

Moving Europe Together, through citizens' deliberations

Lucasta Bath
Johannes Greubel
Corina Stratulat



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Lucasta Bath is a Programme Assistant in the European Politics and Institutions programme at the European Policy Centre



Corina Stratulat is Head of the European Politics and Institutions programme and a Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre



Johannes Greubel is a Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions programme at the European Policy Centre

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Executive summary

When it comes to the future of the EU, there is a lot of commonality in citizens' thinking and concerns across member states, but also with debates in the Conference on the Future of Europe context. European citizens are perfectly capable of having difficult conversations about complex issues of EU-wide relevance and agreeing on common proposals for action. Decision-makers should therefore not underestimate, but rather utilise the contribution that people can bring to the ongoing brainstorming about Europe's future.

Those are some of the main findings of the Moving Europe Together (MEET) project, which was held in parallel to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and carried out by the European Policy Centre (EPC), with the kind support of the European Parliament (EP), the King Baudouin Foundation and the Gulbenkian Foundation.

The project, which ran from January 2021 to June 2022, aimed to reinforce the participatory dimension of the CoFoE with an additional layer of citizen consultations, held at the local level and following a standardised model of deliberation.

The MEET project's methodological framework ensured that important common elements remained uniform, while also allowing for significant flexibility among partners to account for local contexts and pandemic-related restrictions. The 16 Agoras suggest that this standardised framework worked well and produced results that were comparable across member states and to the results of the CoFoE.

In addition to this general assessment, several key findings stand out. Partners were flexible in their choice of participant recruitment method. Beyond any specific selection criteria, however, financial resources emerged as the decisive factor in who actually joined the LCAs. Those partners who opted to spend their limited budget on hiring a specialised recruitment agency managed to maximise both turnout and diversity among their participants.

Various choices were also made on the format of the LCAs. The mix of group and plenary work envisaged in the methodology emerged as a successful formula for deliberation, regardless of the exact sequence adopted by partners. Participants' feedback indicates that citizens crave opportunities to exchange with others and do not mind taking time to debate to get to the bottom of issues.

Securing an MEP proved to be the most challenging task for organisers. The involvement of an MEP in the LCA discussions was meant to raise participants' awareness about the EP and enhance interaction between citizens and politicians. In every case where MEPs did join Agoras, the overwhelming majority of citizens reported a positive experience. However, whether because of their busy agendas or lack of experience with citizens' events, MEPs found it difficult to commit to the LCAs. More work is needed to persuade politicians to open up to participatory exercises in the future and to make the most of their vast democratic potential.

The project also experimented with transnational formats of participatory democracy. To address the lack of clear link between national and transnational events, LCAs in France and Germany gave participants the opportunity to exchange with each other in a Franco-German plenary at the start and end of their Agoras. A Transnational Meeting at the end of the project was another powerful reminder of the value of communicating across borders and putting people at all levels and from different backgrounds in contact to exchange, cooperate and hear from one another.

Content-wise, a broad range of themes related to the CoFoE agenda were discussed at the 16 LCAs. The environment was the topic that proved to be most popular among the Agoras, but democracy, digital policy, foreign policy, health and youth policy all inspired discussions for at least one LCA. Across these diverse subject areas, a number of common themes emerged, which are also evident in the results of the CoFoE. In particular, citizens expressed a clear and repeated desire for more education on the Union and its initiatives; more information from the EU to citizens; more action at a European level to tackle major contemporary challenges; and more opportunities for citizens' engagement with EU politics. The Transnational Meeting demonstrated firm support for a strong EU foreign policy based on principled pragmatism.

The deliberative wave is gaining momentum in Europe and is shaping up into a credible option for EU democratic reform. The CoFoE experience and that of this project within it have been encouraging both in terms of process and results and provide useful lessons for the future. Having said that, the road ahead is still long and the only way to make progress is to sustain the effort, continue to improve on past and existing participatory tools, and to keep experimenting.

1. Introduction

From January 2021 to June 2022, the European Policy Centre (EPC), with the kind support of the European Parliament (EP), the King Baudouin Foundation and Gulbenkian Foundation, led the implementation of the Moving Europe Together (MEET) project. MEET ran in parallel to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), seeking to reinforce the official participatory dimension of the process with an additional layer of citizen consultations held at the local level and based on a standardised model of deliberation.

More specifically, the MEET network, comprising seven civil society organisations (CSOs), carried out a total of 16 so-called Local Citizens' Agoras (LCAs) in 8 different member states (see **Figure 1**). These LCAs promoted engagement between Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and European citizens, through both online and offline discussions about core policy issues on the CoFoE agenda. Citizen 'ambassadors' from each LCA came together at the end of the project in an online Transnational Meeting that facilitated exchange among the various local levels. The results of the LCAs and the Transnational Meeting were uploaded to the [Multilingual Digital Platform](#) (MDP), thus feeding into the Conference process.

In addition, the project partners jointly designed and tested a common methodology for the organisation of local events. This exercise aimed to produce lessons about the limits and opportunities of using a coordinated and comparative approach to deliberations in different national contexts. The data collected in the framework of this process seeks to contribute to the EU's ongoing search for new and more effective ways to upgrade its participatory toolkit.

This final project report reflects on the results of the LCAs both in methodological terms as well as from a policy-content perspective. Whereas the [interim report](#) published in March 2022 discussed the findings of the first round of eight LCAs that had taken place up to that point, the final report focuses on the remaining eight LCAs implemented since then, as well as on the project's Transnational Meeting. The analysis considers the extent to which the two rounds of LCAs produced similar observations and whether the recommendations of the interim report helped to improve the experience of the new LCAs. The overall conclusions are also mindful of the CoFoE process and its [final outcome](#), as well as of the new geopolitical context defined by Russia's war in Ukraine.

Figure 1: 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



2. Eight new Local Citizens' Agoras

All remaining 8 LCAs were successfully implemented in the second phase of the project, thus helping to deliver the total of 16 Agoras foreseen. The new events took place in Belgium (1), France (2), Germany (2), Portugal (2), and Romania (1). Three of them focused on European democracy (France, Germany and Portugal), two on environment and climate (Belgium and Portugal), two dealt with European youth policy (France and Germany), and one with the digital transformation (Romania). **Table 1** below summarises the Agoras organised in each project phase, by topic and country.

The standardised method developed by the network partners at the start of the project also applied to this new round of LCAs. As explained in the interim report, the common framework set out a number of mandatory elements for all events, including: a topic relevant to the CoFoE agenda; randomly selected participants according to core demographic criteria (i.e. age, gender and socio-economics) and preferably also other characteristics; a mix of plenary discussions and small-group deliberations; the presence of an MEP; and results in the form of concrete recommendations that align with the debates of the Conference. Such principles also informed the design of the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) and the guidelines for national events in the CoFoE.

At the same time, partners had the flexibility to decide about most other aspects: for example, the precise selection method; additional recruitment criteria (like country-specific ethnic/religious characteristics or public EU attitudes); whether participants should be compensated and how (i.e. financially or through the reimbursement of travel and board costs); if decisions should be taken by consensus or majority voting; and whether events should be hosted online, in person or in hybrid format. Moreover, the standardised methodological template only made suggestions regarding the number of participants (15-25) and the length of the events (4-6 hours).

