CITIZEN’S CONSULTATIONS ON EUROPE
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The initiative for Citizens’ Consultations on Europe originated in a French proposal made by the President of the Republic in a speech at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017. The aim is to start reshaping the European project, drawing on an extensive public debate informed by contributions from a wide variety of citizens. It is to open up a time for open-minded and wide-ranging discussion and debate, accessible to all European Union citizens, in order to give them a fresh opportunity to express their views and their commitment, say what they think about today’s Europe and sketch the outlines of the Europe of the future they wish and hope to see.

A EUROPEAN PROJECT

From the outset, the Minister for European Affairs and the General Secretariat for Citizens’ Consultations on Europe (SGCCE) involved EU institutions (the Commission, Parliament, Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions) and representatives of the 26 other Member States in Brussels, who quickly gave the project their backing and contributed to it, each at their own level and with their own resources.

The Member States agreed to widely consult their citizens according to a single timetable and a common methodology but above all with a unifying aim: to convey people’s expectations to the highest level, namely the European Council meeting in December 2018.

The European Commission’s organisation of a Citizens’ Panel in Brussels on 4-6 May sent a strong message about this European dimension. After three days of intense discussion hosted by the Economic and Social Committee, 97 citizens from the 27 Member States reflecting the whole spectrum of European society drew up and adopted a 14-point questionnaire for all Europeans, available in all the official EU languages on a special platform on the Europa website.
In France, the Citizens’ Consultations on Europe took place between 17 April and 31 October. Mostly initiated by grassroots players all over the country, they were guided by the principles of pluralism, diversity (of audiences, opinions and proposals) and transparency (of organisation and the delivery of feedback). The primary aim was to lift discussions of Europe out of expert forums and encourage citizens from the most varied backgrounds to take an active part in them, within a rigorous yet accessible methodological framework. By allowing flexibility over Member States’ methodologies, the Citizens’ Consultations sought not to attain a theoretical ideal of participatory democracy but to renew and encourage in a very practical way grassroots mobilisation behind a wide-ranging debate on the future of the EU, canvassing all points of view.

A General Secretariat for Citizens’ Consultations on Europe reporting to the Minister for European Affairs was created in order to achieve this aim. Two governance bodies were also established: an Advisory Board made up of suitably qualified experts on European affairs and a Supervisory Board, on which a representative from each political party in the National Assembly was invited to sit.

After extensive consultation with experts of all kinds in France and in other European countries in order to seek their opinion, test working hypotheses and gather feedback, the SGCCE constructed a strict methodology for citizens’ consultations. Reversing the usual model for debates on Europe, the Citizens’ Consultations on Europe were designed as a bottom-up exercise. The role of central government was merely to inform and encourage the organisers of the consultations, carried out in their preferred format and focusing on their chosen subjects. The SGCCE opted for a "seal of approval" approach, whereby individuals, groups or organisations could organise the consultation autonomously provided that they complied with the principles of the Charter. Each organiser undertook to send the SGCCE a feedback summary from its event, using a form predefined by the Secretariat.

The SGCCE team provided project sponsors with support, assistance and resources throughout the process. These included:

• a dedicated website where all the relevant information and all the results of the Citizens’ Consultations on Europe were collated in real time;

• a hotline to promptly answer all questions on form or content asked by the organisers of consultations;
methodology packs which, without imposing a specific format, were made available to those involved in consultations, giving them the necessary resources to organise discussion workshops or an interactive citizens’ forum.

The feedback summaries were passed on to the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP), an independent administrative authority and guarantor of the public’s right to information and participation. The CNDP was given the task of processing the information derived from the consultations, which explains why this report has two signatories. The SGCCE is responsible for the first part describing the approach. The feedback was designed and drafted by the CNDP, acting in an entirely independent and neutral manner.

The CNDP therefore had to deal with a considerable amount of qualitative information on a range of different subjects in a very short space of time. The goal it set itself was to produce feedback in a form that would not only do justice to the material gathered upstream during the consultations but could also be used by different players downstream. The CNDP did not process verbatim reports of what the participants actually said but the summaries of the consultations prepared by the organisers; it was therefore working with intermediated information.

