



D7.1: Report on the Conference on the Future of Europe

WP7 - Strategies for redirection: institutions/mechanisms

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January 2026

How to cite this document: Fossum, J. E., Góra, M. Pöder, R., Thevenin, E., & Zirakashvili, A. (2026). Report on the Conference on the Future of Europe. REDIRECT deliverable D7.1. HORIZON-CL2-DEMOCRACY-01-Democracy in flux. Grant Number: 101095142.

Funding: REDIRECT is a project funded by the EU's Horizon-Europe programme. Call: HORIZON-CL2-DEMOCRACY-01-Democracy in flux. Grant Number: 101095142. More information can be found at <https://redirect.unisi.it/>.

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Repo on the Conference on the Future of Europe

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1 Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been touted as “the first transnational, multilingual and interinstitutional exercise of deliberative democracy at the EU level” (Galende-Sánchez 2025, 873). It has been described as “a fascinating laboratory of democratic change” (Nicolaïdis in Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski (2025, xiii). Moreover, and what requires a three-pronged clarification of expectations is that the Conference can be regarded as a “macro experiment”: the EU is a political experiment; deliberative forums constitute a form of political experiment; and the CoFoE was an experiment in fashioning deliberative forums within a transnational context and in relation to the broader multilevel EU institutional setting (Alemanno and Nicolaïdis 2022).

The purpose of this report is to analyse the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and to examine whether – or to what extent – the CoFoE exercise in transnational deliberative democracy has had any tangible impact on reviving European democracy. That requires two sets of examinations.

The first set of examinations is necessary in order to establish what we could reasonably expect from the CoFoE as an undertaking bent on reviving European democracy. Clarifying what to expect needs in turn three sets of examinations. One is to establish what requires reviving, in other words, the EU’s democratic deficit. Further is to explicate what the Conference was intended to do and to be, which is necessary for clarifying what forms of democratic revival it could engender if it performed according to plan. Related to that is to clarify what reviving democracy entails, in terms of the chosen mode of democracy (participatory; deliberative; representative, or a combination of (some of) these).

The second set of examinations focuses on what the CoFoE was and what it has achieved in terms of tangible democratic revival. That requires clarifying what type of undertaking it was: how it was composed; how it operated; how it was situated within the EU multilevel system; and what outputs it produced. Particular emphasis will be placed on the CoFoE’s proposals, in order to establish how they approached the EU’s democratic deficit (assessed along REDIRECT’s two strategies: reconnection and redirection); which proposals have been accepted and implemented; and what the entire exercise entails for the EU’s democratic nature and future. Intrinsic to this is the issue of EU treaty change, in other words, whether the CoFoE has had or is likely to have any impact on the EU’s treaties, or basic legal framework. The point is to underline that proper reconnection will require EU treaty changes.

The report is structured as follows: The first part provides a brief overview of the EU’s democratic deficit. This will be followed by an overview of the realm of possible democratizing impacts of the CoFoE. The third part clarifies the role and impact of the CoFoE. The fourth and

last part evaluates the democratic implications of the CoFoE for the EU as a multilevel system of governing. This evaluation must be structured so as to say something about the REDIRECT's two democratic revival strategies, namely, RECONNECTION and REDIRECTION.

2 The EU and the need for democratic revival

The EU is the world's first attempt at establishing democracy at the supranational level. That is unprecedented and therefore has a clear experimental side to it. That is however amplified by the fact that the EU's constitutional chaperons, the member states, have never settled on what type of polity the EU is or should be (Fossum and Menéndez 2011). At the heart of the EU project there is therefore no authoritative statement or document to tailor accountability expectations up against.¹ The EU is formally speaking an international organization. As such, it has a democratic surplus, since there is a directly elected parliament at the EU-level,² and the EU has exceptionally strict transparency requirements.

The presence of the European Parliament as the world's first supranational parliament brings up the question of what the appropriate democratic model should be and what standards we should use for assessing the EU's democratic nature and quality. This has spawned a comprehensive debate. At the end of the day, it is clear that we cannot disconnect the issue of democratic model from the issue of the EU's character as a polity or political system. That becomes readily apparent when we compare and contrast the democratic expectations that are placed on international organisations (insofar as democracy is involved it is anchored in the member states not the international organisation) versus on democratic states (the expectation is that the state should comply with democratic standards at all major levels of governing).

The EU is more than an international organisation, but it falls well short of being a state. This implies that when compared to a federal state, the institutional arrangement at the EU-level suffers from a deficit, in several respects. EU citizenship is more transnational than truly supranational.³ EU citizenship is based on being a citizen of a member state, and a core aspect of EU citizenship is mobility rights (Olsen 2012). A key aspect of EU integration is to put in place arrangements whereby states and their societies open up to each other. With regard to the European Parliament (EP) it is directly elected and capable of holding the European Commission to account but there are horizontal and vertical constraints on the EP's role and powers. Horizontally speaking it has virtually no say on the European Council (EUCO), which is composed of the EU's heads of state and governments. EUCO is a key executive especially in core state powers, and it is the EU's main crisis handling body. A key problem for the EP is therefore that

¹As Dieter Grimm has noted: "lack of clarity regarding core questions of European integration is particularly detrimental. The European Union (EU) has long since become more than an economic community. But there is no answer to the question of its ultimate goal. At the end of the integration process, should the EU become the United States of Europe, or should it remain a community of Member States who unite for specific purposes in areas that they can better address unitedly than separately?... The treaties say nothing about these questions..." (Grimm 2017, 233).

²For accounts of the EP's development, see Hix et al. (2007); Rittberger (2005); Smith (1999).

³This leaves scope for considerable openness and contestation over narratives. As Klaus Eder has noted: "Europe turns out to be a narrative laboratory in which narrative plots are struggling with each other. These narrative struggles offer elements for the reconstitution of a European "we" beyond the model of a national "we" as told in comic or romantic stories" (Eder and Carlson 2020, 110).

it is barred from intervening in and controlling the entire realm of activities that are taking place at the EU-level, notably in the areas of competence associated with core state powers (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014): security and defence and fiscal policy. Vertically speaking the EP is weakly linked to citizens, partly due to the functions the EU undertakes (and those it does not undertake) and due to the fact that the European party system lacks a proper transnational anchorage. European parties are still anchored in the national party systems of the member states making the European party system an amalgam of national systems rather than a transnational system proper. National parties rather than EU-level parties nominate the candidates to EP elections (Lindberg et al. 2008). As noted by Fossum and Lord (2025): “The incongruence between European parties in the parliament and national parties that structure voter choice in EP elections creates its own representative disconnect between the national and Union levels: MEPs are elected as representatives of national parties but – when they use the powers of the EP to influence the policies and laws of the Union - they work in European Party Groups that are little known to voters and, therefore, only obliquely responsible to them.”

EP elections have long been considered second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) meaning that voters use EP elections to give verdict on their national leaders rather than on the affairs at the EU-level. The politicization of the EU integration process and the rise of right-wing populism may have reduced this effect somewhat but may also have replaced it with what Hooghe and Marks (2009) refer to as a change from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus possibly as part of an altered cleavage constellation (GAL-TAN (GAL= Green, Alternative and Liberal; TAN = Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalistic), what de Wilde et al. (2019) and Schäfer and Zürn (2024) and others refer to as communitarians pitted against cosmopolitans. This altered constellation may in turn shift focus from contestations over policy to contestation over polity or the nature and direction of the EU integration process.

European citizens are emotionally speaking weakly anchored to the EU, which is underlined by the lack of a proper functioning EU public sphere and the EU’s weak socializing measures. The EU has a range of the symbols that we associate with national identity, but its flagging efforts (cf. Billig 1995) have far less impact than is the case with its national counterparts (also because of the way the blaming-crediting game is played out in the EU with member states often taking credit for EU actions).

Developments in recent years suggest that these defects at the EU-level may pale when compared to the instances of democratic backsliding we find in several of the EU’s member states, notably but far from exclusively in Hungary and Poland during the PiS government’s tenure in office, and more recently in Slovakia. This, as Kelemen (2017) has argued, is by now the most serious EU democratic deficit. The EU level’s ability to counter such developments is limited and member states as the EU’s ultimate constitutional chaperons are unwilling to own up to them (Fossum 2024).⁴

If we hold the EU system up against the three forms of disconnect identified by the REDIRECT project, we find that these encompass: intermediation disconnects; governance and account-

⁴See European Commission Rule of Law Report 2025: [2025 Rule of Law Report - European Commission](#)

ability disconnects; and affective disconnects.⁵ The first is an intermediation disconnect, which revolves around citizens' rights, political parties and parliaments; media (conventional and social); and civil society. That includes such factors as declining participation in the democratic process, and disengagement from public debate. An intermediation disconnect can also manifest itself in various forms of deconstruction of representation, such as when parties and parliaments cease to be a process of dynamic representation in which claims to represent are made, accepted, rejected and tested. The second is a governance and accountability disconnect, which revolves around political leadership; public administration; and courts. The third and final is an affective disconnect which pertains to citizens' trust in governing and disaffection with governing and their identification.

How severe these are takes us back to the larger issue of establishing what kind of political system the EU is. Since we cannot settle that we can consider how the EU and its members – states and citizens – perceive of the democratic deficit and disconnects. What that shows us is that whereas the EU is not a state, it is embedded in a system of democratic states. Significant divergences in democratic models or approaches across levels of governing brings up synchronization issues and challenges. EU's credibility in issuing commands depends on the EU not being seen as weakening or undermining member state level democracy. There are thus strong normative and mimetic isomorphic pressures on the EU-level to democratize in a manner congruent with the member states in order to gain legitimacy and acceptance. The upshot is that EU democratization is closely associated with the development of viable representative-democratic institutions at the EU-level.

We can therefore assume that the basic model of representative democracy is also the relevant template for the EU. The next step is to ask what that implies for the representative ecology. What kind of representative ecology can we reasonably assume the EU to be embedded within? Even if this question is underdetermined, we know that workable representative democracy must be based on free and fair elections, citizens' rights, a functioning public sphere and system of communication, a functioning system of social intermediation and adequate resources and systems of territorial control and resource extraction. The EU-level and its democratic institutions need the requisite fiscal and other resources, if not the EU cannot operate as a full-fledged representative democratic system. That is also why core institutions such as the European Parliament advocate for the need for treaty changes, precisely to establish those elements from this list that are still missing (more on that below).

