

BLOG POST 27.02.2018

Let's talk about Europe

A review of the proposal for pan-European citizens' consultations

Maximilian Nominacher

Research assistant at the Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin



In 2017, the French President Emmanuel Macron said he wanted to bring the European project closer to the citizens by launching a process of “democratic conventions” across EU member states. The initiative triggered a debate on the implementation of pan-European citizens’ consultations about the future of the EU. This blog post provides a brief overview of the current state of discussion and outlines four challenges specifically related to the implementation of this process.

1 Bridging the gap: A new ‘method’

Bridging the gap between citizens and the politics of the European Union is high on the agenda of European politicians these days. The French President Emmanuel Macron called for the implementation of “democratic conventions” in his two speeches in Athens and at the Sorbonne in Paris in 2017. In his [State of the Union address](#) in September 2017, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker endorsed Macron’s proposal as complementary to the Commission’s own Citizens’ Dialogues. The commitment to hold citizens dialogues about the future of the EU can also be found on page one of the recently published draft German [coalition agreement](#) agreed by CDU/CSU and SPD. Furthermore, German Chancellor Angela Merkel explicitly endorsed the idea to hold citizens consultations in her [government declaration](#) ahead of the informal meeting of the European Council on 23 February 2018. She underlined the need to listen to EU citizens and to actively promote the European idea.

The underlying idea of such deliberative events is that they bridge the gap between citizens and elites and thus help overcoming the EU’s legitimacy crisis. Macron argued in his [speech in Athens](#) that EU politics is faced with a dilemma between a populist form of *binary decisionism* on the one hand, and *technocracy* on the other. He thus called for what he termed *a new method* for the project of EU integration. European policy makers should embrace the procedures of deliberative democracy by engaging with citizens in public debates. This process of deliberation should address both practical questions about citizens’ visions of the ideal future of public life in Europe as well as technical questions concerning the effective and appropriate institutional realization of this vision.

The first steps towards the implementation of a pan-European process of democratic consultations have been made. In its initial stages, the process already had to be renamed to “citizens’ consultations”. Critics pointed out that the notion of “conventions” could be misinterpreted as leading to Treaty change. However, criticism goes beyond the name. This blog post reviews the state of the art and outlines four central implementation challenges.

2 State of the discussion

The process of implementing the consultations can be described as consisting of three phases:

1. The participating member states agree on a common framework on how they want to implement the deliberation process. This process should be terminated by April 2018.
2. The deliberations themselves will be organized and implemented, combined with an online form of consultation. On 17 April 2018, President Macron will deliver a speech at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in which he will formally launch the consultations in France. The other member states are expected to start with the organization as soon as they are ready. According to the French European Affairs Minister Nathalie Loiseau, this second phase should last until the end of October 2018.
3. During the final stage, the results of the deliberations in all participating member states will have to be synthesized. Loiseau underlined that the synthesis report should inform the meeting of the European Council in December 2018 during which the Heads of State or Government are expected to consider its recommendations.

President Macron wants the consultations to be held in as many member states as possible. At a press conference after the informal meeting of the European Council on 23 February 2018, he announced that 26 member states will join the process. Hungary is the only member state that could not be convinced to participate.

Currently, negotiations on the implementation of the consultations are still ongoing. Central issues to be addressed are which themes and questions should be covered within the consultations and which common principles should guide the process. At a meeting of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) on 15 February, Loiseau [suggested](#) that the citizens' consultations could focus on the following 7 themes related to the EU's future:

- Security in Europe
- Europe in the world
- Sustainable development in Europe
- Innovation in Europe
- Prosperity and stability in Europe
- The unity of Europe
- A more democratic Europe

An informal working group in Brussels, consisting of member state representatives, is currently developing *principles* for the implementation of consultations in the participating member states. A working group within the French National Assembly put forward initial proposals in a [report](#) published in December 2017: participating member states should kick-off the consultation process by signing an “inter-state” charter in which they would commit themselves to the principles of representativeness, objectivity, transparency and interoperability.

The issue of guiding principles is intimately linked to a central question for phase two: to what extent should the process be standardised across member states? This has implications for the institutional set-up, event formats, eligible stakeholders and methods of synthesizing.

Different *institutional set-ups* have been proposed for a more standardized form of coordination and organisation of the events. According to a report by a working group within the National Assembly the consultations should be coordinated by “national steering committees”, composed of national MPs and civil society representatives. The [European Policy Centre](#) suggested creating “national secretariats” which would provide a platform for volunteers to organize the consultations and which will be responsible for writing up the national synthesis report. The proposals differ in the relative importance they assign to civil society representatives. This question is not trivial as the success of the envisaged bottom-up process will crucially depend on the degree and form of engagement of volunteers from civil society.

To underline the transnational character of the events and ensure a degree of coherence, the French government proposed creating a *common label* under which all consultations will take place. In the French case, for instance, consultations should be organised by a wide range of actors including universities, trade unions and foundations that would apply for this common, transnational label.