The CNDP found that a number of proposals from the summaries mention existing measures. Following the principle of respecting the people’s voice, it opted to treat them without distinction, on the grounds that unawareness of existing action is highly informative in itself. These proposals therefore feature in the body of this report. The CNDP endeavoured to ensure that no proposal was discarded.

MAIN RESULTS

In France, 1,082 citizens’ consultations were held, attracting over 70,000 participants. 97 of France’s 101 departments took part in the initiative. All the overseas departments and regions organised consultations. The largest number of consultations within a single region took place in the Île-de-France (greater Paris region), and the largest number within a single department in Paris. Nevertheless, three-quarters of Citizens’ Consultations took place outside the Paris region, a distribution relatively faithful to that of the population of mainland France.

400 municipalities organised one consultation or more. Small urban communities (villages and small towns with 20,000 inhabitants or fewer according to INSEE criteria) accounted for 54% of the total, showing that the exercise mobilised smaller communities first of all.

The diversity of organisers, participants and discussion formats nationwide thus fully achieved the government’s aim of generating a broad and reasoned vision, after wide-ranging and transparent debate, of what citizens really think about today’s Europe and what they expect of Europe in the future.

The results bear the imprint of those who sponsored and took part in the consultations. The decision to hold open meetings helped to democratise access to the places where debates were held. Although the people who attend such events tend to have strong views, innovative
initiatives managed to mobilise a variety of participants.

The CNDP did not rank arguments and proposals by frequency since equivalence is a fundamental principle of the feedback. However, "argument trees" chart the occurrences of each proposal.

MAIN THEMES

Deepening the European Union

The consultations focused on the institution which embodies the political project shared by Europeans, namely the European Union (EU). However, both official speeches and the many contributions by participants in the French consultations addressed Europe as a geographical and historical entity. The first finding is key: people think EU but say Europe.

The CNDP then classified all the contributions into “argument trees” which were used to identify the findings, arguments and proposals of each summary. The methodology brought to light 14 major themes (14 argument trees), namely the environment, health, agriculture, the economy, social affairs, education, research, culture, citizenship, institutions, communication, defence and security, Europe in the world, and the future of the Union. Some subjects generated a very large number of proposals. They are presented in the body of the report in the form of a “proposals box” which lists them in a way that is easy to assimilate.

Although the argument-tree approach helped to reveal the wealth of people's proposals and arguments, the classification into themes doubtless does not do justice to the relatively uncompartmentalised way in which they expressed their views. While it is true that a significant number of consultations focused on specific themes, many also tackled wider issues like "the future of the EU" or, whether planned or not, spilled over into a range of subjects. During the consultations, the themes that came up were often linked or joined up, against the backdrop of a need to rediscover an overall vision for the EU that captures people's imagination.

The first point of interest is the issues or themes that do not feature in the debate: there is very little discussion of EU enlargement, either for or against, but rather a focus on deepening the European project. Likewise a number of issues, such as the euro and governance, are implicit without being either identified or named as such by participants.

Although some negative diagnoses were made, especially over the opacity of European institutions, Europe is often perceived as the solution to national problems rather than their cause. Although
readers of the full report will sometimes find opinions unfavourable to European integration expressed during the consultations, most of the proposals put forward by participants suggest that the European scheme is and remains one of ambition, of the democratic and peace-loving ideal as a goal to work towards.

**The new European dream is ecological**

The treatment of the environment issue tellingly illustrates the ambition and relevance of the European scheme. From the contributors’ point of view it embodies **the new European dream**, a self-evident imperative, one of the pillars for building a **sustainable Europe that has a particular responsibility towards the rest of the world**. Ecology is perceived as the area in which European citizens are a step ahead, willing and daring to go further and “tie the European dream to the ecological dream”. The proposals and contributions relating to lifestyles, energy generation, consumption of resources, recycling and climate change are both specific and ambitious.