Pitched against this broad agenda of institutional and structural reforms, what can we realistically expect from the CoFoE in democratic terms? Two main positions on its perceived role run through the literature and the EU-institutions accounts: vehicle for reform versus vehicle for citizens' participation and deliberation (Fabbrini et al. 2021). The next section will develop this in further detail.

⁵For an overview of these disconnects, see Castiglione (2024b); Fossum and Lord (2025).

3 What Democratic Expectations Should CoFoE engender?

The Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe stated that:

The Conference on the Future of Europe will open a new space for debate with citizens to address Europe's challenges and priorities. European citizens from all walks of life and corners of the Union will be able to participate, with young Europeans playing a central role in shaping the future of the European project. We, the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission want citizens to join the conversation and have their say on the future of Europe. We hereby jointly commit to listen to Europeans and to follow up on the recommendations made by Conference, in full respect of our competences and the subsidiarity and proportionality principles enshrined in the European Treaties. We will seize the opportunity to underpin the democratic legitimacy and functioning of the European project as well as to uphold the EU citizens support for our common goals and values, by giving them further opportunities to express themselves (European Union 2021).

The mandate represents a blend of participatory and deliberative democracy. It encourages citizen input and participation. The CoFoE has then also been labelled as "a transnational, multilingual and inter-institutional forum for participatory and deliberative democracy, one which aimed to be inclusive but manageable and conclusive at the same time" (CoFoE 2022; Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski 2025, 2). The CoFoE is preceded by a range of instruments to foster or increase citizens' participation, including the European Citizens' Initiative, Citizens' Dialogues, the European Commission's public consultations, as well as deliberative exercises within member states (the French Citizens Convention for Climate (Giraudet et al. 2022) or the Irish Citizens' Assembly (Farrell, Suiter, and Harris, 2019)).

At the same time, it is clear that this is not foremost an instrument of participatory democracy, which is based on direct citizen participation in decision-making processes. The EU institutions commit to listen and implement proposals but the citizens participating in the CoFoE's activities must entrust the institutions to do what they say, they have no direct presence in the decision-making process or in the EU's representative structures. Nicolaïdis (in Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski 2025) then also notes that "the EU may have embarked on a 'participatory turn'" (Saurugger 2010) at the coming to force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, but such a turn has failed to scale up from consultation to democracy, from focus groups to wider publics. In this spirit, engaging citizens directly as atomised, ununionized individual actors creates the ultimate aporia whereby the "citizen turn" (Oleart 2023) dampens the flame of citizens' engagement." With this in mind it is probably more accurate to label this exercise a form of citizen consultation and activation rather than a full-fledged exercise in democratic participation.

The CoFoE has citizen participatory elements, but its main thrust must be considered under other democratic headings. It is probably more apt to see it as an exercise in deliberative and representative democracy. It is intended to foster EU – citizen and citizen-citizen deliberation, and at the same time the core element of the CoFoE - the citizen panels - had a strong representa-

tive component. Their role is akin to what Warren (in Warren and Pearse, 2009, *italic in original*) has labelled as citizen representatives, “non-professionals who are *selected* or *self-selected* rather than elected for representative purposes... Citizen representatives typically function as supplements to elected representative bodies or administrative bodies in areas of weakness, usually having to do with limitations of communication, deliberation, legitimacy, governability, or attentiveness to public norms and common goods.”

How then to situate the CoFoE within the categories developed by the REDIRECT project? REDIRECT operates with two basic notions of reviving representative democracy, reconnection and redirection. The former is intended to rectify disconnects in the structure of representation, which means in the nature and functioning of the key representative institutions, namely, parliaments and parties. The latter is intended to rectify disconnects through developing new and possibly innovative ways of operating democratically. Such innovations include deliberative bodies, and an important question then would be how and in what sense such elements can be inserted into representative democracy. In this latter case, the analysis cannot be confined to the representative system or basic institutions but must be tailored to the broader representative ecology, which refers to “a web of practices and relations interacting and influencing each other (often contingently)” (Castiglione 2024a, 20). This web consists of several layers or circles, with the core institutions of representative democracy (parties, parliaments, and citizens’ rights) at the heart and supported by a range of government institutions, civil society, and a system of communication (media and public sphere).

Both modes of rectification are relevant in the EU setting. With regard to **reconnection**, the overview of the EU’s democratic deficit has shown that there are significant constraints on the European Parliament and an inadequately transnationally structured European party system.

From a reconnection perspective the CoFoE can serve two basic functions. On the one hand, it can serve as an opportunity structure for parliaments – European and national – through its operations (this has been discussed in Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski 2025). On the other hand, it can provide proposals for EU reforms that improve reconnection and do away with forms of representative disconnect.

From an institutional perspective, we can hypothesize reconnection to involve (1) strengthening the European Parliament within the EU institutional edifice; (2) overcoming two sets of important challenges: i) the Council’s rejection of treaty reform, which is an effort to prevent the CoFoE from having any tangible effects on the EU’s legal-institutional architecture; and ii) that the CoFoE must operate in a setting of incompletely institutionalized representative democracy; (3) strengthening the European party system by properly anchoring the European-level parties in the societies of the member states; and 4) showing that such an exercise has merits even within the exceptionally complex EU setting.

In the EU context, the debate is not only on the role of the EP; the role of national parliaments is also subject to a lot of debate. That means that there are several possible models on offer. The first is to strengthen the role of the EP through ensuring co-decision across all issue-areas that

are dealt with at the EU-level. The second is to strengthen each national parliament's ability to hold its government to account and/or its involvement in EU affairs. The third is to strengthen interparliamentary cooperation either along the lines of multilevel parliamentary fields (Crum and Fossum 2009; 2013) or along national interparliamentary lines (Bellamy 2019).

With regard to political parties, strategies for reconnection would entail moving closer to party government, which means that the party winning the election forms the government.⁶ Further, parties need to be more firmly institutionalized at the EU-level in organizational terms, in terms of candidate selection, and in terms of transnational reach across the Union. Finally, institutional reforms are needed to ensure that EU elections function as first-order and not merely as second-order elections. That implies changes to ensure that citizens know what is at stake in European elections, and that what is at stake is something that citizens really care about. Obvious examples are that elections determine political leadership and that parliaments have a direct (and final) say on the allocation and distribution of public funds. On this count, we see how the reconnection strategy necessarily touches on issues and concerns well beyond the narrow remit of the representative system (encompassing citizens' participation rights, parliaments and parties) to the polity's realm of operations and scope of involvement with issues of direct interest and value for citizens.⁷

There is also the question of whether ongoing structural changes in parties and party systems, notably the combined effect of parties' social dislocation in cleavage structures and societal groups/structures and the inveigling of parties and states through the emergence of cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995, 2009) may make parties less reliable conveyor belts or mediators between citizens and the public authorities. Under reconnection the less reliable parties are as democratic building-blocks the more the institutional configuration of representative democracy has to rely on a narrower form of parliamentary democracy. Since parliaments are part of the institutional system the problem is one of grounding the parliament in society and social intermediaries, since political participation requires bodies that organise and mobilise citizens. What form(s) of social intermediaries can replace parties? To what extent, if at all, can institutions notably but not exclusively parliaments devise deliberative forums for such tasks? Modern democracy has long relied on political parties being embedded in a wider configuration of social intermediaries - interest groups, lobbyists and NGOs – in order to function.⁸

⁶The closest the EU has come to this is when it in the previous EP made use of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure (for an overview and assessment, see Ceron et al. 2024). The current EU procedure is one where the member states in the European Council proposes a Commission President and in doing so pays regard to the EP elections. If the EP accepts the person with an absolute majority the person is elected. The Commission President then draws up a list of Commissioners based on suggestions from the member states. These are then all as a body subject to approval by the European Parliament. [How the Commission is appointed - European Commission](#)

⁷Andrew Moravcsik (2002) has noted that the EU's core realm of activities - EU internal market integration - is a matter of low salience integration, because it takes place foremostly in areas of legislative and regulatory activity that are farthest away from the minds of the voters. A similar line of reasoning is found in the works of Giandomenico Majone. The low salience argument has lost bite after especially the eurozone crisis and the EU's handling of it which both exposed the distributive effects of EU actions, and magnified differences between member states and population groups across the Union. Today it may be more apt to talk of EU opacity and complexity as well as framed distortions by fake news agents and external manipulators (notably Russia and the Trump administration).

⁸The literature on societal corporatism discussed the role of interest organisations at great length and underlined the socio-economic biases such arrangements engendered. Stein Rokkan (1966) then also famously noted that "votes count but resources decide".

With regard to **redirection** this is about developing viable forms of citizen engagement outside the core representative system - either as alternatives or as supplements/complements – and here the CoFoE is itself an interesting case to study. To what extent, and if so, how, can transnational exercises such as the CoFoE serve as democratic enhancements or as vehicles for undoing forms of representative disconnect? Such exercises can increase citizens' knowledge, interest and participation. In addition, undertakings such as the CoFoE can also serve as an ideas or proposals 'bank' for addressing gaps and disconnects in the wider representative ecology. From a broader ecological perspective, the CoFoE's contribution to EU democracy must reach broadly and touch on issues such as public sphere, citizens' rights, citizens' trust etc. This has to do with the breadth of issues that the CoFoE addresses and how and in what sense these issues can be said to relate directly to the representative ecology.

The CoFoE's agenda brings up the question of what to include and what to exclude when talking about representative ecology. Or to put it otherwise, what to consider as the first priority and what to place lower down on the list of political priorities? One way of thinking of the representative ecology is as a series of overlapping circles of different scope or extent (Merkel 2019). In the middle or at the core is the representative system composed of parties and parliaments. Then for the wider circle extending out from the core we should ask what are necessary legal, institutional, (political) cultural and socio-economic supports to ensure the proper functioning of the representative system. These are not part of the representative system but are necessary requirements for its proper functioning. Beyond those we may think of a further circle of more contingent factors such as the socio-economic context (mode of capitalism or regulated economy) etc. that also have profound bearings on workable democracy, but whose effects are mediated by the arrangements closer to the core. Castiglione (2024a) underlines the interactive nature of representation, which also means that it is difficult to rank-order factors in importance as the multiple circles metaphor implies.