While the process is largely member state-driven, the European Commission could be expected to coordinate calendars of their own consultations on the future of Europe with those in member states. In addition, the Commission is likely to set up a *digital platform* that will run parallel to the deliberative events in the participating member states. This digital form of citizens' consultation is supposed to complement the “analogue” discussions. The platform could provide a common online questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions regarding central topics on the future of European integration.

3 Four key implementation challenges

Ideally, this consultation process would enable an inclusive, open, transparent and politically independent process of deliberation that fosters the bottom-up generation of ideas concerning the future of the EU and its reform agenda. It would thereby inform the debate on EU reform ahead of the European Parliament election in May 2019 and contribute to the creation of a transnational public space. With a view to these objectives, four interrelated implementation challenges will have to be addressed in the coming weeks and months.

a. Time pressure and inclusiveness

The obvious first challenge is time pressure. Organizing an inclusive process with a broad range of civil society actors and including a representative group of citizens within six months is not an easy task. After a process of selection or labelling, the participating civil society organizations would have less than half a year for organizing their respective events and summarizing results. Implementing a reasonable number of participatory events within this short time frame might well go to the detriment of a truly inclusive process that reaches out to urban *and* rural areas as well as to pro-European *and* critical voices. A particular challenge will be engaging with those that are indifferent and feel very distant from the European project.

b. Incentives for participation

A second challenge lies in the incentive structure for those implementing the consultations during phase two. Currently, it is still unclear whether there will be financial incentives and where they should come from. Generally three funding options could be envisaged: member state funding, the EU budget, or private sector funding. [One suggestion](#) is to let foundations or private firms pay into a transnational EU fund that would cover the expenses of volunteers who want to organize consultations. All donations would be publicly visible through the project's website and be unconditional. The latter should prevent funders and potential interest groups from exerting influence over the formats and outcomes of events. However, it is unclear whether such a fund would attract enough resources. In addition, setting up such a fund and the respective managerial structure would probably take too much time. As the process is largely member-state-led, EU funding might not be the most realistic option. This leaves us with government funding, which is likely to differ significantly across member states.

c. Comparability across member states

This leads us to the third challenge: ensuring comparability of the deliberations across member states in terms of incentives and methods of implementation. Varying financial incentives in the member states could entail variation in the degree and breadth of civil society involvement. This could lead to a situation in which the number of consultations would go into the hundreds in some member states while others would only hold a small number of events.

The second aspect, indicated above, is to find the right balance between common principles and guidelines and national leeway in the implementation of events. Different institutional set-ups, stakeholders, and questions could bring about very different national results. In his press conference after the informal meeting of the European Council on 23 February, Macron spoke of a “homogénéité minimale” in the organization across member states, indicating that there will

likely be a high degree of flexibility. This is in line with the preferences of the Visegrad countries, which [underlined](#) that consultations should be held “according to national practices”. Convincing almost all 27 to participate might thus have come at the price of less comparability.

d. An effective, inclusive and independent synthesis of the results

A key issue for phase three will be ensuring an effective, inclusive, transparent and politically independent process of synthesis. Different institutional bodies have been proposed to this end. The working group of the French National Assembly suggested forming a “Committee of wise persons” (comité des sages) including representatives of the EU institutions, national parliaments and civil society from all participating member states. However, such a committee might quickly become too big to guarantee an effective summary of the results. The EPC proposed to create a “EU-level secretariat” that would serve as a body of assistance for coordinating and monitoring the democratic consultations and could assist the national bodies in case of problems. Contrary to the proposal of the National Assembly, the EPC model suggests that the body should consist of independent experts from NGOs that already have experience in setting up similar transnational projects and processes. However, a solely expert-driven production of the final report might undermine the very hopes of a bottom-up process. Whatever the composition of the body, it is clear that transparency will be of prime importance to prevent a form of “technocracy through the backdoor”. Those summarizing the results should do so without politically shaping them in a certain direction. Checks and balances thus have to be guaranteed at all levels of the deliberation process.

4 Conclusion

The aim behind Macron’s proposal, namely to engage citizens across the EU in the important discussion on future reforms, is important considering that an increasing number of citizens tends to feel estranged from the European project. However, experience shows that deliberative processes are often fraught with implementation challenges. This blog post outlined four challenges specifically related to the organization of a pan-European process within a relatively short time frame.

This process has the potential to provide valuable input and trigger a broader discussion on the future of the EU ahead of the European Parliament elections. However, a process that is seen as French-, government-, or expert-driven window dressing could also have very negative repercussions on the citizens’ perception of the EU’s legitimacy. As the President of the workers’ group in the EESC stated on 15 February 2018: “citizen consultations are a great idea, but we need no PR shows, no high school to teach grown citizens: we need a discussion, engage people where they live, talk about their concrete problems, why they feel left behind; Get out of our Ivory Towers and have a real conversation”. Ensuring inclusiveness and transparency at all stages of the process is therefore crucial. At the same time, it is important not to overburden this process with expectations. Public consultations are only one way of taking the citizens’ concerns into account. The current debate on the institutional reforms (see our recent [publication](#)) provides various avenues to bridge the gap between Europe’s citizens and their EU-level representatives.