



# AN ANALYSIS OF MEMBER STATES REPORTS ON CITIZENS ASSEMBLIES ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

COVID-19 AS A CHANCE TO RETHINK METHODS

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## SUMMARY

The COVID19 pandemic has forced the EU to postpone the beginning of the conference on the Future of Europe scheduled for May 9<sup>th</sup> 2020. We argue that this may provide a chance to critically discuss the involvement of citizens and civil society in a discussion that the pandemic will make even more necessary. This policy brief addresses the problems that we identify in the national reports on the European Citizens Consultations (ECCs) in order to make recommendations on how the EU could make use of participatory methodologies. But this requires a clarification of the normative objectives that these consultations seek to obtain.

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## European Citizens Consultations in the debate on the future of Europe

Despite the postponement of the Conference on the Future of Europe, it is worth analysing the documents that the institutions have produced on this discussion venue since they lay out the narrative about citizens' involvement in institutional matters connecting the post-Brexit EU and the current legislature. Whether these plans will be decisively impacted by the COVID19 pandemic remains to be seen, but since the call of the conference builds on a certain institutional and political inertia there are chances that this conference will be particularly useful to institutionalise the ongoing debates and policies related to the pandemic.

[Others have already pointed out](#) that the interinstitutional discussion on the Conference on the Future of Europe does not provide a recognised space for civil society, unlike the Convention on the Future of Europe of 2003 – 2005. However, in their [call for the conference](#) the European Parliament and European Commission include deliberative undertones as both documents argue that the voice of European citizens should be heard in the conference via the linkage of the conference proceedings with citizens online or offline citizens' assemblies. Furthermore the European Commission emphasises that the Conference will not be a new venue, but will rather build upon the experience of two years and a half [pan-European citizens' consultations on Juncker's White Paper on the future of Europe](#) and by the [Member States](#) in the wake of president Macron of France proposal.

This connection with previous events and trends goes even further. EU institutions have relied upon deliberative democracy theories and deliberative polling experiences in the EU to try to reach beyond Brussels' bubble "usual suspects" since the mid-2000s. These have been used in processes of consensus gathering for concrete policy decisions – along regulatory quality recommendations - but this would be the first attempt to legitimise a major process affecting several policies with polity-building consequences. This is part of a broader evolution whereby citizens' consultations are being used as a democratic innovation also [in member states such as Ireland in innovative processes of constitutional reform](#).

## The problems behind consultations without clear objects and methods

The basic assumption of these processes is that it is impossible to have all citizens of a nation state assembled to deliberate their future, but that lottery and statistical controls can be put to work to extract a representative sample of citizens who will discuss at length and eventually make proposals for reform. Under representative principles this can hardly replace a subsequent vote by the citizens directly or by their representatives, but it provides an excellent forum to understand how citizens form their image of political objects, test the effect of exposure to data and debates upon their opinions and provide a chance for statistically representative voices external to already mobilised political constituencies to contribute to policy formation without affecting the chance of the body of citizens to reject or accept proposals made by their unelected representatives.

"citizens' assemblies can contribute to improve debates as the focus moves to policy discussions rather than political issues."

Furthermore, most argue that these processes contribute to general awareness rising about the key issues in the policy debates. This is true for the participants in this type of events, as they tend



to consider facts, reasoned opinions and change their positions, but can also contribute to the general quality of debates, as the focus moves to policy discussions (rather than political issues). In this vein [authors like Butcher and Stratulat](#) have considered that the 2018 European Citizens Consultations are valuable for understanding European citizens views and priorities on the future of the EU.

Even though both goals are compatible, each rationale for consultation implies different methodologies: if the aim is to simulate decision making by citizens when exposed to evidence, the citizens have to be truly randomly selected (including financial compensation for lost work or family care time) and have a large margin of manoeuvre to organise their internal proceedings and select the questions addressed. If the main objective is to provide citizens a chance to obtain information, learn about policy options and express their opinions, randomised selection with financial compensation can be substituted by criteria of diversity – ensuring that debates reach different categories of the population – and inclusiveness.

However, Butcher and Stratulat also point out that it is unclear whether these citizens' consultations have to be understood as a contribution to decision making – whether citizens expected their discussion to be part of a policy alternatives discussions and receive a feedback from them – or whether they understood that they were participating in a general debate in the public sphere. [An analysis by a group of Europe think tanks](#) points that the reason for this ambivalence has to be found in the fact that member states organised citizens' consultations without a prior discussion of the objectives and methods on these consultations and as a result they can hardly be called truly pan-European.