For our purposes the debate on what is the most appropriate depiction of EU democracy takes on added salience given that the EU is a contested polity and that there is no agreement on what it is or should develop into as a political system. That has bearings on the role and status of representative democracy, as well as of how it can be legally, institutionally, socially and communicatively constituted. Thus, in the EU context it is not only a matter of distinguishing between representative system (or the core representative institutions) and the broader context or ecology wherein those institutions are embedded; the uncertainty surrounding the EU's nature as a polity makes it very difficult to make clear distinctions between representative system and ecology in the first place. A key question is: In what direction should the EU develop as a political system in order to strengthen the representative ecology? Should the EU become more state-like, or should it scale down its realm of actions? What does either option entail for the representative system, its ecology, and the bounds between representative system and ecology? The assessment of the CoFoE does provide us with some clues to this, not only through what was done, but equally importantly what was not done to address the EU's democratic deficit.

A further issue with bearing on the representative system, the ecology and the relationship be-

tween the two is the fact that the EU is a multilevel system whose emergence and consolidation have transformed the member states. Thus, we cannot conceive of EU integration as a matter of a simple or straight-forward scaling up of representative democracy from the member state to the EU-level. That is not possible given that what is to be scaled up has already been transformed (Fossum and Lord 2025). Added to that we need to recognize that the EU is facing a number of challenges related to its currency, borders, health and climate emergencies, democratic backsliding and the rise of populism, as well as the challenges associated with the global order turning less rule-governed and predictable. In addition to this, it is becoming more and more apparent that representative democracy is in crisis. The latter has given rise to the forms of disconnect outlined above.

With these reflections in mind, we now turn to the Conference on the Future of Europe in order to clarify what kind of undertaking it was and how and to what extent it addressed the EU's democratic challenges.

4 The Conference on the Future of Europe – Overview and Assessment

Academic assessments of the CoFoE (to be briefly presented below) when painted with broad brush provided two depictions of the CoFoE, namely as a vehicle for EU reform or as a means for increasing citizens' participation in and knowledge of and engagement with the EU. The two can be combined, of course.

If we look at the CoFoE's mandate we see that it was devised to address a very broad range of issues. The debate in the multilingual platform, the citizens panels and the plenary session revolved around ten topics: 'Climate change and the environment', 'Health', 'A stronger economy, social justice and jobs', 'EU in the World', 'Values and rights, rule of law, security', 'Digital transformation', 'European democracy', 'Migration', 'Education, culture, youth and sport', and 'Other ideas'.

This very broad agenda shows that the themes that the CoFoE addressed were not confined to the EU's democratic deficiencies or the representative system. From a REDIRECT perspective, this suggests that the CoFoE's agenda would either combine issues of reconnection with issues of redirection or focus mainly on issues related to REDIRECT's notion of redirection. Precisely how CoFoE fits within this bigger picture will become clearer when we outline in more detail the nature and operations of the CoFoE. In addition, with regard to the substance, we need to address to what extent the broad mandate and the wide range of issues cover what we may reasonably label as the representative ecology.

The idea of organizing a type of event such as the CoFoE was first voiced by the French President Emmanuel Macron in March 2019. In his op-ed in *Le Parisien*, Macron suggested to establish a "Conference for Europe" that would be a meeting point for representatives of European institutions, academia, civil society, religious communities, and 'ordinary' citizens. The Conference would outline a "roadmap for the European Union" and "propose all the changes our political

project needs” (Macron 2019). A few months later, Ursula von der Leyen, the new President of the European Commission (EC), committed to turning this idea into action and appointed Dubravka Šuica, a vice-President of the Commission on Democracy and Demography, to lead the process. As noted above, the purpose of the Conference was to act as a platform and forum for active and direct engagement with ‘ordinary’ people. It was a means to solicit citizens’ views on the issues that matter to them, and how they think the EU should act with regard to those issues. All in all, the Conference was meant to strengthen “the link between Europeans and the institutions that serve them” (European Union 2021). The Declaration noted that the final output would be presented as a report to the Joint Presidency and that the three EU institutions would then follow it up in line with their competence and expertise.

Initially planned to start in May 2020, the Conference was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and finally opened on 9 May 2021. A year later, the Conference completed its work and presented the final report which included 49 proposals and 326 specific measures formulated by citizens.

4.1 Structure and composition

The CoFoE was a collaborative effort involving the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission working as equal partners alongside the member States of the European Union. These three institutions acted as **Joint Presidency** for the Conference.

The Joint Presidency was supported by an **Executive Board** – a structure set up in accordance with the Joint Declaration. It was co-chaired by the EP, the Council of the EU, and the EC – each represented by three members and four observers. Additionally, it included observers from the presidential Troika of COSAC,⁹ the Committee of the Regions, and the Economic and Social Committee, as well as other EU bodies and relevant social partners. The Board was tasked with overseeing the organizational details and consensus decision-making concerning specific processes and events. It managed the ongoing development of the Conference and organized the Plenary meetings, ensuring the inclusion of citizens' contributions and subsequent actions. The Executive Board regularly reported to the Joint Presidency and was responsible for preparing a report on the final outcome of the Conference.

In accordance with the Joint Declaration, the Executive Board approved the **Rules of Procedure** (RoP) of the Conference on 9 May 2021. It established a framework for how various CoFoE structures would function and interact. One of the key points of the RoP was Article 17, which stated that the decision-making process had to be based on a consensus between the EP, the Council, the EC, and the national parliaments.

The Rules of Procedure are not to be confused with the **Conference Charter**. The latter was “a set of common principles and criteria, reflecting EU values, to which organizers of events shall subscribe and to which Conference participants must adhere” (Alemanno 2021a). This document was made available for all participants on the Multilingual Digital Platform and everyone who wanted to organize an event or publish a contribution had to subscribe to it beforehand. The

⁹Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union. See: [Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union \(COSAC\) - IPEX.eu](https://www.conferenceofparliamentarycommittees.eu/)

purpose of the Charter was to ensure that all participants agreed to uphold the public debate principles, such as openness to different opinions, respecting other people, and contributing to a fruitful debate. The Charter also enabled the platform moderators to hide any contribution that would go against the community rules and values.

In short, the Rules of Procedure sought to regulate solely participatory details, that is, ensuring the usage of trustworthy sources, providing accurate information, keeping individuals with personal interests out of the process etc., whereas the Conference Charter, in addition to the participatory logic, also had a deliberative tone to it, stressing the importance of diversity and free expression of individual viewpoints (García-Gutián and Bouza Garcia 2023, 8).

Along with the Executive Board, the Joint Declaration established two other structures – a Common Secretariat and a Conference Plenary. The **Common Secretariat**, steered by co-heads from the three abovementioned European institutions, ensured the smooth workflow of the Executive Board. In addition to coordinating the preparation of the Executive Board meetings, Conference Plenaries, and the European Citizens' Panels, the Common Secretariat also oversaw the Multilingual Digital Platform and reported on its key achievements.

As for the **Conference Plenary**, it consisted of 108 MEPs, 54 EC delegates, three delegates from the European Commission, 108 representatives from all national parliaments, and citizens. The latter included civil society organizations, regional and local authorities, and social partners. The main purpose of this structure was to develop proposals as a result of discussing the input gathered from European and National Citizens' Panels, various CoFoE events, and the Multilingual Digital Platform, making sure that all their recommendations were assessed in accordance with the EU's values and the Conference Charter. The Conference Plenary held seven meetings between June 2021 and April 2022 – five of them were in hybrid format and the last two were conducted at the EP in Strasbourg. These meetings were broadcasted online, and all the documents were published on the Multilingual Digital Platform.

The Conference Plenary was divided into nine **Working Groups**, with each focusing on one specific policy area. As noted above, the following themes were chosen in pursuance of the Rules of Procedure of the Conference and based on the CoFoE/Multilingual Digital Platform topics: **Climate change and the environment (1), Health (2), A stronger economy, social justice and jobs (3), EU in the world (4), Values and rights, rule of law, security (5), Digital transformation (6), European Democracy (7), Migration (8), Education, culture, Youth, Sport (9)**. Each Working Group acted under the authority of the Chair and the Spokesperson – they were responsible for facilitating dynamic discussions, drafting proposals, and presenting the outcome of the discussions to the Conference Plenary afterwards. The Working Groups held meetings from October 2021 until April 2022, within the scope of the Conference Plenaries.

Any EU member state, institution, or citizen could organize an **event under the CoFoE umbrella** and across the Union, at European, national, regional, or local level. These events could be hybrid, in-person, or hosted online (through the Multilingual Digital Platform). The events were optional to attend and did not have a predefined structure. They fulfilled not only “the functions of individual self-expression and political communication” but also the “desire ‘to

close the gap with Europe's citizens' by trying to promote the use of procedures of a deliberative nature" (García-Gutián and Bouza Garcia 2023, 8). There were over 6,000 events registered on the Multilingual Digital Platform, with more than 650,000 attendees in total (CoFoE 2022). Around 6% of the events were removed from the platform due to repeating or irrelevant topics, insufficient information, or after organizers' requests (Ibid.).

The involvement of younger generations in deliberative processes was especially important throughout the whole Conference. The European Youth Event (EYE2021) was a clear example of this. Held on 8-9 October, EYE2021 was a hybrid event which gathered around 10,000 people aged between 16 and 30 online and in the European Parliament in Strasbourg to exchange ideas about various CoFoE topics. In the end, 20 of the most eminent ideas were included in the Youth Ideas report and presented to the Conference Plenary on 23 October.

Besides these general and decentralized CoFoE events, the Conference also involved Citizens' Panels. There were two types of panels: **European Citizens' Panels** and National Citizens' Panels. The former was "the most innovative feature of the entire Conference's participatory design" (Alemanno 2021a). It consisted of 800 participants selected randomly through phone calls in summer 2021. All participants were EU citizens, and they represented the Union's diversity with regard to their age, gender, education level, geographic origin, and socio-economic background. Additionally, one third of the Panel participants were between 16 and 24 years, reflecting the Conference's special focus on youth yet again.

There were four European Citizens' Panels in total. Each Panel consisted of three sessions lasting over the weekend, and discussed specific subject matters: Stronger economy, social justice, jobs/education, youth, culture, sport/digital transformation (1), European democracy/values and rights, rule of law, security (2), Climate change, environment/health (3), EU in the world/migration (4). These topics were based on the Multilingual Digital Platform themes. European Citizens' Panels approved 178 recommendations in total (CoFoE 2022).

