DOCUMENTATION

ONLINE DIALOGUE

The Digital Way to EU Citizen Participation: The Conference on the Future of Europe and beyond

May 21, 2021

Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with
King Baudouin Foundation and Open Society Foundations

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Content

ONLINE DIALOGUE

On 21 May 2021, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, together with the King Baudouin Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, organised an online dialogue called: The Digital Way to EU Citizen Participation: The Conference on the Future of Europe and beyond

The three foundations have been engaged in strengthening and expanding citizen participation for many years – a topic that is increasingly relevant for the European Union. By means of this online dialogue, fifty EU officials, think tankers, experts on democracy and European affairs, participation practitioners and journalists came together. Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency provided the dialogue with her views and experiences. Discussions were held in plenary, as well as in breakout sessions dealing with specific sub-topics.

The Chatham House Rule was applied at this event. Therefore, the documentation only provides an overview of the discussion without reference to specific speakers.

Breakout sessions

Digital participation challenges

The Conference's digital platform: What we have learnt so far

What initial lessons can we draw from the first month following the launch of the Conference digital platform?

In session 1, the main functions of the Multilingual Digital Platform were explained and first experiences shared. The impressions shared were that the platform represents an innovative way to interact with citizens, but it is only the start and it still needs more development and better promotion.

For inclusive and broad participation, easy access to the platform is needed and a support threshold may be considered

Participants underlined the importance of promoting the platform better to citizens in order to have a wide, balanced participation across Europe given that more men and more people living in Western Europe actively use the platform. Currently, the platform is mostly used by citizens and organizations already active at the European level, but the vast majority of EU citizens and residents do not know about the Conference and the platform. One idea to make the platform more attractive was to introduce a support threshold for ideas to be given special treatment, similar to the European Citizens' Initiative. This would encourage people who submit ideas to also promote them within their own networks, and it would result in more awareness about the Digital Platform.

Close interaction of the platform with the other bodies and activities

Another important topic of discussion was how the platform interacts with the other bodies in the Conference and how that could be strengthened. It was emphasized that the Digital Platform is not a self-standing participation instrument—it is meant to be the Conference's online hub, bringing together different elements. The ideas submitted on the Digital Platform are meant to feed into the Citizens' Panels by means of interim reports. The most endorsed, most commented, most consensual, and most polemic ideas may be highlighted in such a report to stimulate discussion. Similarly, the recommendations of Citizens' Panels could be further discussed on the Digital Platform.

BREAKOUT SESSION 2

How to find the right balance between great numbers of citizens and quality participation

Going deep or going wide? What does the Conference on the Future of Europe need?

In session 2, the participants talked about the different modes of digital participation and what is more important for the Conference. Is it reaching a lot of citizens or having in-depth deliberation with limited numbers?

Four types of digital participation: One-click format, deliberative format, modern consultation and a combination of the three

One way to look at the different modes of digital participation is to divide them into four types. The first type is a simple tool, for instance a one-click format, where there is direct input from citizens but not much exchange between participants. The second format is a deliberative one, like a town hall meeting where citizens communicate with each other in person. The third type could be referred to as modern consultation. It could be, for instance, an online platform that directly involves citizens in the decision-making process and includes forms of interaction between citizens. The fourth combines the three previous ones. It could involve a considerable amount of time from the participants. It could be, for example, a citizen assembly with a random selection of participants which could be costly.

The decision as to what depends on the expected outcome—a combination would work best

All of these forms could be used and the choice depends on what we want to achieve. If we want as many participants as possible, a one-click format might be the best option. However, ideally maybe a combination would work best. It would enable reaching a large variety of participants but also ensure in depth dialogue. A combination could be one that starts with a one-tick format and followed by more depth in the second stage. It was agreed in the discussion that we need digital tools that guarantee both quantity and quality. They serve a purpose and should be aimed for. This is not easy to achieve in one go and that is why two stages are probably necessary.

