democratic renewal, several recommendations should be considered for the future, building on the experience with the instrument so far.

- Keep the conversation going: The EP elections should give centre stage to the results of the ECCs. The campaigns of the *Spitzenkandidaten* and MEP candidates should amplify the voice of the people, as heard during the consultations. Moreover, the agenda of the Sibiu Summit and the EU’s next Strategic Agenda (agreed by the European Council) and Strategic Priorities (defined by the next Commission) should reflect the syntheses of the discussions held during the ECCs, following up on the concerns and proposals raised.
- Turn the talk into action: In the period until September 2019, covering the last leg of this round of ECCs and the start of the new politico-institutional cycle after the EP elections, national and European politicians should keep sight of the initiative

and echo the results of the consultations in their discourses and decisions. This will be a critical test for the future of the initiative. If in the end, citizens feel that their participation in these events had no impact on European decision-making, their perception that politicians are unresponsive and unrepresentative, and that the Union is distant and develops beyond their control, will likely be reinforced. In that case, their support for European integration can be expected to drop.

- Make it a regular feature: Beyond 2019, the process should be repeated, drawing on lessons learned from this time around to improve the format. At the EU level, this could be facilitated by a permanent mechanism for inter-institutional cooperation, such as that proposed by the European Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee.<sup>11</sup> Any such future efforts should also be inclusive of civil society and experts, who have the necessary expertise and experience to suggest appropriate common quality standards and processes.

- ▶ Aim for better coordination: Organisers should consider the trade-off between standardisation and respecting national practices, with the goal of making the process more unified and coherent to allow citizens to feel engaged in a single Europe-wide discussion. This would also make it easier to compare and synthesise the results, increasing the instrument's potential impact. The European institutions should also work together as much as possible.
- ▶ Set clear objectives: The goal of the consultations should be clearly stated at the outset so that people can understand and trust the initiative. Citizens should be informed precisely on how their input will be reflected in decision-making to avoid setting expectations too high and to give purpose to their engagement.

As national governments played a crucial role in the implementation of the ECCs, the key to their future success lies in national capitals. The member states must demonstrate a willingness to stick with the idea and keep moving forward. The Citizens' Consultations were a new experiment in improving the quality of democracy in the EU, but they could become, in Macron's words, "an integral part of Europe's radical reform".<sup>12</sup> If necessity and providence set the ECCs in motion, will political leaders' curiosity to explore their full potential drive European democratic progress henceforth?

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1. ["Presidential programme of Emmanuel Macron"](#), *En Marche*.

2. ["Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne, Paris"](#), Office of the President of the French Republic, 26 September 2017.

3. ["Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address"](#), European Commission, 13 September 2017.

4. See, for example, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., rapporteur, (2017), ["Re-energising Europe: A package deal for the EU27"](#). Third report New Pact for Europe", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

5. For example, Belgium, Finland, and Lithuania.

6. In Italy, political factors, notably the crisis resulting from the March 2018 general election, prevented the ECCs from taking place. The United Kingdom decided not to participate given its forthcoming departure from the EU.

7. For a full overview of how the ECCs were implemented in each country, see Stratulat, Corina

and Butcher, Paul (2018), ["The European Citizens' Consultations: Evaluation Report"](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.

8. See, for example, Munta, Mario, ["The empty taste of Macron's citizens' consultations"](#), Euractiv, 11 April 2018.

9. Council of the European Union, ["Citizens' Consultations – Joint Report"](#), 3 December 2018.

10. ["Quelle est votre Europe?"](#) (2018), ["Citizens' Consultations on Europe – Executive Summary"](#), Paris: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 4.

11. Lambertz, Karl-Heinz and Jahier, Luca (2018), ["Bringing the EU closer to its citizens: The call for an EU permanent mechanism for structured consultations and dialogues with citizens"](#), European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee.

12. ["Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne, Paris"](#), Office of the President of the French Republic, 26 September 2017.