In addition, partners holding LCAs in the second round were asked to consider the recommendations of the interim report, which were inspired by the experience of the first eight Agoras. As a means of addressing initially observed challenges, organisers of the new LCAs were advised to ensure that they also recruit among marginalised groups; that they allocate more time for in-group deliberations; secure an MEP for the entire duration of the event; bring in experts on the topic discussed and offer participants briefing material ahead of the meeting. **Annex 1** offers an overview of the methods adopted by the different partners in their respective countries.

Based on the data collected from the Reporting Forms and the Participants' Feedback Forms filled in by all partners after each LCA, this section analyses the process of the second round of Agoras in comparison to the first eight LCAs.

2.1 THE METHOD OF RECRUITMENT

As in the first eight Agoras, budgetary restrictions compelled partners to adopt different methods for the selection of participants. Among the new eight LCAs, only Portugal used a professional agency to recruit citizens in a random manner. French and German partners opted to team up with a city administration to randomly select from among their pool of contacts. In Belgium and Romania, on the other hand, participants were chosen at random from among those responding to an open call sent to the partners' own network, public offices and fellow organisations.

Looking at the data from all 16 LCAs, the method of recruitment seems to be closely related to the turnout rate. Those organisations which used a specialised agency (i.e. Greece and Portugal) had a 100% turnout at their Agoras. Partners that cooperated with a city (i.e. France and Germany) saw participation rates of

Table 1: LCAs by topic and country

TOPIC	FIRST ROUND	SECOND ROUND
Environment and climate	Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Romania	Belgium, Portugal
European democracy	Denmark	France, Germany, Portugal
European youth policy	-	France, Germany
Digital policy	-	Romania
Foreign policy	Greece	-
Health policy	Ireland	-

between 70% and 100%. And those who chose to rely on open calls (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, and Romania) struggled to ensure an adequate turnout, with rates varying more markedly between 39% and 90%.

In general, though, turnout rates fluctuated less drastically in the new LCAs than in the first round. This time, turnout was especially low in Romania 45% (30 participating citizens/66 invited citizens) but all other seven new Agoras were well-attended, from 70% of respondents showing up in one of the French LCAs to 100% participation at both Portuguese Agoras and one of the German LCAs. Average turnout improved from 65% in the first round to 85% in the second round of Agoras. The number of participants ranged from only 7 citizens in France to 37 in Belgium.

At least in part, the improved numbers are the result of the extra energy invested by partners in the recruitment of participants after the first round of Agoras. For example, both the Belgian and Romanian partners reported that their experience with the first LCA prompted them to invite more participants for their second Agoras, to make up for a potentially high drop-out rate. In Belgium, organisers also increased their outreach efforts to participants ahead of the event via email and phone to confirm that those registered would actually show up on the day.

The recruitment method also seems to have had implications for the diversity of participants. Only Portugal, which used a professional agency, managed to recruit a more diverse sample.¹ This correlation was noticed also in the case of Greece during the first round, which was also the only country in that group to make use of a specialised agency. For the rest, some of the German and French Agoras were skewed towards younger people, but displayed more diversity in other demographic categories (e.g. gender and level of education). Belgian participants were mainly pro-European and highly educated. And other LCAs (e.g. in Romania, and the French and German Agoras on democracy) struggled to ensure gender parity among their participants.

But all partners tried to select their participants in the new eight Agoras on the basis of more than just core demographic criteria (e.g. age, gender and socio-economic background). In Portugal and Romania, they used regional indicators to ensure participation from across their respective country at their online Agoras. As in the previous round of LCAs, the Belgian partners included people's views on the importance of the EU for their future as a selection criterion. And in France and Germany, organisers asked participants to indicate their experience with deliberative and Franco-German events.

In the end, while the organisers' expertise and dedication can make a difference to the process, resources also seem to matter. As in the first round of LCAs, the partners who opted to pay for a professional polling agency maintained a more representative sample of participants. But they also spent a significant

proportion of their limited budget doing so. This trade-off was not acceptable or feasible to the organisations in the other member states. Given more generous means, all partners would have aimed for diversity and representativeness through specialised recruitment.

Quite clearly, the choices that the network made ultimately had consequences for the kind of citizens who joined the Agoras; the 'unusual' suspects and marginalised groups were again less represented than one might have hoped. The results of the discussions should therefore be seen through this prism. However, there *was* diversity at all Agoras and this was demonstrated not only by the rich debates reported by organisers, but also by the participants' positive appraisal of the experience as a rare opportunity to meet individuals from diverse backgrounds and holding views different from their own.

2.2 THE FORMAT OF THE LCAS

All LCAs followed the instructions of the common methodological template and unfolded as a succession of plenaries and group sessions. They tended to open with an introductory discussion of the topic at hand, often involving one or several MEP(s). In group and plenary sessions, the participants then identified common themes or challenges linked to the subject under discussion. For the top priorities, participants would subsequently draw up concrete recommendations and vote on them in a final plenary. Similar to the first round, the length of Agoras varied in this second round from four hours in Portugal and Romania, to five hours in Belgium and six hours in France and Germany.

In line with the recommendation of the interim report, most partners allowed more time for discussion among citizens in small groups during this second round. Across all five member states that organised LCAs in the first round and irrespective of the duration of these Agoras (i.e. from four to seven hours), participants called for more extensive in-group debates. In response to this request, France and Germany made sure to allocate a total of 2.5 hours to their group deliberations. The Portuguese Agoras also dedicated more than half of their event time to small-group discussions (2.5 hours out of 4 hours). Only in Belgium and Romania were the group sessions shorter, with slightly less than half of the event being devoted to this purpose. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the Belgian participants cited "more time for discussion" as one way their event could have been improved.

Overall, participants' feedback in this round suggests that the longer group discussions were appreciated. To be sure, citizens seemed to have preferred Agoras of six to seven hours (as in France and Germany), hence at the high end of the length spectrum. Whereas participants in shorter events often complained about the lack of time for in-depth deliberations, citizens' feedback on the events in France and Germany concluded that the "numerous discussions, especially those in the working groups" (French LCA1) helped

participants to “really understand each other’s point of view, give our ideas, debate and question the theme” (French LCA2). Even though a few participants in the French and German Agoras would still have wished for even more time, most comments from the French and German participants indicated satisfaction with the overall length – especially in an online setting.

When it comes to the decision-making method, most partners opted for consensus. Organisers in Belgium and Portugal defined consensus as the absence of opposition to the recommendations. French and German events worked with a mix of majority voting (at the agenda-setting stage) and consensus (when formulating recommendations) for their events. Only Romania decided to use majority voting (for the top three concerns and/or recommendations) on their entire outcome. Romania was, in fact, the only country across both rounds to rely entirely on majority voting, whereas for all other partners, seeking consensus on the final outcome was crucial to their approach.

These choices of decision-making method reflect the different participatory cultures among the member states involved. It was precisely out of consideration for such country-specific traditions and preferences that the project allowed for some flexibility in the methodological template adopted. The experience with the 16 LCAs suggests that future initiatives seeking to implement a systematic approach for different countries will likely also have to decide on the elements that must be common and those which can be allowed to diverge according to local context.

2.3 THE INVOLVEMENT OF MEPS AND EXPERTS

As per the common guidelines, all partners aspired to involve at least one MEP in their LCAs in this round, as in the first round. The MEP(s) would offer information about the topic under discussion, frame the event based on their practical experience, and answer questions from participants. The intention was also to have MEP(s) listen to the outcome of the Agora in the hope that the discussions would offer them fresh ideas to bring into their work in the European Parliament or the Conference on the Future of Europe.