A large number of citizens does not necessarily mean diversity of citizens

The first stage could address a simple question: What are your priorities for Europe? The second stage is where wider participation can be achieved, but it requires specific targeting. However, how can we ensure that a large number of participants also means diversity? You can have 1 million participants and they can still be from the same bubble (for instance pro-EU). We need to think which combinations bring the best form of legitimacy. You could also have a format that has the potential to cater a lot of participants, but in real life only brings a few. To have real diversity, we would need to know about the participants by asking for some background information. That can pose a tradeoff with easy participation that enables easy access to large amounts of participants.

BREAKOUT SESSION 3

Being a digital citizen: Challenges for people and institutions

How can inequality be overcome and broad digital citizen participation be realised? Do the people or the institutions need to change?

Session 3 started based on the assumption that there is no one European digital citizen or one digital space where everyone feels welcome and comfortable to engage on their own terms. Skills vary, opportunities vary and the differences can be huge even with a very small age difference among participants. On the other hand, the political consequences of digital exclusion can be significant so that a conscious effort has to be made to cast the net wider to include the losers of digitalisation, alongside the winners. How do we do that? How can we do better to make digital citizen participation broader and less unequal? Several ideas and proposals were discussed in the group.

More tools for the different needs and abilities

In future, the EU must pay more attention to diversity in political processes than it has in the past. EU Citizens' Participation formats must not only address citizens who desire greater integration of and within the EU, but also give disadvantaged societal groups a meaningful say in the discussion. More digital tools should be developed that take into account people's different abilities and habits. These tools should not just be designed by Eurocrats for Eurocrats but also by nerds & regular citizens. We need more spaces that are not just designed with profit in mind.

Narratives and participatory instruments that are more inclusive are helpful

However we also need narratives that are more inclusive, as opposed to just more inclusive spaces because narratives themselves can be very polarizing and divisive. More instruments that bring people together in a format where they can actually listen to each other are helpful. The participants recommend Citizens assemblies, but also spaces and instruments where discussions can be of quality. Random selection is a good method to give access for diverse groups of citizens and to make digital participation more inclusive.

We need to invest in digital competence

We also need to invest in literacy so that people can distinguish between different spaces and become more capable to participate. And we also need to put more resources into artificial intelligence.

Institutions need to be daring and improve their instruments for digital participation

Institutions at all levels play a key role in making digital participation more inclusive and here the multi-lingual platform of the European Commission in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe was praised as revolutionary. That makes innovation and experimentation the way to go. Institutions and other actors need to continue to dare in this field and improve their websites and citizens/activists making these actors accountable.

BREAKOUT SESSION 4

The participatory footprint of the Conference: The EU's future digital participation infrastructure

What are the relevant factors that could make digital participation result in political consequences and a participatory footprint?

Session 4 was about the Digital Participation footprint. That means that citizens' proposals are seriously discussed by policy makers, that consequences are drawn and citizens recommendations implemented. To make the Conference on the Future of Europe a success for European citizens, a participatory footprint is vital.

Democratic culture: Citizen participation is an added value for representative democracy

It is important to create a democratic culture where representative democracy is accompanied by more participatory democracy and citizens' contributions are taken seriously by politicians and perceived as an enrichment. The Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity for the EU to show that it takes into account what citizens want but in order to do so, the process must be serious and sound from the start.

The topic of citizen participation must be relevant for politicians and for citizens

It is important to identify topics for digital citizen participation that are also relevant to the citizens. If there is no common interest in the topics, the citizen participation process does not lead to good results. Politicians and citizens are disappointed—this is what the experience from municipal contexts has shown.

Documenting the results of digital citizen participation

Digital citizen participation tools should be designed to be inclusive and accessible to "ordinary" citizens. Processes should ensure that citizens can discuss with one another and that they can develop quality recommendations. The results should be documented in such a way that they can be negotiated with political decision-makers in the political follow-up process.

For digital participation, it is important to have the transparency on how algorithms and artificial intelligence are set up and understand how the inputs from citizens will be selected and feed into policy making. For the multilingual platform, the challenge is to analyse, condense and prioritise the diverse citizen contributions and prepare them for the negotiations in the decision-making bodies of the Future Conference.

Define follow-up process and feedback

The process for dealing with the results of digital participation must be defined. It must be clarified how the interfaces between the decision-making bodies (platform recommendations, executive board, plenary, presidency, and other processes of regular decision-making) are designed and what the individual bodies decide on. Equally important is the clarification of the follow-up process. It should be made clear what the political bodies are accountable for and how timely feedback is given by the political decision-makers to the citizens involved.