This ecological dream crops up in many chapters with themes other than environment policy. It **features prominently in the chapters on health and agriculture**, in particular via the crucial issue of a sustainable and high-quality food supply. Discussion of the Common Agricultural Policy, still seen as important by participants even if some consider it rigid, focused in particular on the linkage of health and environmental issues. For participants, the aim is to **transform both production and consumption modes**. Saying that they are ready for such a change, the feelings they express on this subject are at odds with the views of politicians, seen as more willing to listen to industry lobbies than people’s hopes.

**European citizens as active participants in change**

The vision of **Europe as a resource, a template against which others can compare and improve themselves**, a source of good practice, is particularly prevalent in contributions relating to **education and training**. Issues relating to education, which inform many proposals with a European dimension, are constantly intertwined with those relating to citizenship, the cornerstone of these consultations.

**European citizenship** is one of the most widely discussed subjects, raising questions such as how to foster a sense among Europeans of belonging to their geographical and political area, or how to develop a European identity. European cohesion, seen as essential, involves asserting the value of its culture, the differences between countries, its common values and symbols. The idea of a common identity has been a major argument for advocating European citizenship, but participants felt that a common identity should not dilute cultural differences. On the contrary, the value of such differences should be proclaimed because they are a “source of riches”. On this basis there would be no **contradiction between a national identity, with its specific characteristics, and a shared European identity**. For some participants, greater familiarity with each other’s culture could be a way of “learning how to work together”
European citizenship would also involve the development of rights to which it gives access and the promotion of possibilities for commitment. Links between countries should be strengthened. Several of these elements are found in the work to be done among young people in particular. The proposals focus extensively on the need to reduce inequality of access to mobility among the young, whether for study, work or travel. All should be able to live in another country for a few months, measure the common points and cultural differences between Member States and build up international work experience. Education is another focus for a number of ideas to help young people towards a critical appropriation of the European project, including greater emphasis on language-learning (not limited to English), a more European approach to the teaching of history and civics and the development of educational projects.

The consultations convey a rather unfavourable view of the EU institutions, seen as opaque, complex, rigid and above all undemocratic. For participants, their main flaw can be summarised in the great distastation between the various political actors of the EU, between European institutions and citizens, between Member States and the EU and even between Member States themselves, reflected in splits between west and east, south and north. This distance shows up not only in a lack of transparency and clarity and a lack of democratic oversight but also in a sheer lack of knowledge and information. As a result, citizens feel shut out of their political Union and are losing trust in it, just as at a national level they are losing trust in their politicians, who themselves seem to have only limited trust in the EU.

Nevertheless, all the proposals favour closer links between citizens and institutions and more democracy, through measures such as grassroots involvement in decision-taking, reform of the justice system and institutional reform to give Parliament more say, ensure greater oversight of the Commission and rethink the role of the Council. The aim is clearly to integrate citizens into a political whole through institutions that operate in a more democratic and participatory way. Because of the distance that exists between European institutions and citizens, participants regard
communication as a key issue. More than a communication deficit on the part of the EU, it is a fundamental problem of dispossession, shutting citizens out of their Union. Participants indicated a need to highlight both the progress made possible by the EU and the workings of its institutions, by educating the public and making people aware of the advantages of being European. From this standpoint an integrated media policy would be a welcome step forward.

A Europe that stands up for itself and protects its citizens

Economic issues are some of the most important to arise from the European consultations, partly because they have underpinned the European project from the outset and partly because participants recognise that the EU has played a major part in the implementation – and success – of Member States' economic policies. However, they urge it to face up to the new challenges of globalisation with determination and to rethink its approach, deemed too liberal and centred on the financial markets. Furthermore, participants consider that the EU is suffering globalisation now and will do so even more in the future if it is not able to regulate it effectively. They therefore call on the Member States to truly unite in order to protect their citizens and defend their interests. Participants have great expectations of digital technologies and consider that the EU should encourage the emergence of European giants. The EU is also seen as being the right vehicle to support all its economic operators.

The approach should be based on providing advice, support and protection, not administrative oversight and an emphasis on performance. EU assistance should therefore be harmonised and made more accessible; its mechanisms should facilitate genuine integration of workers into the European market. The foundations on which Europe is built are seen as primarily economic and liberal, with insufficient attention being paid to the social dimension. In this context, many participants recommend harmonising tax and social rules, following the example of the best deal on offer, often with reference to the French model.