However, as in the case of the first eight LCAs, securing the participation of an MEP was a challenge. Whether because of their busy agendas or a lack of experience with citizens’ events, MEPs found it difficult to commit for the entire duration of the Agoras in almost all countries. In Belgium, no MEP at all was able to join the LCA, despite the organisers’ best efforts. For this reason, the Belgian partners had to be creative and invite instead a member of the national parliament who was also a member of the Conference Plenary. In a similar manner, the Romanian organisers made sure to confirm the attendance of the MEP’s Head of Cabinet for the entire event in an attempt to compensate for the fact that the MEP who accepted the invitation then had to leave before the end of the Agora. These decisions helped

but, based on citizens’ feedback, the presence of an MEP would have been preferable. In general, the MEPs who attended stayed only for the beginning of the meeting, except in France and Germany, where at least one of the three MEPs involved came back for the concluding session to discuss the LCA’s results with the citizens.

Still, whenever MEPs were in attendance, citizens were highly appreciative of their presence. In fact, many participants indicated in their feedback that the direct exchange with European decision-makers was one of the reasons they agreed to join the event. Citizens were especially happy with the MEPs’ involvement when they stayed throughout the entire event (e.g. France and Germany). “It shows that we are not just talking in our rooms, between us, but that we are also being listened to”, a German participant noted. Another German citizen added that the MEPs’ involvement made the EU more “tangible” to the participants. In member states where MEPs only stayed for a limited time, the citizens found their involvement informative and useful but noted that their discussions with the MEPs were “a little too short” and could have been “more in-depth” (both quotes from Romanian citizens).

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Many participants in the first eight Agoras also asked for experts and more information to be provided in advance to citizens joining similar exercises in the future. For this reason, the interim report recommended to partners that they involve experts in the new LCAs and provide participants with briefing material ahead of the meeting. However, almost all organisers simply relied on the MEPs to offer input and background information to participants at their LCAs. Only Belgium circulated an additional briefing note to those who attended their Agora, which was well received, with one participant stating that it was “very clarifying”. For the rest, the citizens’ feedback seemed to be less critical of the amount of information in this round. Yet, participants at some LCAs (for example in Belgium and Germany) specified that learning more about the institutional architecture of the European Union would have been helpful for them. Such testimonies suggest that the involvement of experts throughout the events can be beneficial, especially since organisers cannot be expected to anticipate all questions and knowledge gaps that can emerge from deliberations.

2.4 THE TRANSNATIONAL ELEMENT

This new round of LCAs brought a transnational dimension to the project as a means of enriching the debates and the participants' experiences by connecting the different levels and countries. This innovation was a direct response to the missing link between the national and European levels of deliberation in the CoFoE, where the citizens who joined the ECPs were largely unaware of the national dimension of the Conference and had parallel debates to the ones happening in the member states. The transnational element played out both in the innovative format of the Agoras held in France and Germany, as well as in the final event organised at the end of the project with citizen 'ambassadors' from all LCAs.

2.4.1 The Franco-German Agoras

The partner in charge of the organisation of LCAs in France and Germany opted for a process that allowed the two countries to engage simultaneously with similar topics, as part of the same exercise. Thus, a French and a German LCA dealt concurrently with the subject of democracy and then another French and another German Agora covered youth policy at the same time. Simultaneous translation of these LCAs' joint plenaries enabled a seamless exchange across borders. The originality of the approach of these Agoras did not prevent the partners from abiding by the common methodological guidelines of the project.

The Franco-German LCAs started with a transnational opening plenary in which organisers explained the MEET project, the agenda and the objectives of the events. Three MEPs – one French and two German – offered a short input and answered questions before participants split up into their local Agoras. At the end of the event, the French and German local Agoras came together again to present their recommendations to MEPs and fellow citizens from the partner country.

As such, by holding the opening and concluding sessions of each Agora jointly, the Franco-German LCAs gave participants from the two countries the opportunity to speak with and hear from each other about the same European issues. Moreover, choosing two partner cities (i.e. Angers and Osnabrück) for this transnational exchange further enhanced Franco-German cooperation at the local level. It also increased awareness of the Conference among these cities and their citizens, thereby creating a concrete opportunity for them to contribute to the process.

Nearly every participant evaluated this transnational experiment positively. One German citizen, for example, noted that "normally, I am mainly concerned with the Franco-German cooperation". But he went on to say that this event showed him "a kind of commonality of interest [between the two countries] that I had not thought about before." A French participant then expressed excitement about the "opportunity to exchange with other young people, including from

the neighbouring country, and to manage, even after a short period of time, to come up with concrete and innovative ideas to strengthen Europe."

For another German citizen, the meeting made it "clear how important exchange and communication is, whether this concerns young people, parliaments, or citizens in general. This connection and dissemination of information is one of the most important processes in politics and society." And the events also proved their added value in raising participants' awareness about the topics discussed. According to a French citizen: "my point of view definitely expanded, I had never really discussed the subject of democracy before and I really understand much better now what it represents."

2.4.2 The project's Transnational Meeting

Once the total of 16 Agoras had been delivered, a final, online project meeting brought together citizen ambassadors from all LCAs to discuss a topic of joint concern. The ambassadors – one per Agora and two per country – had been selected by the partners in such a way as to ensure gender representation. As a major constraint, given the project's budgetary limitations, all ambassadors had to be able to speak English. This selection criterion clearly impacted the diversity of the sample of participants, but budget constraints made it impossible to have simultaneous translation in eight different languages.

Two weeks ahead of the Transnational Meeting, the EPC circulated an online poll to the ambassadors, asking them to vote for their preferred topic to discuss at the event. In the midst of war in Ukraine, citizens selected foreign policy, even though this subject had only been addressed by one Agora (Greece) in the first round. In itself, this choice suggests a reshuffling of people's perceived priorities as a result of the war on the EU's borders. To aid with the preparation of participants ahead of the meeting, the EPC sent the ambassadors some background material, including basic information on the EU's competences and role in foreign and security policy, the CoFoE recommendations on foreign policy and the recommendations of the Greek LCA on the same topic.

Regular communication with the participants in the weeks ahead of the event ensured a good turnout on the day: 14 out of the 16 ambassadors showed up (i.e. 88% turnout). The group was gender-balanced: seven men and seven women. Their ages ranged from 21 to 82, with seven participants aged below 30, four aged between 30 and 50, and three aged over 50. Two citizens attended from each member state, with the exception of Ireland and Portugal, where one representative each could not attend the meeting after all.

The Transnational Meeting was intentionally designed to be short (i.e. two hours) given that it had to be organised after work/school and accommodate three different time zones. While pragmatic reasons determined the length of the event, participants reacted as expected and criticised the limited time in their

feedback. More time would have allowed the group to “go into more detail” (German participant) and “get to the real debate” (Belgian participants). The majority of ambassadors argued that longer in-group and plenary sessions would have benefited discussions among citizens from so many countries. Their evaluation reinforces the calls of other citizens who participated in all 16 LCAs for proper debate time. Future similar initiatives should therefore not shy away from allocating generous space for deliberations. The experience of this project suggests that people are not bothered about staying the extra hour, but actually crave more time to exchange, listen, and learn as part of such exercises.