Plenary discussion

The digital way to EU citizen participation: The Conference on the Future of Europe and beyond

The discussion with European Commission Vice-President Věra Jourová was based on reports from the different working groups. Several important topics were touched upon.

Covid-19 is a (digital) game-changer, but what about the Conference?

There is no doubt that the pandemic is a game-changer for the EU, particularly with respect to digital transformation and digital participation. Covid-19 has forced many people to work remotely and to get used to digital means of meeting, collaborating and deliberating. In the light of this radically changed social and political landscape, the Conference on the Future of Europe was referred to metaphorically as an opportunity to see not only the trees but also the forest. It was commonly agreed that the Conference offers a great opportunity to set the course for the EU for the years and decade to come in dialogue with its citizens, but there are equally important risks that should be considered in order to prevent this exercise from fuelling popular disillusionment with the EU.

Reshaping digital participation – the Conference Digital Platform, a permanent innovation?

One of the questions discussed was the extent to which the Conference may significantly reshape the future of EU digital participation. The main digital component of the Conference is the Digital Platform launched on 19 April 2021. It is the Conference's online hub, allowing citizens to present and discuss ideas and to launch and promote their own events. The question was raised whether the platform should stay after the Conference has come to an end and become a permanent feature of the EU's participation infrastructure. The idea was well-received by some participants, though it is too early to judge the success of the platform. Whether or not the Conference may also lead to a reform of some of the existing digital participation instruments – such as European Parliament petitions and the European Citizens' Initiative – was a question that was addressed, but not answered.

The danger of "being bubbled in" and the potential of citizens' panels

Ensuring diversity in participation was presented as one of the main challenges for the Conference. The demographic profile of users of the Digital Platform shows that men and people from Western Europe are strongly overrepresented. This profile of users also shows with the Commission's online public consultations, and it raises the question whether the Conference truly reaches those not already active in EU politics. How can we prevent the Conference from "being bubbled in"? It was stated that women have taken on a lot of the essential work during the pandemic, and efforts should be made to have their and other underrepresented voices heard in the Conference. The introduction of citizens' panels was brought up as the main answer to this challenge of limited representativeness by involving cross-sections of the European population by means of stratified random selection. The outcomes could then be more credibly presented as reflecting the diversity of the EU population. However, it was argued that, in order to make these citizens' panels a success, it is crucial that the outcomes are dealt with properly, so that citizens don't feel tokenised or otherwise frustrated by the "arrogance of representative democracy". This requires a serious engagement of political decision-makers with citizens' recommendations and extensive feedback to citizens on the decisions made and follow-up given to these recommendations.

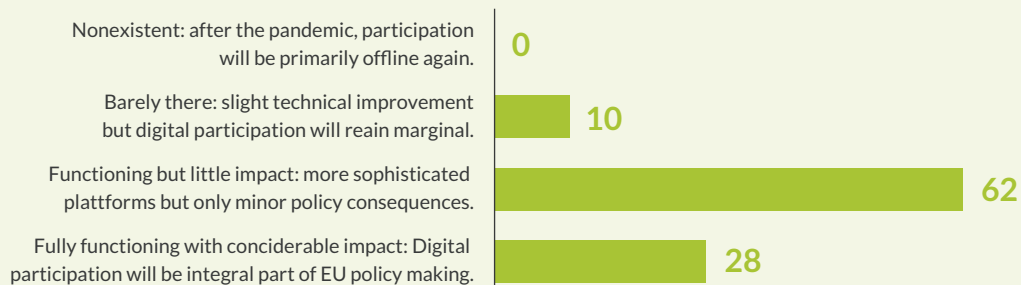## The meaning of "leaving no one behind" in the digital era

The citizens' panels will only involve a relatively small group of citizens, and the Conference Digital Platform is only accessible for those with access to the internet, so how to make sure that the whole of the EU population has the chance to participate? First of all, it was mentioned that a big chunk of the recovery fund is planned to be invested in the digital transformation and digital inclusion so as to further widen the circle of people with access to quality internet. Secondly, it was emphasised that online and offline participation opportunities should be offered in tandem—the Digital Platform cannot replace face-to-face events in the Member States.