Table 1. National Citizens' Panels – general overview. Source: CoFoE 2022

Country	Date	Participants	Topic of discussion	Recommendations
Belgium	October 2021	50	European democracy; How citizens can be involved in EU affairs	115
Germany	January 2022	100	Europe's role in the world; Climate and environment; Rule of law and values; A stronger economy and social justice.	8
France	September -October 2021	700+	Nine Conference topics	14
Italy	March 2022	55	A stronger economy, social justice, and jobs; Europe's role in the world	58
Lithuania	January 2022	25	The EU's role and mandate in foreign policy; The EU's economic role	21

Country	Date	Participants	Topic of discussion	Recommendations
The Netherlands	September- November 2021	29	Nine Conference topics	30

The aim of European Citizens' Panels was to deliberate over the most pressing issues related to the future of Europe and formulate policy recommendations for European decision-makers to conduct reforms within the above-mentioned thematic fields. The Panels had the potential for "democratic catching up" and represented an opportunity for empowering citizens as "political subjects" and "active participants of constitution-making" (Seubert 2024). However, delving fully into specific issues ended up being a challenging task due to the broad scope of the Conference. As a result, the Panels' recommendations turned out to be a mere "wish list" formulated by a big focus group (Oleart 2023).

In addition to the European Citizens' Panels, six member states – Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, and the Netherlands – organized **National Citizens' Panels**. Participants were randomly selected to ensure representation across various characteristics such as age group, gender, socio-economic background, and geographic region. Some countries also organized digital sessions in addition to face-to-face events. Namely, Germany held five online workshops, Lithuania hosted an online opening session, and the Netherlands sent out a questionnaire to a representative group of 4,000 citizens. The recommendations from National Citizens' Panels were presented and discussed in Conference Plenaries (CoFoE 2022).

One of the main pillars of the Conference, together with European Citizens' Panels and Conference Plenary, was the **Multilingual Digital Platform**. Established on 19 April 2021, shortly after issuing the Joint Declaration, the platform became the main hub for receiving information regarding the Conference events, as well as submitting ideas, endorsing and discussing others' inputs, and hosting and attending events. Additionally, Plenary debates, Working Group meetings, and the plenary meetings of the European Citizens' Panels were all livestreamed there. All contributions were publicly available in 24 official EU languages. In short, "the platform played a fundamental role in the transparency of the overall process and the access to information" (CoFoE 2022, 11). By April 2022, around 5 million unique users had checked out the Platform. There were more than 50,000 active participants and over 17,000 ideas discussed (CoFoE 2022).

The Multilingual Digital Platform enabled thousands of European citizens to engage in an interactive and transnational discussion where they shared their viewpoints regarding various issues related to the European Union and its future. Therefore, it indeed held the potential to be an effective and innovative tool for exercising deliberative democracy at the EU level. However, Alemanno (2021a) argues that there were three significant structural limitations concerning the Platform:

1. Limited awareness and publicity – The link to the Platform was not readily available on the Home page of any EU institution or national authority. Additionally, the login requirement disincentivized many visitors from contributing. Other challenges, such as access

to necessary equipment, technical proficiency, and “online fatigue” caused by the Coronavirus pandemic were not properly addressed either.

2. Unequal access to the opportunity structure – Engagement was higher among those who were in a better epistemic and economic position as they could “afford to contribute to an essentially technocratic form of participation” (Alemanno 2021a, 497).
3. Limited representativeness – The most active users were men, western EU citizens, and individuals who were already actively engaged in EU affairs.

Oleart (2023) shares this critique and writes that a significant number of the Multilingual Digital Platform participants had tertiary education, pointing to the fact that the platform was “ultimately dominated by usual suspects of the ‘Brussels bubble’”. Furthermore, some even proclaimed that the platform was subject to manipulation throughout the whole Conference. For instance, Beck (2022) stated that moderators often removed critical input because of the high amount of EU critics contributing to the platform. In addition to this, ECR claimed that the youth were significantly overrepresented, and that the platform favored integrationist young voices since these generally tend to be more positive towards the EU, raising concerns about “casual ageism” and the CoFoE’s legitimacy (Krotký 2024).

This brief overview shows the comprehensive scope of the CoFoE, hints at some of the difficulties involved in organizing such a comprehensive undertaking during a pandemic where populations for long periods were under lock-down and the additional challenges associated with undertaking such a comprehensive effort in a multilingual and multicultural context.

5 The Plenary Proposals and Their Relevance for the REDIRECT Scheme

On 9 May 2022, the Conference on the Future of Europe closed in Strasbourg, and the Co-Chairs of the Executive Board presented a final report that incorporated 49 sets of proposals put forward by the Conference Plenary as a result of one year of deliberations. The proposals were organized around the nine CoFoE themes and included not only general objectives but also specific measures.

We have here reproduced the 49 general proposals from the concluding report. We have marked those proposals that we consider most relevant in respectively **yellow** and **green**. This marking exercise is meant to distinguish between those proposals that appear the most directly relevant for the representative system and are marked in yellow. Those proposals that clearly are about the broader conditions for democracy, or the representative ecology, are marked in green. The question then is how this distinction relates to REDIRECT’s two strategies, since the scheme confirms that we cannot simply equate reconnection with the representative system and redirection with the representative ecology. Every representative system is embedded in a broader ecology. What this brings up is a question of each strategy’s situatedness in the ecology and whether each strategy has the same or similar ecology requirements to work. For the scheme that brings up the question of which of those proposals marked in green appear particularly

relevant for respectively reconnection and redirection?

Further, we need to examine in more detail those proposals that have been marked in yellow in order to make a clearer distinction or delineation between what are strictly speaking **reconnection** and what are **redirection** because the general proposals are not necessarily clear on that. Such a delineation is also important in order to establish whether the or the extent to which CoFoE contains proposals that are *sufficiently* attuned to the EU's democratic challenges, as define above.

Table 2: Proposals (verbatim) from the CoFoE's Report on the Final Outcome (2022)

N	Proposal	Objective
I. Climate Change and the Environment		
1	Agriculture, food production, biodiversity and ecosystems, pollution	Safe, sustainable, just, climate responsible, and affordable production of food, respecting sustainability principles, the environment, safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems while ensuring food security
2	Agriculture, food production, biodiversity and ecosystems, pollution	Protect and restore biodiversity, the landscape and oceans, and eliminate pollution
3	Climate change, energy, transport	Enhance European energy security and achieve the EU's energy independence while ensuring a just transition, and providing Europeans with sufficient, affordable and sustainable energy. Tackle climate change, with the EU playing a role of global leader in sustainable energy policy, and respecting the global climate goals
4	Climate change, energy, transport	Provide high quality, modern, green, and safe infrastructure, ensuring connectivity, including of rural and island regions, in particular through affordable public transport
5	Sustainable consumption, packaging and production	Enhance the use and management of materials within the EU in order to become more circular, more autonomous, and less dependent. Build a circular economy by promoting sustainable EU products and production. Ensure all products placed on the EU market comply with common EU environmental standards
6	Information, awareness, dialogue and lifestyle	Foster knowledge, awareness, education, and dialogues on environment, climate change, energy use, and sustainability
II. Health		
7	Healthy food and healthy lifestyle	Ensure that all Europeans have access to education on healthy food and access to healthy and affordable food, as a building block of a healthy lifestyle
8	Reinforce the healthcare system	Reinforce the resilience and quality of our healthcare systems
9	A broader understanding of Health	Adopt a holistic approach to health, addressing, beyond diseases and cures, health literacy and prevention, and fostering a shared understanding of the challenges faced by those who are ill or disabled, in line with the "One Health Approach", which should be emphasized as a horizontal and fundamental principle encompassing all EU policies
10	Equal access to health for all	Establish a "right to health" by guaranteeing all Europeans have equal and universal access to affordable, preventive, curative and quality health care
III. A Stronger Economy, Social Justice and Jobs		

N	Proposal	Objective
11	Sustainable Growth and innovation	We propose that the EU supports the shift to a sustainable and resilient growth model, considering the green and digital transitions with a strong social dimension in the European Semester, and empowering citizens, trade unions and businesses . The conventional macroeconomic indicators and the GDP could be complemented with new indicators in order to address the new European priorities such as the European Green Deal or the European Pillar of Social Rights and to better reflect the ecological and digital transitions and the wellbeing of people
12	Enhancing EU's competitiveness and further deepening the Single Market	We propose strengthening the competitiveness and resilience of the European Union's economy, single market, industry and addressing strategic dependencies. We need to promote an entrepreneurial culture in the EU, where innovative businesses of all sizes, and in particular Micro-, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), as well as start-ups are encouraged and can thrive in order to contribute to more resilient and cohesive societies. There is a need for a strong functioning market economy in order to facilitate the vision of a more social Europe
13	Inclusive labour markets	We propose to improve the functioning of labour markets so that they ensure fairer working conditions and promote gender equality, employment, including that of young people and vulnerable groups . The EU, Member States and social partners need to work to end in-work poverty, address the rights of platform workers, ban un-paid internships and ensure fair labour mobility in the EU. We must promote social dialogue and collective bargaining . We need to ensure the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including its relevant headline targets for 2030, at EU, national, regional and local level in the areas of "equal opportunities and access to the labour market" and "fair working conditions", while respecting competences and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and to include a Social Progress Protocol in the Treaties. While doing so, there should be a respect of national traditions and the autonomy of social partners and a cooperation with civil society
14	Inclusive labour markets	We propose to reduce inequalities, fight social exclusion and tackle poverty . We need to put in place a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that could include, among other, a reinforced Child Guarantee and Youth Guarantee, the introduction of minimum wages, a common EU framework for minimum income schemes and decent social housing. We need to ensure the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including its relevant headline targets for 2030, at EU, national, regional and local level in the area of "social protection and inclusion" with due regard for respective competences and the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality and to include a Social Progress Protocol in the Treaties