The goal of the Transnational Meeting was to enable the citizen ambassadors coming from eight different countries to agree on a common set of recommendations in the field of EU foreign policy. It started with an introductory plenary that reviewed the agenda of the meeting and presented the subject, with the help of two experts. The experts also stayed throughout the event to answer any potential questions arising during deliberations. The ambassadors were then split into two sub-groups to ensure a fair balance of gender, age and nationality. Each of these groups discussed the list of recommendations that emerged from the Greek Agora on foreign policy (which took place in November 2021), in order to add to or change anything deemed important, especially in light of the new war-related developments. A final plenary brought the two groups together again to vote, and adapt and agree on the final list of recommendations (see **Annex 2**). As no MEP was available to join this meeting, the EPC invited a member of the Europe in the World working group in the CoFoE Plenary to provide feedback on the citizens’ recommendations at the end of the event.

All 16 LCAs offered plenty of evidence that those who agreed to participate in these events did so because of the promise and opportunity of meeting and exchanging with fellow citizens about key European issues. And the feedback collected at the end of these Agoras reveals that participants were not disappointed: the social/human interaction aspect of the experience scored highly everywhere. But the Transnational Meeting showed that citizens’ desire for communication actually transcends local and national contexts. As an Irish ambassador explained: “dialogue between member states is extremely important. As in any relationship, having an understanding of each other’s concerns, strengths, and weaknesses is very important.” A French participant remarked that “it is good

to hear from people who come from European countries that one does not know, to learn about their lifestyles, priorities, and views. Such opportunities do not come about often.” A Belgian participant also evaluated the event as “a unique chance to debate with people that have different backgrounds, origins, and ideas.”

It was equally interesting to read what participants took away from this Transnational Meeting. One Irish citizen stated that “now more than ever I see that we are very much on the same page. Sometimes solutions to problems differ, but the major issues of concern are the same across Europe.” A French citizen explained that this meeting “helped [me] to have a better understanding of differences across national borders but mostly the similarities in the views that citizens from different countries have on foreign policy issues.” A Romanian citizen added that “I have learned to listen more, as there are different views in the EU on the future”, while a Belgian participant remarked that they had learned “to support a compromise that was not fully but at least partially in line with [their] view.” Finally, one participant from France found that the Transnational Meeting “confirmed that Europe is not created by one country. We are all together in this with our differences and similarities.”

At a time when the EU and its member states are confronted by critical internal and external challenges, such transnational initiatives are a powerful reminder of the value of communicating across borders and putting people at all levels and from different backgrounds in contact to exchange, cooperate and hear from each other. Linking local and European levels in a Transnational Meeting enabled citizens to discuss local issues in a European setting. In this context, the MEET project suggests that having national deliberations before going into a transnational dialogue can help citizens to get (better) acquainted with the EU and the topic under discussion, preparing them for a more fruitful exchange with fellows from other countries. The project’s transnational element also indicates that cross-country debates are a sure path to building bridges, better understanding and a common vision for even the hardest decisions that need to be taken to secure Europe’s future. As an Irish participant stirringly concluded: “if there was one thing I could ask for is please hold more inter-European public discussions. I think they hold the key to resolving tough issues, be they climate, environment or war.”

3. Common reflections from the LCAs’ recommendations

All participants in this project’s events gave top scores to their experience. But these local and transnational deliberations did not only leave a positive and

lasting impression on the citizens who got involved. They also produced concrete recommendations that partners uploaded to the MDP in order to feed into the

proceedings of the Conference. **Annex 2** shows the full list of recommendations from all eight member states. Broadly speaking, they range from an impressive collection of 33 short recommendations grouped into 10 categories in Belgium to two very detailed, thought-through proposals, including justifications, in the German Agora on youth policy. In spite of these differences, the recommendations all succeed in conveying the priorities for the future in the eyes of participants, and all include proposals for how the EU should engage with them.

This section presents and analyses the citizens' proposals from the online Transnational Meeting (on foreign policy) and the new eight Agoras of this round covering the green transition (Belgium and Portugal); the digital transition (Romania); democracy (France, Germany and Portugal); and youth policy (France and Germany). The results are discussed according to five themes that cut across these different policy areas, including: (3.1) more EU educational policies and initiatives; (3.2) more effective and reliable EU communication; (3.3) more EU-level solutions; and (3.4) more citizens' participation. The evaluation draws on the outcome of the first eight LCAs and on the Conference on the Future of Europe, by way of comparison.

3.1 MORE EU EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND INITIATIVES

One major commonality of all Agoras, irrespective of their topic, is that participants called on the EU to promote education. The Romanian LCA on digitalisation, for example, highlighted the importance of digital education and training for all age groups as a means of helping citizens to acquire the necessary skills for the labour market. The CoFoE's European Citizens' Panel 1 (ECP1) ("Stronger economy, social justice and jobs/education, culture, youth and sport/digital transformation) also reflected this emphasis, with one recommendation (#8) asking for an EU-wide digital skills certification in schools, as well as upskilling opportunities throughout the workforce. The final report of the Conference Plenary highlighted this issue too and adopted a proposal aimed at improving digital literacy among EU citizens (proposal #32).

Moreover, the issue of environmental education was raised repeatedly in several Agoras. The Portuguese LCA dealing with the environment recommended that environmental education be reinforced in schools, and highlighted the conviction that young people are "key to changing the way society looks at these problems." The second Belgian LCA on environment, climate and health also proposed that climate issues become part of the curriculum in school.

The link between education and environment was discussed extensively in the first round of LCAs too, with the Greek, Romanian and Belgian Agoras all

underscoring the role of schools and young people in tackling the climate crisis. As noted in the interim report, the ECP3 on climate change/health devoted significant time and space to the subject and proposed a common environmental charter to harmonise education and communication efforts across member states (recommendation #7). ECP1 also formulated two recommendations on environmental education, calling for courses (recommendation #15) and an online platform for environmental education (recommendation #35). These recommendations are reflected in the Conference Plenary's final report, with proposal #6 calling on the EU to "foster knowledge, awareness, education and dialogues on environment, climate change, energy use and sustainability."

The theme of education also intersected significantly with the subject of democracy. In the German Agora, for example, citizens largely focused on shaping a common historical and cultural identity through common educational standards. The recommendations included calls for a European Education Council; the production of a common European history textbook for use in schools; and a strengthening of a "common culture of memory and common democratic values" which would "complement the national perspective." Similar themes were identifiable in the French Agora, with participants demanding a "civic education on Europe for all" and educational programmes in secondary schools across the EU. The Portuguese LCA on democracy even called for education and training to become European priorities, and recommended that together with health, these areas should receive more money than roads and infrastructure. Although a conceptual link between democracy and better education was also apparent in the first round of LCAs, the issue of cultural and historical identity was more pronounced in the eight new Agoras. It also emerged in the conclusions of the Transnational Meeting, where participants saw the "forging of a common political identity [...] as a prerequisite for closer cooperation in foreign policy and real solidarity."

In addition, education also came up in the German Agora on youth, which asked for greater EU support for youth exchange programmes. According to the German recommendations, these initiatives should be oriented towards digitalisation and sustainability, again illustrating the extent to which different topics were perceived as being interlinked by participants. The German citizens also proposed improving cooperation with Eastern EU member states and third countries in the field of youth, and asked for the Union to strengthen its visibility in school contexts.