### **Analysing the national citizens consultations**

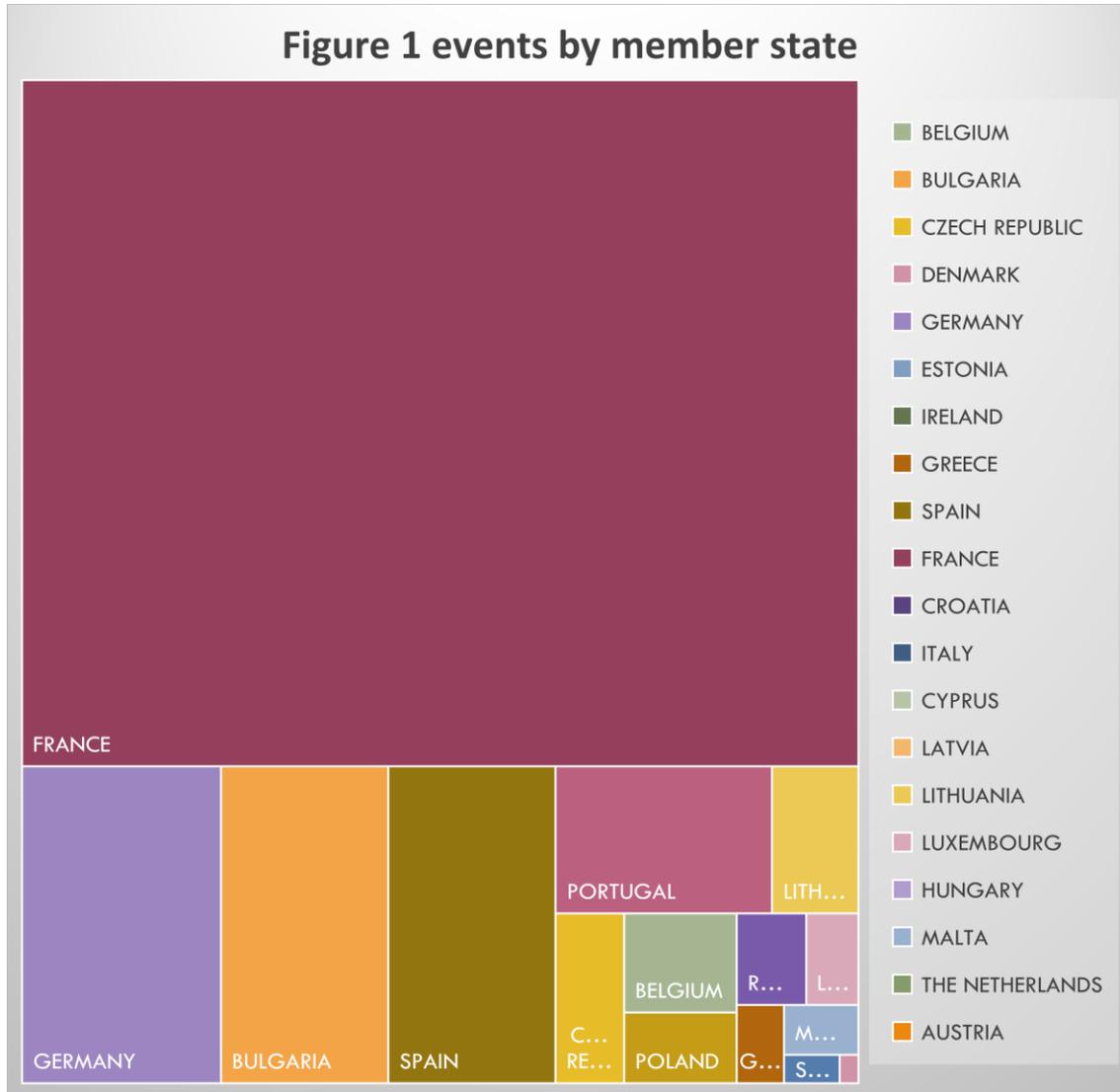
In order to try to contribute to the debate of the important issues highlighted by Butcher and Stratulat we undertake an analysis of the [national reports on the Citizens Consultations](#). We apply [Participedia](#) methodology to each of the 27 reports and compiling categories for comparison and reporting based on the principles of inclusivity and participants ability to conduct the process and trying to distinguish citizens' assemblies compatible with international standards for citizens deliberation from debate events. This complements the previously mentioned report by think tanks by analysing the emphasis of member states in their reports and contributes to answering the question of whether a deliberative process that can claim to represent the voices of citizens has been carried out.