N	Proposal	Objective
15	Demographic transition	We propose to address the challenges arising from the demographic transition , as a critical ingredient of Europe's overall resilience, in particular low birth rates and a steadily ageing population, by ensuring support to people throughout the lifecycle. This should involve comprehensive action aimed at all generations, from children and young people, to families, to the working-age population, to older persons who are still prepared to work as well as those in retirement or need of care
16	Fiscal and tax policies	We propose that the EU promotes future-oriented investments focused on the green and digital transitions with a strong social and gender dimension , taking also into account the examples of the Next Generation EU and the SURE instrument. The EU needs to take into account the social and economic impact of the war against Ukraine and the link between the EU economic governance with the new geopolitical context and by strengthening its own budget through new own resources. Citizens want to move away taxation from people and SMEs and target tax evaders, big polluters and by taxing the digital giants while at the same time they want to see the EU supporting Member States' and local authorities' ability to finance themselves and as well as in using EU funds
IV. EU in the World		
17	Reducing dependency of EU from foreign actors in economically strategic sectors	We propose that the EU take measures to strengthen its autonomy in key strategic sectors such as agricultural products, strategic economic goods, semiconductors, medical products, innovative digital and environmental technologies and energy
18	Reducing dependency of EU from foreign actors in energy	We propose that the EU reach more autonomy in the field of energy production and supply, in the context of the ongoing green transition
19	Defining standards within and outside the EU in trade and investment relations	We propose that the EU strengthen the ethical dimension of its trade and investment relations
20	Defining standards within and outside the EU in environmental policies	We propose that the EU strengthen the environmental dimension of its trade relations
21	Decision making and cohesion within the Union	We propose that the EU improve its capacity to take speedy and effective decisions, notably in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) , speaking with one voice and acting as a truly global player, projecting a positive role in the world and making a difference in response to any crisis
22	Transparency of the EU and its relations with the citizens	We propose that the EU, in particular in its actions at the international level, including trade negotiations, improve its accessibility for citizens through better information, education, citizen participation, and transparency of its action

N	Proposal	Objective
23	The EU as a strong actor on the world scene in peace and security	We propose that the EU continue to act to promote dialogue and guarantee peace and a rules-based international order , strengthening multilateralism and building on long standing EU peace initiatives which contributed to its award of the Nobel Prize in 2012, while strengthening its common security
24	The EU as a strong actor on the world scene in relationship building	We propose that the EU should, in its relations with third countries make use of its collective political and economic weight... strengthen its ability to sanction... promote sustainable and rules- based trade ... etc.
V. Values and Rights, Rule of Law, Security		
25	Rule of law, democratic values and European identity	Systematically uphold the rule of law across all member states
26	Data protection	Guarantee a more protective and citizen-oriented data treatment policy
27	Media, fake news, disinformation, fact-checking, cybersecurity	Tackle disinformation by further promoting media independence and pluralism as well as media literacy
28	Media, fake news, disinformation, fact-checking, cybersecurity	A stronger role for the EU in countering cybersecurity threats
29	Anti-discrimination, equality and quality of life	Take action to harmonize living conditions across the EU and im- prove EU citizens' socio-economic quality of life
30	Animal rights, agriculture	Take decisive measures to promote and guarantee a more ecological and climate-oriented agriculture
VI. Digital Transformation		
31	Access to digital infrastructure	Equal access to the internet is a fundamental right of every Euro- pean citizen . We propose that everyone in Europe should in practice have access to the internet and to digital services, and that the sovereignty of the EU's digital infrastructure is enhanced
32	Digital literacy and skills that empower people	We propose that the EU ensures that all European citizens can benefit from digitali- sation , by empowering them with the necessary digital skills and opportunities
33	Safe and trustworthy digital society – cyber security and disinformation	We propose that in order to have a safe, resilient and trustworthy digital society the EU should ensure effective and swift implementation of existing legislation and have more powers to enhance cyber security, deal with illegal content and cyber criminality, counter and recover from cyber threats from non-state actors and authoritarian states, and ad- dress disinformation
34	Safe and trustworthy digital society – data protection	We promote data sovereignty of individuals , better awareness and more efficient implementation and enforcement of existing data protection rules (GDPR) to enhance personal control of own data and limit misuse of data

N	Proposal	Objective
35	Digital innovation to strengthen the social and sustainable economy	We propose that the EU promotes digitalisation measures which strengthen the economy and the single market in a fair and sustainable way, increase European competitiveness in technology and innovation, enhance the digital single market for companies of all sizes and make Europe a world leader in digital transformation and in human centric digitalisation
VII. European Democracy		
36	Citizens information, participation and youth	Increase citizens' participation and youth involvement in the democracy at the European Union level to develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective . That is why the most appropriate form of participation should be considered for each topic
37	Citizens information, participation and youth	Make the European Union more understandable and accessible and strengthen a common European identity
38	Democracy and elections	Strengthen European democracy by bolstering its foundations, boosting participation in European Parliament elections, fostering transnational debate on European issues and ensuring a strong link between citizens and their elected representatives
39	EU decision making process	Improve the EU's decision-making process in order to ensure the EU's capability to act, while taking into account the interests of all Member States and guaranteeing a transparent and understandable process for the citizens
40	Subsidiarity	Ensure active subsidiarity and multilevel governance across the EU and increase the involvement of social partners and organised civil society in the decision-making process
VIII. Migration		
41	Legal migration	Strengthen the EU's role on legal migration
42	Irregular migration	Strengthen the EU's role in tackling all forms of irregular migration and strengthen the protection of the European Union's external borders, while respecting human rights
43	Irregular migration	Apply common rules uniformly in all Member States on the first reception of migrants
44	Asylum, integration	Strengthen the EU's role and reform the European asylum system based on the principles of solidarity and fair share of responsibility
45	Asylum, integration	Improve integration policies in all member states
IX. Education, Culture, Youth and Sport		
46	Education	The EU and its Member states should seek to establish by 2025 an inclusive European Education Area within which all citizens have equal access to quality education and life-long learning, including those in rural and remote areas

N	Proposal	Objective
47	European youth issues	The EU and its Member States have to focus on the specific needs of young people across all relevant policies, including the European Union's regional policy in order to offer them the best possible conditions for study and work and starting an independent life, while engaging them in the democratic life and decision-making processes, including at European level. Youth organisations have a crucial role to play
48	Culture and exchanges	To promote a culture of exchange and foster European identity and European diversity across different areas
49	Sport	Sport is crucial for our societies - in order to defend our values, ensure healthy lifestyle and ageing, promote a culture of exchanges and also celebrate the diversity of European heritage

5.1 Reconnection and redirection proposals

How many of the proposals touched on the representative system with particular emphasis on the European parliament, national parliaments and political parties, and what did they propose? How many of those highlighted in yellow are actually about redirection rather than reconnection? The relative balance between the two is important in order to establish how the CoFoE plenary, which included the EU institutions, thought about EU democracy.

Proposal 21(1) refers to changing voting rules from unanimity to qualified majority in CFSP; 21(3) refers to the role of the High Representative; and 21(4) states the need for “agreeing on a strong vision and a common strategy to consolidate the unity and decision taking capacity of the EU in order to prepare the EU for further enlargement” (CoFoE 2022, 64). The first proposal is on decision-making and would if implemented have a significant centripetal effect on EU decision-making and with 21:4 contribute to consolidate the EU's institutional system. It is obvious that such a step entails a significant institutional change that would alter the power balance between EU institutions and the member states in foreign and security as a core state power (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). If these changes were accompanied by a commensurate role of the EP, then this could greatly strengthen EU-level representative democracy.

Proposal 22(1) underlines the need to improve transparency and strengthen links to citizens, including in the EU's international relations. 22(2) makes explicit reference to CoFoE as an example for such citizens' involvement and notes that it should be organised at the European, national, and local levels. What this means is that proposal 22 focuses on redirection not reconnection and links such measures to the improvement of citizens' participation. How extensively such measures need to be used to have any real bearing on participation is not specified.

The issue of whether the CoFoE or similar undertakings is a one-shot affair or part of a program of citizen activation matters for the reform process and for citizens involvement. With more events lined up there is more scope for fashioning such undertakings as part of an incremental reform process. The issue of one-shot or several also has bearings on citizens' expectations. A

one-shot unique effort may raise expectations more than would be the case in a stream of similar undertakings.

Proposal 36 is explicitly dedicated to citizens' participation mechanisms. 36(1) is aimed at better communicating to citizens the mechanisms that are available; 36(2) is aimed at improving their frequency; 36(3) refers to the need for a user-friendly digital platform; 36(5) underlines the need for including civil society and regional and local authorities; 36(7) proposes to hold Citizens assemblies periodically. It notes that "(i)f the outcomes are not taken on board by the institutions, this should be duly justified" (CoFoE 2022, 79) The wording of this proposal is more akin to redirection than reconnection.

Proposal 38 is listed under the heading democracy and elections. 38(1) is explicitly focused on the need for pursuing and strengthening EU values as laid out in the EU treaties. 38(2) proposes an EU-wide referendum "to be triggered by the European Parliament, in exceptional cases on matters particularly important to all European citizens" (CoFoE 2022, 81). This proposal would require a treaty change (European Parliament 2024). Proposal 38(3) refers to electoral changes by stating: (s)ome of the Members of the European Parliament should be elected through a European Union-wide list, the rest being elected within the Member States" (Ibid.). This appears as a watered-down version of the proposal from European Citizens Panel 2, which proposed: "16. **We recommend adopting an election law for the European Parliament that harmonizes electoral conditions (voting age, election date, requirements for electoral districts, candidates, political parties and their financing). European citizens should have the right to vote for different European Union level parties that each consist of candidates from multiple Member States. During a sufficient transition period, citizens could still vote for both national and transnational parties**" (bold in original).¹⁰ Proposal 38(3) includes the possibility for digital voting and "guaranteeing effective voting rights for persons with disabilities" (Ibid.). Proposal 38(4) underlines the need for "(s)trenghening links between citizens and their elected representatives, taking into account national specificities and citizens' desire to be closer to them and have a feeling that their concerns lead to specific action by elected representatives in the European Parliament and national parliaments. This is a universal issue and people of all ages should be engaged" (Ibid.). This includes measures to improve citizens' say on who is elected as the President of the European Commission either through direct election or through a lead candidate system; the EP should be given the right of initiative; and the EP "should decide on the budget of the EU as it is the right of parliaments at the national level"; parties and organized civil society "should be more lively and accessible in order for citizens to be more involved and engaged in European democracy." This proposal requires a treaty change (European Parliament 2024). It would, if adopted, have a significant effect on the EP's standing in the EU institutional edifice because it would render explicit what is at stake in EU elections and through providing the EP with fiscal clout make the EP elections more consequential whether the EU moved towards a more parliamentary or checks and balances system. Proposal 38(5) refers to the need for adopting a wider notion of democracy which includes the workplace.