The outcome of the Conference also highlights the horizontal nature of the topic of education. References to education are peppered throughout the final report – far beyond the two proposals dealing with education per se (proposals #46 and #48). Education is mentioned, for example, on climate change (proposal #6), in relation

to Europe's role in the world (proposal #22), linked to digital issues (proposal #32) and youth (proposals #36 and #37) or health (proposal #7).

To sum up, the subject of education cuts across different policy fields and even though it is not an EU competence – but rather the prerogative of member states and/or regions – citizens want more European action in this field. Yet, instead of asking for a transfer of decision-making power on this issue to the EU, it appears that participants would be content with the Union simply doing more in terms of coordinating, funding and supporting member states' educational efforts and initiatives. As such, the results do not interfere with the limits set on the EU by the existing Treaties in this domain.

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3.2 MORE EFFECTIVE AND RELIABLE EU COMMUNICATION

A second common thread running through the LCAs and all topics is the request for more information about the EU. As a Danish citizen noted, “insight and understanding [about the EU and its functioning] are a prerequisite for the opportunity to participate much more actively in democratic processes.” This outcome is not exclusive to the MEET project's Agoras. A healthy public appetite for information about European affairs has also become evident in the ECPs, where three of the four panels formulated recommendations on improved EU communication. These found their way into the final report of the Conference.

This call refers not only to information on how the EU works (Denmark) but also to the various policy issues that the Union covers. It includes, for example, digitalisation, where Irish participants urged the EU to “increase its efforts to communicate its current capabilities.” It also touches on the green transition, with Belgian citizens asking for the EU to “set up awareness campaigns on the environment” to reflect the “negative consequences of climate change but also the achievements and benefits of climate neutrality.” They also argued that “the EU should draw up a ‘climate barometer’ that provides detailed (technical) information on the state of play of climate objectives per

member state (or even region).” According to the Danish participants, “information about possibilities for change [to our climate] must be accessible to everyone.”

Similar recommendations also emerged from the final report of the Conference,² or the third ECP, which devoted an entire sub-stream (1.2) to environmental education and the need to establish a common European framework of information and training to ensure consistent education across EU countries. French participants, on the other hand, seemed more interested in online information campaigns targeting young people “on the European voluntary services” to raise awareness about these possibilities and make them more attractive to the public.

In a number of countries (i.e. France, Portugal and Germany), social media campaigns were seen as ideal tools to reach out to younger people. A European TV channel and direct interactions between citizens and MEPs via new technologies were mentioned by the Portuguese recommendations – a suggestion that was also put forward by the ECP2 on democracy (recommendation #31). French citizens proposed instead “the use of influencers, public figures and politicians to reach a wider audience.” Moreover, participants in Portugal cautioned that to be more effective, “European institutions should communicate with citizens using less technocratic and more simple and friendly language.” This is in line with the ECP2, which also appealed to policymakers to speak in less pretentious and bureaucratic terms in order to be more easily understood (recommendation #33).

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Citizens also emphasised the importance of centralising access to information. The Belgian participants, for example, maintained that “there should be a single point of contact for information on climate challenges.” For Danes, this is because “the EU must work to ensure that the dialogue on climate is based on facts and knowledge.” In the Portuguese Agora, participants suggested that decision-makers should “create a MyEUApp to allow citizens to ask questions about the EU, to communicate with MEPs and find out more about European funds and how they are being granted.”

Technological solutions for better information and increased exchange with policymakers was also a recurring topic in the ECPs, where several panels formulated recommendations about the setting up of a platform to facilitate environmental education for all citizens (ECP1, recommendation #35; ECP3, recommendation #7) and of multilingual platforms with information on the EU's work (ECP2, recommendation #17). The proposals put forward by the LCAs and ECPs could offer inspiration for the implementation of proposal #46.5 of the final report of the Conference, which introduces the idea of an information platform for all citizens but stops short of explaining how this should be set up.

Requests for more information were also linked to a perceived need in countries like Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and Portugal for more transparency in the EU. Whether this refers to “more transparency in the way European funds are being used” (Portugal/democracy) or to transparency on lobbying at the EU level, knowing more seems to help with people's sense of “democratic control” (Germany/democracy). But Belgian, Danish and Portuguese citizens also insisted that the information made available has to be reliable so as to fight disinformation. The Romanian Agora concluded that being able to trust the available information was crucial “both to ensure good solutions but also to counter polarisation” in societies affected by disinformation.

The subject of fake news – ever more relevant in the context of the Russian disinformation on the Ukrainian war – was also the focus of the first and second ECPs and was covered at various points in the final CoFoE document. For example, the Conference proposed the establishment of an EU body to counter disinformation and called for efforts to improve “media literacy and awareness about disinformation” (see proposals #27 and #28). The fight against disinformation has also been high on the EU's agenda for many years. The European Commission and the European External Action Service in particular have been working to develop several instruments and roadmaps in this regard, including the recently published [European Democracy Action Plan](#).

3.3 MORE EU-LEVEL SOLUTIONS

A third common thread to all 16 LCAs – becoming obvious from the recommendations discussed in the sections above too – is the fact that participants repeatedly invoked collective solutions and looked towards the EU to initiate, coordinate, facilitate or harmonise member states' actions or efforts in response to different challenges. This is the case even when the problems are clearly coloured by a local or national perspective (e.g. in Belgium, citizens discussed European recommendations for the issue of waste management at the local level).

Throughout the recommendations of this round, many examples emerge of citizens calling on the EU to set up a European Education Council (German LCA); to coordinate information-sharing in the context of the above-mentioned ‘climate barometer’ (Belgian LCA); or to support municipalities to modernise waste collection systems (Portugal). In a similar vein, German citizens urged the EU to work with member states towards a “uniform energy policy” by investing in renewable energies – an issue which is especially salient in the current debate following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Belgian participants too would like the Union to spearhead joint efforts to establish a pan-European rail network. And Portuguese and Belgian citizens expressed hope for more regulatory efforts at the EU level to prevent bureaucracy and regulatory inconsistencies, especially in the context of the energy and the digital single market. In the first round of Agoras, Irish citizens also called for EU support for member states to improve the digital infrastructure (Ireland) and local industries (Denmark).

Participants in the Agoras seemed perfectly aware that acting to resolve problems would require financial resources. For this reason, citizens called on the EU to provide more funding in various policy areas, depending on the focus of any given LCA: e.g. to fight climate change (Romania), to support health care (Portugal), to build a digital infrastructure (Ireland), for better education (France, Portugal), and to promote youth policies (Germany). Portuguese citizens explicitly asked for a bigger EU budget to be able to cover all the different financial imperatives across and within member states – just as the Danish and Belgian citizens did in the first round of LCAs.

The need for collective European action was invoked by all eight member states, especially with regard to climate change and the environment. In many LCAs – including those which did not focus on this topic – climate change came up as a repeated issue of concern, where citizens looked at the European level to take action. For example, the German Agora on democracy formulated three recommendations on climate issues, asking for increased transparency and democratic control to combat climate change. Belgian citizens too urged the EU to “integrate tackling climate issues into all its policy areas”, and drew an explicit link between tackling climate issues and strengthening the European Pillar of Social Rights. Similar references, which identify climate change as a cross-cutting issue with importance for many policy fields, are also found in the associations made between climate change and the EU's trade and energy policies (Belgium, Germany), economic policies (Belgium, Denmark), migration policy (Belgium) and social justice (Germany).