"Numbers of participants are very low if the process' objective was to raise awareness but impressive if they aimed at gathering a representative voice of citizens."

More than 160.000 people responded to the Commission online consultation and more than 100.000 participated in meetings across member states according to the information that we have extracted from the member states reports. These numbers are very low if the process' objective was to raise awareness but impressive if they aimed at gathering a representative voice of citizens. If the latter is true, it suggests that this process has reached well beyond what is required to achieve a debate that would represent accurately EU citizens' views on Europe. However, confirming this requires checking that the abovementioned procedures for ensuring diversity and empowerment have been applied.



The number of events provides the first evidence that this consultation process is essentially the Europeanisation of a national idea: France alone organised more than 1000 out of 1647 events and gathered 70.000 participant of the approximately 100.000 citizens involved.



One of the main problems for researching the deliberative dimension is the lack of information. For instance, at least 12 member states mention that some of the events included measures of random selection of participants, which can be a signal that attention to sampling the population has been paid. However, none of the national reports provided evidence that measures like day care or financial compensation had been implemented to ensure that randomly selected participants attended.

Evidence of citizens' ability to control the organisation and conclusion drafting of the event is also affected by this lack of systematic information, but in at least 10 states citizens it was not the organisers who decided on the issues to be addressed and in 9 states organisers did not monopolise conclusion drafting. In most cases, these coincide with states where the government assigned or



shared the planning with civil society. However, this also means that the lack of government involvement in organisation and conclusion drafting involved a direct empowerment of participants.

### **Good practices: Slovenia**

Despite the lack of coherence with international participatory and deliberative standards some cases demonstrate that it is possible to apply this methodology to European debates domestically. The Slovenian report includes a section for “calendar and methodology of consultations” that facilitates the interpretation of the results of the citizen’s participation experience. The key tool of this report is to distinguish the type of events (public debates, internal expert discussions, citizens’ consultations) and, furthermore, to define the content of each of them. The report includes the number of participants at each event and it defines the role of the experts.

The national report mentions the municipalities where the consultations with citizens were organised and designates who carried out the projects. It was the Government in close cooperation with the Representations of both the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as with NGOs.

On the qualitative dimension, the Slovenian report includes an additional section, which gathers the main outcome and concerns heard in the discussions and the frequent complaints (e.g. migration issues, lack of solidarity, difference between the Eurozone economies). Furthermore, the consultations noticed the concern of the requirement of a reinforced European identity, mainly from the boost of an active young generation (e.g. Erasmus programmes, role of modern technology). To connect with the methodology approach, the report also states who prepared it, the Government Communication Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion that these consultations cannot be qualified as an exercise of deliberation is not new, but authors writing before us have understood that the process was at least a first experiment from which conclusions can be reached. However the fact that the Commission seems to endorse the national consultations as a deliberative contribution to the Conference is a signal that [a narrative is being built to present the Conference](#) as the *result* rather than the beginning of a genuine European participatory debate: "the Conference must draw from the experience of different forms of citizens' consultations and participatory democratic events, such as the citizens' assemblies organised in Member States." As COVID19 is fostering transnational debate more than ever in webinars, podcasts and manifestos there are good reasons to argue that the EU may take a step beyond awareness rising and build upon this emerging public sphere to combine a conference reflecting representative logics with representative citizens' panels contributing to the institutional debate.

This does not mean that member states leadership in this process must be challenged: we concur with Butcher and Pronckutė that "[consultation starts at home](#)", but this requires a higher degree of coordination. An alternative that combines clearer methodology and diversity may indeed emphasise more rather than less nationalisation of the debates combined with a transnational panel or assembly. Member states should choose whether and which type of national forum to organise provided a clear methodological explanation as to the validity of the data. This would contribute to a genuine European debate where an experiment in transnational deliberation combines with opportunities for



civil society to check and influence on what national institutions and political actors contribute to the institutional conference.

Finally, there are important arguments to say that citizens' direct deliberation is made more and not less relevant when there are political mediators in consultation processes. Because organisation, expertise provision and conclusion drafting done by non-governmental actors contributes to citizens' ownership of the assembly and since assemblies will always remain an experiment in which not all citizens can participate it is vital that civil society, political forces, journalists and academia are involved in order to make deliberation reach beyond those that were assembled by lot.