¹⁰This is derived from the deliberations of European Citizens' Panel 2, available at: [Panel_2_recommendations.pdf](#)

Proposal 39 is on the EU decision-making process. Proposal 39(1) refers to a need to reassess EU voting rules, and that all unanimity votes should instead be decided by qualified majority. This provision requires a treaty change (European Parliament 2024). Proposal 39(2) is on the need to improve decision-making transparency and to strengthen the EP's right of inquiry. This provision also refers to the need to include national parliaments for instance in EP hearings. In a similar vein the Committee of the Regions should also be better involved. 39(3) refers to the possibility of changing the names of the EU institutions, so that the Council is termed the Senate and the Commission the Executive Commission of the EU. This proposal requires a treaty change (European Parliament 2024). Proposal 39(5) and 39(6) refer to the need to improve the involvement of civil society and social partners, and 39(7) proposes reopening the discussion of an EU constitution. This latter proposal naturally requires a treaty change (European Parliament 2024). This proposal (39) is important for EU representative democracy. Note that it is geared not only towards strengthening the EP but also national parliaments. A case could therefore be made for this being more about the multilevel parliamentary field (Crum and Fossum 2009, 2013) than the EP.

Proposal 46 refers to the need for "(c)ivic education about democratic processes, as well as EU values and history of Europe" (Ibid., 88).

Proposal 47 is on European youth issues and sets out proposals to improve their political participation. Proposal 47(2) proposes that the voting age should be 16 years, and that national parties should put youth on their lists for elections.

Overall, we see that the proposals we identified as particularly geared to the representative system contained provisions that highlighted both reconnection and redirection measures. The main reconnection measures revolve around the need for changing voting rules from unanimity to qualified majority, granting the EP a more prominent role in areas of core state powers, and providing the EP with greater fiscal clout; hence these proposals could represent important steps towards reducing the EU's democratic deficit if they were implemented to the full. Note however that all the major proposals that would heighten reconnection required EU treaty changes. It therefore matters a lot for the democratizing effects of the CoFoE if it were to lead to EU treaty changes.

This brief overview of the specifics of the proposals shows that there was a mix of proposals for reconnection and redirection with especially proposals 22 and 36 directed towards redirection measures more than reconnection. The interesting question then is what the relationship between these sets of proposals was. We can posit two main scenarios. The first is that reconnection is complemented with redirection. The assumption is that proposals will ensure the basic tenets of representative democracy and redirection measures will complement these. The second is that reconnection measures are inadequate. Redirection measures must either make up for shortfalls in representative democracy or institute other modes of democracy, participatory or deliberative. That brings up the question of whether or to what extent redirection strategies can make up for shortfalls in the system of representation. The proposals that were listed above pertaining to reconnection showed a willingness to put in place much of what we associate with representative democracy. Whether that would be fully realised depended on

how far these reforms were carried and what type of EU they were carried out within. We are back to the issue flagged above: what kind of ecology for what kind of political system?

5.2 Representative ecology proposals

In the EU context, we have already underlined that it is more difficult than in a democratic state to determine whether there is a representative ecology worthy of its name. What we do know is that the EU has not yet established a full-fledged system of representative democracy, and whereas some of the planks for ensuring that are quite readily apparent, the scope of the ecology will also be tailored to the scope of the polity. We reject the no demos logic,¹¹ which posits that a necessary condition for EU-level democracy is a shared language and in its strong version ethnicity.

The problem we face when seeking to clarify how and to what extent the proposals touched on the representative ecology is a problem of delineation. Where to draw the line between institutional and legal provisions and policy substance ones? Both are necessary, especially in the EU context, since the nature and scope of the EU's policy substance provides important insights into the EU as polity.¹² In the table we marked in green mainly two sets of proposals, namely **citizens' rights** and the **rule of law**¹³ as vital conditions for workable democracy as well as media and digital transformation. Citizens' rights and the rule of law are essential building-blocks in constitutional democracy. They are essential for stabilising systems of representation and for ensuring that such systems are founded on the notion of public control with political equality. The EU already has the Charter of Fundamental Rights so there is an established rights basis in place. One issue is therefore of ensuring compliance with rights already in place but also that the existing rights are sufficiently tailored to the workings of democracy. A concern that runs through the report is for the EU to uphold its values internally in the member (and affiliated) states but also externally, since the EU has long been a champion for a rules-based global order. Many of the proposals contain insistence on adhering with basic values and policy substance for instance through ensuring inclusive labour markets, defining standards for trade and investment etc. The methodological problem in establishing their role and status in the wider ecology is that they are *not polity neutral*. The issue is therefore to 'read out' from the whole set of polity proposals what underlying polity conception informs them and whether there is one coherent one or proposals go in different directions. That is beyond the scope of this study, but it is a necessary undertaking in the EU context given the uncertainties and contestations underlying its status as a multilevel political entity.

We have also highlighted proposals that touched on **media** and the **digital transformation** given the centrality of these issues for workable democracy. Proposals cover both EU-internal and EU-external matters.¹⁴ The list is very extensive and covers critical issues pertaining to the basic

¹¹For an overview, see Fossum and Lord (2026).

¹²The EU's strong anchorage in the single market, and the fact that the single market to a large extent is polity constitutive has prompted Jozef Bátora, John Erik Fossum and Jarle Trondal (2026) to label the EU a segmented polity. See also Bátora and Fossum (2020).

¹³The relevant proposals we have highlighted in green are: 13(1), 13(2), 13(3), 13(5), 13(6), 13(9); 14(1), 14(2); 15(5); 19(2); 23; 24(5); 25(1), 25(3); 29(1); 32(2); 35(3); 47(2); 48(2).

¹⁴The relevant proposals we have highlighted in green are: 6(1), 6(2), 6(6); 22(5); 25(5); 26; 27(1), 27(2), 27(3),

conditions for workable public spheres and facts-based communication.

5.3 A feedback event

A feedback event was organised on December 2, 2022, for citizens to receive feedback from the institutions on the status of their proposals. A report from the event sums it up as follows: “At the feedback event, the citizens appeared eager to learn how and when their proposals would be implemented. Their expectation was that representatives from the EU institutions would inform them in a clear and practical way about how their input had been taken forward in the seven months since the ‘end’ of the CoFoE. However, as the day advanced, citizens became increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with the event, frustration with the institutions, and confusion about what progress was being made... having spent considerable time and effort working on the outcome of the CoFoE, the citizens wanted to know which proposals have made it into the first batch of the Work Programme and which proposals fell into the 5% that would be put on the back burner on account of requiring treaty change. Despite directly asking questions about specific proposals to the institutional representatives, the citizens did not feel they had received satisfying answers during the event”.¹⁵

With this uncertainty what can we make of the fate of the proposals? The next and final section assesses what the three core EU institutions carried forth and committed to do as follow-ups to the proposals that they received from the conference plenary.

6 Impact Assessment

In the following we try to establish more precisely what came out of this exercise. Two sets of examinations are conducted. First, we start by examining the main EU institutions’ reports on how and to what extent they have addressed the proposals that came out of the CoFoE exercise, not only the 49 proposals that came out of the plenary but the hundreds of proposals that came out of the citizens’ panels. One methodological challenge is that we do not know if the concrete proposals that the institutions report actually emanated directly from this exercise. It could also be that the CoFoE exercise served as a vehicle for institutions to add or pursue proposals that were relevant or that they had already worked on prior to the CoFoE and therefore did not directly emanate from this exercise. The CoFoE could serve as a legitimating device for reform proposals that emanated elsewhere. That would have been a more important issue had the CoFoE exercise ended up in treaty changes which it thus far has not and is unlikely to do in the foreseeable future. We examine the institutions’ reports with a view to clarify whether and to what extent the exercise contributed to reduce the EU’s democratic deficit.

Second, we provide a brief overview of a range of academic assessments of the CoFoE to get a clearer overview of how this undertaking was assessed. This overview both gives us a sense of how it was received in the academic community and how academics considered this exercise in the first place, since positions varied from seeing the CoFoE as a reform vehicle or as a vehicle

27(4); 28; 31; 32; 33; 34; 37(2), 37(4).

¹⁵In EU Citizens’ Panels, the institutions must not leave citizens behind

for citizens' participation and deliberation.

With regard to the first point, the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission have collectively committed to following up on the proposals formulated by EU citizens as a result of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The three institutions agreed to act in full transparency throughout this process, each within their own sphere of competence and in accordance with the Treaties.

6.1 The European Parliament

On 9 June 2022, the **European Parliament** adopted a Resolution calling on the European Council to make various amendments to the EU Treaties. One of the most important initiatives concerned voting procedures in the Council and aimed to enhance the European Union's capacity to act. The proposal suggested switching from unanimity to qualified majority voting – abolishing the Member States' veto powers – with regard to sanctions, emergencies, and *passerelle* clauses. Another proposal suggested to provide the EP with the right to initiate, revise, or revoke legislation, as well as to grant it full rights as a co-legislator on the EU budget. Other proposals touched upon the topics of health, renewable energy, climate change, social rights, economy, and protecting the EU's core values. There were 355 votes in favour of the resolution, 154 MEPs were against it, and 48 did not vote. The next step was to wait for the European Council's decision on putting up a Convention through simple majority (European Parliament 2022).

In May 2024, the European Parliament published a report on *The follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe in numbers*. The document notes that “(t)he Conference Plenary approved 5 DEMOCRACY proposals incorporating a total of 33 measures. These revolve around four main objectives: enhancing citizen information, participation, and youth involvement; strengthening European identity and accessibility of the European institutions; fostering democracy, electoral processes and subsidiarity, and reforming EU decision-making mechanisms” (European Parliament 2024, 23).