The conclusion then, as the Romanians put it, was that “the EU must spread, develop and govern with a circular economy as a point of reference”, and must guarantee

the protection of the environment across all member states. In particular, according to the Belgian Agora, “the EU should develop solidarity mechanisms to ensure that all member states, regions or households can contribute to the green transition.” Dealing with climate change was also placed at the heart of EU action in the context of the ECPs, where the topic was extensively discussed in three of the four events. And it is also at the top of the European Commission’s agenda of priorities. Citizens and politicians alike seem to see the fight against climate change as the key challenge of our time – and the EU as pivotal in tackling it.

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3.4 MORE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The citizens who joined the LCAs of this project did not only advocate for more action from the EU level, however, they also asked for citizens to be granted more opportunities to be active in European political affairs. This finding already emerged quite forcefully in the first round of Agoras, where in the context of the green transition, five different LCAs recommended the continued and active participation of citizens in discussions on climate and green issues. Indeed, both the Irish and Belgian LCAs in the first round called for the creation of platforms or fora to allow citizens to continue to engage with politicians and stakeholders. Danish citizens even supported a “continuous and systematic citizen involvement”, for example in the form of a permanent citizens’ assembly.

The CoFoE recommendations were equally ambitious in this regard. Ideas from the MDP and ECP2 on democracy also asked the Union to “create multilingual online forums and offline meetings where citizens can launch discussions with EU representatives” (recommendation #32), to hold regular citizens’ assemblies (recommendation #39), and to involve citizens if “the EU reopens the discussion about the constitution of Europe” (recommendation #35). In addition, the ECP3 on climate change and the environment/health asked for a dedicated online platform which would allow citizens to access transparent information and to promote interaction between people and experts (recommendation #33).

Citizen participation proved once again to be a common theme in the eight new LCAs of this project. The Romanian Agora on digitalisation recommended a

forum to bring together representatives from the public and private spheres, as well as the education sector, to discuss and consult on more effective collaboration and policy development in the digital field. The Portuguese LCA on democracy suggested that new technologies, including an app, could allow citizens to consult directly with MEPs and to find answers to questions about the EU and its allocation of funds. The Belgian Agora on climate, environment and health made an explicit link between the climate crisis and citizens’ participation, calling for the strengthening of the European Citizens’ Initiative and other direct democratic initiatives to feed into policy formulation. These proposals were echoed by the German LCA’s recommendation for greater citizen participation in decisions on the environment.

The German youth Agora also mentioned citizen participation when asking for the creation of a local ‘Junior Ambassadors’ scheme, which would allow for the concerns of young citizens to be brought directly to European policymakers “in order to ensure youth participation and involvement of European youth in the EU institutions.” Engaging young Europeans has been a priority for EU institutions already in the context of the CoFoE, but this focus on youth-oriented citizen participation is an entirely new concept that was not reflected in the ECP reports – and could reinforce the EU’s commitment to engage young people beyond the current Year of European Youth.

European citizens’ eagerness to talk politics and contribute to policies that affect their lives has become a recognised trend in recent years. It was a key finding of the [European Citizens’ Consultations process](#) in 2018-2019 but also of a recent [2021 Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe](#), where a staggering 92% of respondents demanded that citizens’ voices be taken more into account in EU decisions. The final report of the Conference acknowledges these findings, as do the recommendations outlined above. As such, it dedicates proposal #36 entirely to improving the EU’s participatory toolbox, including the launch of a digital platform, improving existing forms of participation on all levels and the setting up of regular Citizens’ Assemblies. The results of the CoFoE and of this project merely confirm Europeans’ genuine desire for political participation. The mounting evidence behind this trend suggests that it is not a passing phenomenon but a real and resolute call for EU democratic reform. The Union and its member states should therefore look into updating European decision-making structures to make them much more participatory than they are at present.³

3.5 THE TRANSNATIONAL MEETING

Finally, the results of the online Transnational Meeting (see [Annex 2](#)) deserve a separate discussion because they cover the sensitive topic of EU foreign policy at a time when war rages on the Union’s borders. Since the LCAs and the ECPs took place prior to Russia’s invasion

of Ukraine, the Transnational Meeting in this project was a distinct opportunity to begin to understand how European citizens – from different member states in this case – perceive the new geopolitical reality and the role of the EU in the ongoing *Zeitenwende*. The fact that in the end the debate and outcome of the Transnational Meeting overlaps in significant ways with the concerns raised by citizens who participated in the Conference suggests that there is an intuitive EU-wide approach to the key issues of the conversation on this subject. As noted also by the representative of the CoFoE's Europe in the World working group at the Transnational Meeting, "[i]t also shows that we have a common point of understanding: that there is a pre-existing consensus in a way, in terms of what we can improve in the European Union."

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More specifically, the citizen ambassadors touched on the dichotomy between pragmatism and principles, as well as on the question of qualified majority voting (QMV) in the EU foreign policy field. Both these issues have been prominent, as well as rather divisive, in the discussions held in the Greek LCA during the first round, the CoFoE and even, more broadly, in Brussels and EU capitals.

While the Greek Agora in November 2021 leaned towards "more pragmatism" in foreign policy, the Transnational Meeting argued that "in view of the war in Ukraine, the EU should work towards greater self-sufficiency and do more to protect its principles and values in its relations with third countries." This approach reinforces the message put forward by the ECP on foreign policy. Six recommendations (#1-6), including one on reducing dependency on oil and gas (recommendation #2), were outlined in stream 1 of Panel 3. In addition, the importance of a value-based foreign policy was highlighted in sub-stream 2.3 dealing with the promotion of European values, in sub-stream 2.1 on foreign policy relations "in an Ethical Perspective", and was further referenced in several final recommendations (e.g. recommendations #23 and 33). Again, the final CoFoE report reflects these recommendations, asking for a focus on "reducing dependency of the EU in economically strategic sectors"

(proposal #17) and energy (proposal #18). In line with the EU's own strategic compass, Proposal #23 urges the Union to play "a leading role in building the world security order after the war in Ukraine."

All these proposals seem to ultimately point in the direction of principled pragmatism as a doctrine for EU foreign policy. But "a prerequisite for closer cooperation and real solidarity", according to participants in the Transnational Meeting, is forging "a common political identity." Greek citizens had also raised the identity issue during the previous round but not as forcefully as the citizen ambassadors. The Transnational Meeting even outlined concrete proposals to this end, including a joint European history book, to help foster a common understanding of the values and principles that Europe stands for in international relations.

In addition, the Transnational Meeting dealt with the QMV issue – i.e. how to move to QMV in foreign policy – which in wider debates has been a particularly difficult topic on which to reach agreement. The 'ambassadors' supported the expansion of QMV to all fields of foreign policy. However, while the vast majority backed its immediate introduction, some participants were hesitant and proposed a gradual phasing-in of QMV over time instead – similar to the Greek LCA recommendations. This outcome aligns with the recommendations adopted in the ECP on foreign policy, insofar as citizens there also called for moving towards QMV on all foreign policy issues as a means to "consolidate the position of the EU in the world by presenting a united front" (recommendation #21). The final Conference report also reinforced this recommendation by adopting a proposal that pushes for the introduction of QMV in foreign policy (proposal #21). The Union will thus have to find ways to iron out lingering frictions regarding the use of QMV in foreign affairs if it is to respond to what seems to be a general popular perception that there is a need for reform of institutional arrangements in this policy field.