How to bring Europe – and the Conference – to citizens

Closely related to the earlier concern about limited representativeness, the challenge of visibility of the Conference was discussed. Participants defended the need for EU institutions to use 'normal' language and new narratives in order to trigger citizens' interest in the Conference. The EU is planning on decentralising the communication effort: instead of communicating directly from Brussels, the EU is planning on using its national and local representations and information offices in order to promote the Conference in a way and a language that appeals to citizens from a particular area.

FIGURE 1 **Survey among participants: In then years, what will be the state of EU digital participation?**

In percent

Nonexistent: after the pandemic, participation will be primarily offline again.	0
Barely there: slight technical improvement but digital participation will reain marginal.	10
Functioning but little impact: more sophisticated plattforms but only minor policy consequences.	62
Fully functioning with conciderable impact: Digital participation will be integral part of EU policy making.	28

Source: Own results

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Agenda

14:30   Welcome & Introduction

Breakout Sessions: Digital participation challenges

SESSION 1   The Conference's digital platform:
                       What we have learnt so far
                       Input: **Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul**, European Commission

SESSION 2   Going deep or going wide? How to find the right balance between great
                       numbers of citizens and quality participation
                       Input: **Stefan Roch**, Bertelsmann Stiftung

SESSION 3   Being a digital citizen:
                       Challenges for people and institutions
                       Input: **Ruth-Marie Henckes**, European Partnership for Democracy

SESSION 4   The participatory footprint of the Conference:
                       The EU's future digital participation infrastructure
                       Input: **Elisa Lironi**, European Citizen Action Service

15:00   The Digital Way to EU Citizen Participation:
               The Conference on the Future of Europe and beyond

A plenary conversation with

Vĕra Jourová,
Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency

with interventions from the Breakout Sessions

moderated by **Dominik Hierlemann**, Bertelsmann Stiftung

16:00   End of Online Dialogue

List of participants

Alberto **Alemanno**	Jean Monnet Professor of EU Law & Policy, HEC Paris, France
Carsten **Berg**	Director, Association for the European Citizens' Initiative e.V., Germany
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Obhi **Chatterjee**	Head of Sector, Learning Technologies, DG Human Resources and Security, European Commission, Belgium
Claudia **Chwalisz**	Policy Analyst, Open Government, OECD, France
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Jonas **Engel**	State Ministry Baden-Württemberg, Germany
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Petros **Fassoulas**	Secretary General, European Movement International, Belgium
Virginia **Fiume**	Coordinator, Eumans, Belgium
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Pedro **Godinho**	Official, Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Portugal
Maarten **de Groot**	Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
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Christian **Huesmann**	Project Manager, Program Future of Democracy, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Germany
Věra **Jourová**	Vice-President for Values and Transparency, European Commission, Belgium
Martin **Jungius**	Federal Chancellery, Germany
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Matthias **Kolb**	EU and Nato Correspondent, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Belgium
Monika **Ladmanova**	Cabinet Expert, Cabinet of Vice-President Věra Jourová, European Commission, Belgium
Mika **Leandro**	Campaigns Director, WeMove.EU, France
Benjamin **Leruth**	Assistant Professor in Politics and Society, University of Groningen, Netherlands
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Charles **de Marcilly**	Political Administrator, Council of the European Union, Belgium
Leonie **Martin**	President, Young European Federalists (JEF Europe), Belgium
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Francesco **Pala**	Head of the Secretary General's Office, The European Association for Local Democracy, Belgium

Reema **Patel**	Associate Director, Ada Lovelace Institute, United Kingdom
Gilles **Pelayo**	Head of Unit, Europe for Citizens, European Commission, Belgium
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Erika **Widegren**	Chief Executive Officer, Re-Imagine Europa (RIE), Belgium
Richard **Youngs**	Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe, Belgium
Anthony **Zacharzewski**	President, The Democratic Society, Belgium
Katharina **Zügel**	Co-director, Décider Ensemble, France

Further information can be found on

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe-eu-commissioners-in-citizens-dialogue

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