The document shows that results vary by thematic areas and that the follow-up efforts have generally been weaker with regard to 'Democracy'. Namely, 61% of measures within this sector remain unaddressed; in other words, only 13 measures out of 33 have been addressed so far (European Parliament 2024). What is more, according to the report, 'Democracy' has the most implementation gaps in comparison with other CoFoE fields, making up almost a quarter of overall unaddressed measures (Ibid.). The report states that full implementation of some – namely, 10¹⁶ – of the unaddressed measures within 'Democracy' would necessitate institutional reforms at the EU level. The report confirms what was said above namely that the key proposals for improving reconnected required treaty change and that was not forthcoming. The other institutions responses, notably that of the European Council are illustrative in that regard.

¹⁶Measures: 37(1), (6); 38(2), (4); 39(1), (3), (6), (7); 40(2), (3).

6.2 The European Council

On 10 June 2022, the **European Council** published a preliminary technical assessment of the proposals and related specific measures listed in the CoFoE final report. Subsequently updated in November 2022, the document described the extent to which the EU institutions had already been working on the measures outlined in each proposal and stated which legal bases could be relevant for implementation of further proposals/measures. There were three key takeaways from the preliminary assessment. First, nearly 95% of proposals and related measures had already been handled or were in the process of being addressed by various EU institutions. Another finding outlined in the document was that most of the proposals/measures could be implemented without the necessity to amend any existing EU legislative framework. Lastly, according to the assessment, very few proposals/measures required treaty change in order to be fully carried through (European Council 2022).

With regard to democracy, the preliminary assessment stated that the Council was working on the European Democracy Action Plan¹⁷ (3rd pillar). As for other proposals within the sector of ‘European Democracy’, the assessment is quite vague in terms of explaining how each proposal/measure could be implemented. In this regard, the document often refers to comments on other measures; is ambiguous in communicating (“A specific website could be explored”, “The existing initiatives could be pursued further”, “Further tools could be explored” etc.); brushes off the responsibility (“The mechanisms at national and local level are a competence of the Member States”); or highlights the need for treaty change but without showing any willingness or readiness to do so.¹⁸

The European Council, during the meeting on 23-24 June 2022, once again reassured EU citizens that they would effectively follow up on the CoFoE final report proposals. On 20 September, the Council discussed the possibility of using qualified majority voting – instead of unanimity – on a case-by-case basis. However, in the end, the Council concluded that it would be better if they prioritized looking into those CoFoE proposals that did not require any treaty change (European Council n.d.).

On 7 December 2023, the Council published an updated assessment of the CoFoE proposals and measures. The document describes specific actions taken by the Council to follow-up on the Conference’s proposals related to the thematic area of ‘European Democracy’. Based on the report, the Council:

- Approved Conclusions on the protection and safety of journalists and media professionals;
- Approved Conclusions on the role of civic space in protecting and promoting fundamental rights in the EU;
- Together with the European Parliament, tentatively agreed on the key aspects of a new regulation concerning the transparency and targeting of political advertising;

¹⁷Measure: 23(5).

¹⁸For these statements, see European Council (2022).

- Arranged Citizens' Panels on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility (European Council 2023).

6.3 The European Commission

As for the **European Commission**, on 17 June 2022, they published a Communication that set out an assessment of specific steps that needed to be – and would be – taken in order to follow up on the Conference's proposals, highlighting lessons from the CoFoE and ways to embed citizens' participation into the European Union's policy and law making. The document annex offers four types of responses for *each* of the nine Conference topics:

- Actions that are consistent with the Conference proposals but have already been put forward by the European Commission;
- Proposed legislation that the European Parliament and/or Council would have to approve;
- Planned steps and legislation that would deliver on the CoFoE ideas;
- New initiatives or areas of work that were inspired by the Conference and fall within the competence of the European Commission (European Commission 2022c).

President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced the first round of new proposals already in her State of the Union speech on 14 September 2022. Stressing the significance of the CoFoE, she described it as “a sneak peek of a different kind of citizens' engagement, well beyond election day” (European Commission 2022a). von der Leyen also added that the Commission was already delivering on multiple proposals of the Conference, naming the Citizens' Panels and a new initiative on mental health as examples (European Commission 2022a).

The Communication published by the Commission on 10 October 2022 contains initiatives that follow up on the Conference proposals. With regard to 'European Democracy', according to the document, the Commission had already proposed a European Media Freedom Act; put forward proposals aimed at reinforcing the EP elections through rules on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations and on the electoral rights of mobile Europeans; proposed a European disability card; and expressed readiness to support the EP in connection with a new Electoral Law, as well as to find a common ground regarding the initiatives on combating violence against women and domestic violence and on pay transparency. The document also states that the Commission was planning to initiate a defence of democracy package; update the legislative framework to fight corruption; work on strengthening the transparency framework; and continue working on issues such as protection against discrimination, collaboration between consumer protection authorities, as well as between national data protection authorities (European Commission 2022b).

Based on the *European Commission follow-up to European Parliament requests 2022-2024*, the Commission arranged a conference in connection with 30 years of EU citizenship rights (November 2023), proposed specific measures to reinforce the EU citizens' rights (December 2023), and

published the Defence of Democracy Package (December 2023). In terms of citizen engagement, the Commission established a new set of Citizens' Panels and expressed willingness to enable them to provide suggestions in advance of specific important proposals. Additionally, the Commission renewed the 'Have Your Say' portal; and put forward new plans to enhance the performance of the European citizens' initiative (ECI). On the topic of encouraging youth involvement in democratic life, the Commission stated that the CoFoE proposals were fully in line with relevant proposals that were already being implemented, naming the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 as an example. Regarding the accessibility to and awareness about the EU, the Commission pointed to a Guide to EU membership which is a part of a Citizenship Package and contains comprehensive information on this topic. As for fostering citizen engagement digitally, the document states that "It is unclear to what extent the Commission kept its promise to explore ways to improve citizen engagement" (EPRS 2024, 2359).

All the abovementioned Commission initiatives have one thing in common – they are very specific and do not necessarily address the issue of representative disconnect. The 17 June Communication is a clear example of this. Having reviewed its section VII on European democracy, it is clear that most of the proposals that the Commission has already put forward, or requests the Parliament and/or the Council to adopt, or intends to propose, relate to broader aspects of the ecology (if so) rather than form part of the basic elements of reconnection. On the other hand, the proposals that fall under the category of "new areas of action" – in other words, the ones that might never be considered and/or implemented at all – relate to the issue of reconnect. These are the specific actions that hold the potential to reconnect citizens with the EU institutions and involve them in the decision-making processes. However, the implementation of these proposals would require treaty change and the Commission appears to be mute on the issue.¹⁹

This brief overview has shown that the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Commission had differing positions towards the CoFoE. Touching upon the issue of the Joint Presidency, Seubert (2024) highlights that there were apparent clashes between the three European institutions concerning the ultimate results of the Conference. The issue of treaty change was of particular importance in this regard. The CoFoE contained a very broad agenda and that can be expanded through additional proposals in the relatively open setting of the ordinary revision procedure (which assumes the convening of a Convention to form a proposal to be accepted by an Intergovernmental Conference where all the heads of state and government have the power of veto) and can therefore be inherently difficult to control. Fabbrini (2021) therefore considered the large agenda as a form of "watering down of the Conference's outcome", making the constitutional aim of the process abstract and the nature of its final output ambiguous.

6.4 Academic assessments – a brief overview

In his assessment of whether the CoFoE has advanced democracy in the EU, Markus Patberg (2024) starts by noting that the CoFoE was an "extraordinary opportunity" that led to antic-

¹⁹See European Commission (2022c).

ipation for treaty amendments and reforms within institutions as soon as it was announced. “Together with the democratic rhetoric that accompanied the initial stages of the process, this led to the hope that the CoFoE could provide an opening for citizens to reclaim constituent power at the EU level” (Patberg 2024, 412). However, over time it became evident that the EU’s constituted powers held sway over the final outcome of the Conference. Additionally, not all member states supported the idea of potential treaty change. Furthermore, the concept of ‘we, the people’ in the EU context – that is, whether the process would be guided by EU citizens, national citizens, or both – was not clearly formulated by the institutional setup of the Conference. As a result, “the whole process took on a somewhat diffuse character and never developed the kind of momentum that would have been necessary to result in an exercise of constituent power” (Patberg 2024, 412). Patberg then proceeds to evaluate the CoFoE as a means of introducing citizens’ forums into EU politics and usefully refers to James Bohman’s (2007) notion of the democratic minimum, and that such citizens’ forums should be evaluated on the basis of whether they contribute to establishing those conditions. In our view at the heart of the democratic minimum must be the core elements ensuring representative democracy; hence the entrenching of a democratic minimum must rely heavily on a strategy of reconnection in the EU context.

Alemanno (2021b) argues that the Conference was not about treaty change but rather about: “an attempt at rejuvenating representative democracy by creating mechanisms that are complementary – not antagonistic to nor aimed at replacing – representation” (Alemanno 2021b). In other words, the ultimate goal was to embed ‘ordinary’ citizens in the EU’s institutional architecture and day-to-day decision-making process. Further, Alemanno (2021b) asserts that the CoFoE participants were “statistically quite representative” of the EU population.

Seubert (2024) shares the abovementioned standpoint regarding the Conference’s purpose, claiming that Citizens’ Panels represented a “democratic innovation” that holds the potential to make the EU accessible as a political arena and thus enable citizens to become empowered as political actors and agents of change. Additionally, this initiative has shown that it could potentially accelerate the usual decision-making process in some cases (Abels et al. 2022). However, these tools “*prepare* but do not *substitute*”, and in order to bring about democratic transformation, it is necessary to find a way to connect citizen panels with the broader public, as well as incorporate the spontaneous self-organization of civil society (Seubert 2024).

García-Gutián and Bouza Garcia (2024) have mapped out specific criteria that one should keep in mind when evaluating the Conference. Using these criteria, the authors review three CoFoE elements – Digital platform (1), Citizen panels (2), and Conference plenary (3) – and assess whether the Conference managed to reach the general normative aims outlined in the final report. The paper posits that the CoFoE created a *limited* space for deliberations (Citizen panels), and that the debates were not as wide and inclusive as initially envisaged: “the content of most of the country reports is relatively poor regarding the impact on public opinions and a wider citizenship, and there is not clear connection with the activities at the national and sub-national levels” (García-Gutián and Bouza Garcia 2024, 12). Furthermore, it is challenging to measure whether the Conference contributed to boosting EU’s democratic legitimacy, or public support

for its objectives and values.