In a pragmatic sense, the citizens' ambassadors also mentioned trade as a powerful EU asset in the international arena. While trade policy is already one of the EU's strongest foreign policy instruments, citizens seem to want the EU to redouble its efforts and make better use of trade and investment in pursuit of foreign policy priorities, always in respect of core European values and principles. To be sure, there is often some scope to do more and better. However, such a recommendation also demonstrates that even where the EU has a strong and unified policy, it has not managed to communicate well enough about its work to the wider European public. This observation gives force to calls for greater engagement with citizens henceforth on foreign affairs, as a CoFoE deliverable. In fact, participants at the transnational meeting explicitly asked for the EU to explore "more ways to consult with citizens on the Future of Europe, including on foreign policy."

Overall, the discussion of the citizens' ambassadors revealed a great deal of common thinking and concerns across the eight different member states represented at the Transnational Meeting but also much commonality with similar debates held in the CoFoE context and beyond. Even if consensus on specific proposals is still lacking, the way European citizens seem to approach

the topic of EU foreign policy demonstrates a shared commitment to building a strong Union in the world. Resolving the question of how to get there is now paramount for the success of the European integration project and will continue to inform deliberations long after the end of this project and the Conference on the Future of Europe.

4. Conclusion: Whereto from here?

The MEET project was set up with four main objectives in mind:

1. to provide input to the Conference on the Future of Europe and reinforce its citizens' dimension;
2. to test and improve a prototype model of citizens' consultations across member states;
3. to link citizens' debates at different levels with each other; and
4. to foster CSOs' engagement and expertise in participatory democracy.

Considering all the findings reported here and in the interim report, as well as the more general experience with the implementation of the project in practice, it is possible to conclude that all four above-mentioned goals have been reached, albeit with differing degrees of success.

Objective 1: Input to CoFoE and reinforce its citizens' dimension

By organising Local Citizens' Agoras in eight different member states in parallel to the CoFoE, this project reinforced official participatory elements of the Conference process with an additional layer of local citizens' consultations. The intention was to try to compensate for the lack of systematic involvement of people at the local, regional and national levels in the CoFoE. The results of the 16 LCAs organised in the framework of this project were also transferred to the national and EU levels, feeding into the proceedings of the Conference and enriching its outcome.

The discussions and recommendations of the Agoras revealed a great deal of commonality in terms of citizens' thinking and concerns across member states, but also with debates in the CoFoE context and beyond. This finding suggests that European citizens, especially when they have access to timely and relevant information, are perfectly capable of having difficult conversations about complex issues of EU-wide relevance and agreeing on common proposals for action. Decision-makers should therefore not underestimate – but rather

utilise – the contribution that people can bring to the ongoing brainstorming about Europe's future.

In addition, the Agoras and the public events that partners had to organise as a means of sharing their LCAs' experience with the wider public helped to raise awareness about the CoFoE in their respective member states. As such, this project demonstrated that it is possible to add value to a substantial initiative such as the Conference, even if on a modest scale and with a limited budget.

Objective 2: Test a prototype model of citizen consultations for all countries

Rather than giving member states the liberty to carry out one-off and uncoordinated citizens' deliberations – as did the CoFoE – this project devised and implemented a standardised methodology for the 16 different LCAs. When defining the methodological approach, the partners' diverse experiences in organising citizens' events and the different participatory cultures and needs of the communities they represent were taken into account. This resulted in a template that insisted on a number of mandatory elements, while also granting partners the flexibility to make their own idiosyncratic choices in several regards (see **Table 2**).

By developing a methodology for the Agoras that is at least partially common to all the member states involved, MEET made the various national debates more easily comparable. The strategy also offered valuable lessons and best practices for future similar initiatives following the Conference, as the EU continues to search for effective means of engaging citizens in European political affairs.

As shown in **Table 2**, the different methodological elements chosen in this project inspired specific learnings. For example, when it comes to the mandatory elements, asking partners to select the topics of their LCAs on the basis of the CoFoE agenda turned out to be a meaningful way for the project to communicate about the EU to citizens and enable them to debate each other's opinions and positions on concrete issues of topical interest. This approach anchored the deliberations in a tangible reality, made

citizens' engagement in the Agoras more relevant and allowed for the results to be compared with the recommendations that emerged from other LCAs, the ECPs and the Conference, more generally. Future citizen events should therefore also focus on specific subjects that are currently on the table of European decision-makers. And they should offer more detailed instructions to organisers on the format of recommendations to enhance their comparability across countries.

Likewise, it proved instructive to request all partners to implement a random selection of participants and aim for as much group diversity as possible. Core demographic criteria (e.g. gender, age, and socio-economics) were imposed in all cases, while partners were allowed to add further characteristics pertinent to their own contexts (e.g. country-specific ethnic or religious minorities, people's views on the EU). However, beyond any specific selection criteria, financial resources emerged as the decisive factor when it came to who actually joined the LCAs. Partners who opted to spend their limited budget on hiring a specialised recruitment agency managed to maximise both turnout and diversity among their participants. All other options embraced by partners with cost savings in mind fell short on such desiderata. For the future, this outcome suggests that such initiatives should ensure adequate financial means to organisers to be able to choose avenues that are sure to lead to greater representativeness of participants.

The mix of group work and plenary exchanges emerged as a successful formula for deliberation, regardless of the exact sequence or event format adopted by different partners. If anything, the participant feedback suggests that citizens crave opportunities to exchange with others and do not mind spending time debating to get to the bottom of different issues. In all LCAs, almost irrespective of the length planned for in-group sessions, participants asked for more space for debate in the future. It is likely that such calls can be effectively answered not only by increasing the time allocated to discussions but also the frequency of such exchanges. Put differently, more participatory events rather than simply longer in-group debates might in the end satisfy citizens' appetite for deliberation, which was so manifest in this project.

One of the most problematic requests of the standardised method has been for partners to secure the presence of an MEP at their Agoras. The involvement of an MEP as guest speaker and participant in the LCA discussions was meant to raise participants' awareness about the role of the EP in the EU and CoFoE, thereby enhancing interaction between citizens and politicians. However, securing an MEP proved challenging, even impossible, for some organisers. Whether because of their busy agendas or lack of experience with citizens' events, MEPs found it difficult to commit for the entire duration of the Agoras in almost all countries. But in every case where MEPs did join LCAs, the overwhelming