The ecological dream is also very much to the fore in all economic and social issues, with talk of short supply chains, the need to reforge the links between Europe and its regions, to build a Europe on a human scale that does not overlook rural areas or vulnerable people. On social matters, the EU seems to be perceived as a potentially effective vehicle for combating poverty, insecurity and economic and gender inequality. It is also seen as a way of advancing the treatment of social issues such as rights, legislation on drugs, euthanasia, etc. The proposals are generally “progressive”, referring to the republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity. As with economic issues, alignment with the best deal on offer and the use of shared tools, especially fiscal tools, frequently crop up. It is interesting to note here the distinctly national flavour of all these recommendations.
Europe as a force for ethical conduct

The analysis of international relations is broadly similar to that of the economy: Europe should not be unpicked but strengthened, provided that it has a more socially-aware and ethical ambition. Thus, the EU should claim its seat at the global table and stand up to the great powers such as the United States, Russia and China; it could even take inspiration from a very French type of diplomacy that defends its unique position in the international community. One particularly salient point to emerge from the consultations is the need for the EU to maintain a genuinely fair stance in its support for and relations with Africa, a continent to which all eyes seem to be currently turning.

In contrast to institutional and environmental aspects, where discussions tend to be rich and well-informed, participants in the consultations seem to have little knowledge of specific defence and security issues, despite showing genuine interest in the subject. Although the majority of contributions generally favour European cooperation in this area and its reorganisation, the debate remained inconclusive on how far integration should go and on specific aims. While some do not hesitate to propose new forms of integration, such as joint armed forces responsible for defending the EU and its interests in the world, others suggest increasing the number of bilateral agreements on strategic issues. This area is still broadly unexplored, though the spheres of practical cooperation are relatively well-defined: the defence industry and security.

On the subject of migration, several participants urged better treatment of migrants. It should be noted that the consultations reveal a certain lack of knowledge of the subject, for example confusing different types of status (migrant, asylum seeker, immigrant, refugee) and hence the issues associated with them. One option to explore mentioned by participants would be wider-reaching and more neutral communication in order to inform European citizens and mitigate fears and xenophobic reactions.

Nevertheless, the EU is perceived as an appropriate vehicle for doing more to accept, help and integrate migrants, in accordance with European humanist values. It is interesting to note that the feeling of belonging to Europe is very much present in response to non-EU otherness. Participants mention the possibility of working on a more global scale, for example by treating conflicts in countries of origin, but most often from the standpoint of channelling flows. Emphasis is also placed on the need to lighten the burden on countries of entry like Greece and Italy, and to give backing to an integrated asylum policy.
CONCLUSIONS

With 1,082 events and around 70,000 participants, the Citizens' Consultations on Europe organised in France were a first-of-a-kind experiment in participatory democracy, an opportunity for innovative debate and a human adventure. The participants clearly expressed their expectations for feedback on how their proposals will be followed up. They also emphasised the importance of **greater grassroots involvement in the EU's democratic life**, especially through an extension of this type of participatory exercise.

The citizens who came together for these consultations, although highly critical of the conduct of public policy, do not see the great challenges facing the world as being resolved outside the European framework. In all areas, they expect the European Union to be more effective and the workings of its institutions to be more transparent. They would be proud to belong to a Union whose political focus would be a greater capacity to **defend their shared values and interests**, with a **humanist social and environmental ambition**.

«**In this citizen panel, we discussed for 4 half-days, to arrive at the proposals of this opinion**: We have (very) different opinions. We experienced a way of talking about Europe between ourselves and confronting each other point of views, in which we recognised ourselves. We discovered in our exchanges things we did not know about Europe. Our perception of Europe has changed. We will talk about this rewarding experience. We recommend that such workshops be set up regularly. By inviting us, you have opened a path, this path is promising for us citizens and for you decision-makers.»

(Excerpt from the Citizen Opinion adopted by the citizen panel, from October 25 to 27, 2018 in Paris)