Table 2: Lessons from the common method of citizens' consultations

	ELEMENTS	LESSONS
MANDATORY ELEMENTS	Topic relevant to the CoFoE agenda	Linking the LCAs' topics to the CoFoE themes allowed for the results of the two exercises to be compared.
	Random sample of participants, reflecting core demographic criteria	Diversity of participants correlated with the selection method chosen and affected by budgetary constraints.
	Mix of plenary and small-group deliberations	Effective set-up for deliberations; small-group sessions particularly popular with participants
	Presence of an MEP	Difficult to secure for the entire duration of any one Agora; likely because of MEPs' busy agendas or limited experience with participatory events. Experts often requested as well.
	Concrete recommendations	Format of recommendations should have been further specified for better consistency across LCAs.
FLEXIBLE ELEMENTS	Number of participants (15-25)	To strike the right balance between diversity and quality of discussions in short events, 20-30 participants seems ideal.
	Length of events (4-6 hours)	In general, participant feedback showed that longer events and more time for deliberations was highly appreciated.
	Recruitment method and additional selection criteria	Using a specialised recruitment agency seems most effective to secure high turnout and good representativeness of participants. Has budgetary implications that should be considered.
	Participants' compensation	Financial compensation or reimbursement of travel costs tended to correlate with higher participation rates.
	Decision-making method (majority voting or consensus)	A mix of methods can help: i.e., majority voting to identify the most pressing issues for participants, consensus for the final recommendations of the group.
	Event format (online, in-person or hybrid)	In-person events were the preferred option of participants but online was agreeable to everyone, given the pandemic.

majority of citizens reported a positive experience. This finding indicates that, even within short timeframes and with limited resources, by means of direct interaction, it is possible to improve on people's notorious perception of a widening gap between them and their political representatives. As the project reveals, though, such interactions are not automatic. They require work, including towards politicians, to persuade them to open up to participatory exercises and explore the vast democratic potential of such exchanges.

In line with the participants' feedback, similar events in the future should also involve experts. Their role should not be limited to merely giving input at the start of the meeting. They should attend the deliberations in case questions emerge during citizens' exchanges. Since participants generally felt that they lacked knowledge about the EU, many asked for more information about the topic under discussion to be provided *before* the actual event. Organisers of citizens' consultations should therefore consider providing briefing materials, involving experts, officials and practitioners or imagining other methods to help participants join the debates feeling prepared to tackle the subject. Doing so can allow deliberations to go into more depth and produce more relevant results.

Objective 3: Link citizens' debates with each other

To ensure a transnational citizen dimension, the project organised two Franco-German LCAs, as well as a final event that brought together citizen ambassadors from all Agoras. As such, it sought to link debates about the same issues in different countries but also across the national and European levels. The CoFoE failed in this regard since the ECP deliberations did not reflect the ideas or proposals that emerged from the national events. Participants' testimonials reveal that the transnational exchanges of this project enriched their perspective on the topics debated, increased their awareness about other national interests and viewpoints, and fostered greater mutual understanding and a stronger sense of togetherness. Such ingredients would seem indispensable if the EU wants to tackle today's hard problems and secure its future. Other similar initiatives should therefore include transnational exchanges. But they should also consider holding national deliberations *before* going into a transnational dialogue. This project shows that, in this sequence, discussions can first help citizens to become familiar with the EU and the subject at hand, better preparing them for a fruitful debate with their counterparts from other countries.

Objective 4: Foster CSOs' engagement and expertise in participatory democracy

MEET entrusted CSOs in eight different member states with the organisation of the LCAs. As such, the project contributed to strengthening the partners' expertise in participatory democracy. The seven partners in the MEET network engaged with and learned from each other, expanding not only their understanding of the EU's democratic challenges but also of potential solutions to them. Their active participation in the project ensured that they also became involved in the CoFoE context, helping to raise awareness about the Conference in their own contexts, including among segments of society otherwise left outside European discussions. The potential of such cooperation among civil society actors should continue to be explored in the future as the EU looks for new and innovative democratic ways to structurally enhance citizens' participation in European policymaking. By working together, organisations, experts and other stakeholders across member states can make more of a meaningful and lasting impact on the culture of citizen participation in Europe than any single one of them alone.

The deliberative wave is gaining momentum in Europe and is shaping up into a credible option for EU democratic reform.

The deliberative wave is gaining momentum in Europe and is shaping up into a credible option for EU democratic reform. In this regard, the CoFoE experience and that of this project within it have been encouraging both in terms of process and results. The lessons they provided are also useful for the future. Nonetheless, the road ahead is still long and the only way to make progress is to sustain the effort, to continue improving on past and existing participatory tools, and to keep experimenting. Persistence is not only necessary to identify the most effective means of the participatory revolution but also to shift mind-sets and make citizens' participation an accepted and systematic practice in EU political affairs.

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- ¹ The Portuguese participants were selected on the basis of their age, gender, education and geographical region.
- ² See, for example, proposals #46 and #48, as well as proposals #6, #22, #32, #36 and #37 linked to individual policy areas.
- ³ For ideas on how citizens' participation could be institutionalised in the EU, see Emmanouilidis, Janis A. et al. (2022) Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next? Brussels/Berlin: European Policy Centre/Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Annex I. Comparison of methodologies

Elements	Belgium (EGMONT)	Denmark (WeDoDemocracy)	Germany & France (Missions Publiques)	Greece (ELIAMEP)	Ireland (EMI)	Portugal (Nossa Europa)	Romania (GEYC)
Number of LCAs	2	2	2 per country	2	2	2	2
Expected number of participants/LCA	25	30	15	15-25	15-20	20	15-25
Online or in-person?	In person	In person	Online	Online	Online	Online	Online
Length	5 hours	7 hours	6 hours	5-6 hours	4 hours (split over 2 days)	4 hours	4 hours
Method of participant selection	Open call for interest with different partners	Existing database; involve local partners	Cooperation with city	Specialised company	Through civil society partners	Specialised company	Existing database; involve local partners & Europe Direct centres
Selection criteria	Age, gender & socioeconomic factors, plus vision of EU	Age, gender & socioeconomic factors	Age, gender & socioeconomic factors, plus participation in deliberative & Franco-German events	Age, gender & socioeconomic plus regional representation	Age, gender & socioeconomic plus regional & minority representation	Age, gender & socioeconomic plus regional representation	Age, gender & socioeconomic factors
Format	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary 1 • Working Group • Working Group • Working Group • Plenary 2 	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary 1 • Working Group • Plenary 2 • Working Group • Plenary 3 • Working Group • Plenary 4 • Working Group • Plenary 5 	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions, with transnational element: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FRA-GER Plenary • Working Group • Working Group • Working Group • FRA-GER Plenary 	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary 1 • Working Group • Working Group • Plenary 2 	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary 1 • Working Group • Plenary 2 	Deliberative format, mixing plenary & group sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenary 1 • Working Group • Working Group • Plenary 2 • Working Group • Plenary 3 	
Decision-making method	Seek consensus	Seek consensus on recommendations	Mix of majority voting (priorities) & consensus (recommendation)	Seek consensus, but with due respect to any diverging position	Seek consensus but make space for everyone to express thoughts/ reasoning	Seek consensus	Majority voting on top 3 concerns & top 3 recommendations
Role of MEP	Introductory remarks, Q&A & concluding remarks	Introductory remarks & Q&A	Introductory remarks, Q&A & concluding remarks	Introductory remarks, Q&A & concluding remarks	Introductory remarks, Q&A & concluding remarks	Introductory remarks & Q&A	Introductory remarks, Q&A & concluding remarks

NOTES

The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

The **European Politics and Institutions** programme covers the EU's institutional architecture, governance and policymaking to ensure that it can move forward and respond to the challenges of the 21st century democratically and effectively. It also monitors and analyses political developments at the EU level and in the member states, discussing the key questions of how to involve European citizens in the discussions over the Union's future and how to win their support for European integration. The programme has a special focus on enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans, questions of EU institutional reform and illiberal trends in European democracies.

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