Focusing on the topics of climate and environment, Galende-Sánchez (2025) criticizes the Conference's deliberative process – its design, framing, and implementation – contending that the final proposals merely represented “a legitimacy tool” since they were in accordance with the EU's climate policies. The article argues that this was due to the depoliticization of the European Citizens' Panels, meaning that the discussion topics were very broad; the participants lacked information and were unable to connect to the political reality; and the Conference Plenary was marked by a noticeable imbalance of power between the citizens and their political representatives (Galende-Sánchez 2025).

Oleart (2023) writes that even though the Conference was “citizen-centred”, it still exhibited “more continuity than change”, failing to connect individual, localized (micro-level) citizen involvement with broader (macro-level) political decision-making processes. Steuer and Organ (2025) dive into the “value talk” aspect of the CoFoE, stating that there were two conflicting approaches adopted throughout the whole process – participants of European Citizens' Panels preferred “value holism”²⁰ while the design of the deliberations favoured “value reductionism”²¹. However, the authors believe that a more holistic approach would be necessary to foster participatory democracy and improve the EU's political legitimacy.

Crum (2024) usefully notes that EU constitutional reform “suffers from a post-functionalist dilemma: the options that are politically viable are not democratically legitimate and the options that are democratically legitimate are not politically viable” (Crum 2024, 392). To address this dilemma Crum discusses the issue of treaty change by outlining and comparing four modes of constitutional reform. He concludes that as long as the EU is in the grip of its member states, the Intergovernmental Conference will continue to serve as the EU's primary and indispensable venue, but efforts should be made to see how that can be complemented with instruments aimed at pre-committing member states and giving impetus to constitutional reforms.

7 Conclusion

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a significant initiative aimed at engaging citizens across Europe to discuss and propose reforms for the European Union. It successfully brought together ordinary people, policymakers, and stakeholders from various parts of Europe to address a wide range of topics, adopting an innovative approach – Multilingual Digital Platform paired with Citizen panels – to facilitate dialogue and idea-sharing. “The Conference has ... proven that when brought together citizens are willing and capable of taking part in a serious in-depth discussion about solutions for the most pressing policy problems that the EU is struggling with” (Abels et al. 2022, 34).

The CoFoE resulted in numerous citizen-led proposals, and the main question in the aftermath was how to effectively implement those proposals and integrate them into actual policymaking. Some of the criticisms we have cited refer to the conference's visibility, as well as its capacity to

²⁰Values complement each other and have to be discussed holistically within the broader system.

²¹Values are isolated from each other.

enforce real change, given existing political constraints within the EU. Additionally, ensuring that the voices were representative of the entire European demographic was an ongoing challenge. It is also noteworthy that the direct participation of the three EU institutions in the CoFoE process was important not only because they committed to take measures to follow up on the Conference's proposals but because their presence raised expectations that could subsequently be dashed (Fabbrini et al. 2021).

This paper has focused on analysing the CoFoE up against REDIRECT's two main strategies for dealing with representative disconnects, reconnection and redirection. We have found that the proposals that emanated from the CoFoE were directed at reforms that would do away with forms of representative disconnect, especially by strengthening the European Parliament within the EU institutional edifice, strengthen European party democracy, improve election procedures, and strengthen national parliamentary involvement. Reconnection proposals mainly revolved around the EU-level and the EP, but there were hints of strengthening the European parliamentary field, as well. Nevertheless, the CoFoE did not succeed in overcoming two sets of important challenges: i) the Council's rejection of treaty reform, which amounted to preventing the CoFoE from having any tangible effects on the EU's legal-institutional architecture; and ii) that the CoFoE must operate in a setting of incompletely institutionalized representative democracy.

The conference in its design and mode of operation represented an experiment and effort in redirection directed as it was at developing viable forms of citizen engagement outside the core representative system. The problem was that the EU's structural deficiencies, in institutional and policy substance terms (lack of proper EP fiscal clout) put the CoFoE in a particularly difficult spot. It is not a matter of considering citizens forums as supplements/complements to existing functioning representative democracy, when the latter is deficient, the question turns to how or to what extent efforts such as the CoFoE can make up for such shortfalls. Our position is in line with Patberg's assessment in the sense that citizens' forums can serve useful functions if or to the extent that they complement systems of full-fledged workable representative democracy. How far transnational exercises such as the CoFoE can serve to develop democratic minima requires more systematic attention.

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The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators: Reconnecting Strategy through the Institutionalisation of Citizens' Deliberation in the European Union

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Abstract:

A Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators (YCAP) has been set up in 2025, following a similar model to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Running from September 2025 to March 2026, this initiative brings together 100 young European citizens (aged 18–29) and includes both in-person meetings in Brussels and online sessions. The young Assembly members focus on addressing a key challenge related to environmental protection, i.e., pollinator conservation. The initiative specifically targets the younger generation to engage with this pressing environmental issue. The initiative constitutes a redirection strategy focusing on the institutionalisation of citizens' participation and consultations within the European Commission's political process. This report explores how the YCAP builds upon, departs from, or reinterprets the participatory model of the CoFoE. It focuses on the institutional positioning of YCAP within the EU governance framework and examines the presence of political will to sustain and legitimise such youth-focused, EU-led deliberative initiative.

Keywords: Conference on the Future of Europe, Democracy, Deliberation, European Union, Pollinator protection, Youth.

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1 Introduction

For more than two decades, there has been a widespread belief that, without greater involvement of citizens, the European Union is condemned to fail. The perceived democratic deficit of the EU – characterised by low voter turnout in European Parliament elections, declining trust in EU institutions, and a sense of disconnection between Brussels and Europeans – has prompted repeated calls for democratic renewal (Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Scharpf, 1999; Smismans, 2004). In light of persistent shortcomings in EU representative democracy, the last decade has witnessed new commitments in favour of participatory democracy, aimed at bridging the gap between EU institutions and citizens (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013; Fabbrini et al., 2021).

The history of citizen participation in the EU can be traced through several key developments. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) introduced the principle of openness to bring civil society closer to the decision-making process (Alemanno, 2014), while the Amsterdam Treaty (1997) emphasised the importance of transparency. The Treaty of Lisbon (2007) marked significant milestones by enshrining participatory democracy as a foundational principle in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which explicitly recognises the right of citizens to participate in the democratic life of the Union (Art. 11 TEU). The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), introduced in 2012, represented the first transnational instrument of participatory democracy, allowing one million citizens from at least seven Member States to call for the European Commission (EC) to propose legislation (Bouza García 2012). However, the ECI has faced criticism for its limited success rate and complex procedural requirements (Kaufmann, 2012; Organ, 2014).

More recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE, 2021-2022) marked an unprecedented experiment in EU-wide deliberative democracy, bringing together randomly selected citizens from all Member States to deliberate on the future direction of the European Union. As stated in the theoretical part of this report, the CoFoE constituted an important democratic and transnational experiment (Alemanno et al. 2021), even calling it an “experiment to the power three” (Alemanno and Nicolaïdis 2022, 3): The EU itself is a political experiment; deliberative forums constitute a form of political experiment; and the CoFoE represented an experiment in fashioning deliberative forums within the transnational and multilevel institutional setting of the EU. Building on the momentum of the CoFoE, the European Commission has since launched additional deliberative initiatives, including thematic Citizens' Panels addressing specific policy areas, notably, recently, Youth Policy Dialogues (starting December 2024 with follow-ups), digital technology through European Citizens' Panel on Virtual Worlds (February-April 2023) and the Citizen Panel on Artificial Intelligence (February-April 2024), a Debate on Intergenerational Fairness (February-November 2025), a Citizens' Panel on the EU Budget (March-May 2025), a Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators, as well as an upcoming European Citizens' Panel on Preparedness (European Commission 2025b; Petit & Oleart, 2026).

The participatory and deliberative formats developed after the CoFoE exemplify a redirection strategy that the REDIRECT project has implemented. In essence, the representative disconnect is seen as dysfunctional intermediation between citizens and institutions, the governance disconnect blurring clear accountability, and the affective disconnect relates to increasingly negative attitudes of citizens and elites towards democratic structures. To address this multi-layered

disconnect, two types of strategies are developed. Reconnection strategies are focusing on political parties and parliaments, and reconnection strategies are more innovative ways to engage citizens with political process through deliberation, consultation and participatory mechanisms. In this analysis, we assume that both CoFoE and YCAP has been examples of such redirection strategies. The key aim of these strategies is to improve democratic legitimacy in the European policymaking – specifically at the European Commission – by adding a consultative and participatory process involving citizens.

Against this evolving landscape of participatory mechanisms, this analysis examines the Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators (YCAP, September 2025-March 2026) as a recent innovation in EU citizen engagement, focusing both on youth and environmental issues. The analysis is guided by two central research questions: First, how is the YCAP situated within the EU's institutional architecture? How do political actors frame and legitimise the Assembly's role and expected impact? These questions are particularly pertinent given ongoing debates about establishing a permanent deliberative mechanism for citizen participation in the EU. All in all, the aim is to reflect on the redirection strategy enabled by the European institutions.

This report is structured as follows: It begins by discussing the evolution of citizens' participation in the EU and the development of deliberative democracy mechanisms at the supranational level, with a specific focus on the CoFoE. This is followed by a case study of the Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators, which serves as the empirical focus of this research. After a short note on the methodology, the report delves into a discussion based on observations of the YCAP process, and its implications for the future of deliberative democracy in the European Union.

2 Citizens' Participation and Deliberative Democracy in the EU

The evolution of citizen participation in the European Union reflects ongoing questions about EU democratic legitimacy. Since its creation, the EU has grappled with questions of democratic accountability and citizen involvement, with participatory mechanisms gradually expanding in response to persistent concerns about the Union's democratic deficit (Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

2.1 Historical Development

During the initial decades of European integration, the EU operated largely under what Lindberg and Scheingold (1970) considered as a "permissive consensus" – a tacit acceptance by citizens of elite-driven European integration, predicated on the delivery of economic prosperity and peace. Direct citizen participation was minimal, with democratic legitimacy channelled primarily through national governments in the Council and, following the first direct elections in 1979, through the European Parliament (Rittberger 2005). However, as integration deepened into areas more directly affecting citizens' daily lives, the gap between the EU and citizens became more apparent.

Seeking to remedy this, the Maastricht Treaty introduced provisions emphasising transparency and openness, including a declaration on public access to documents, and established EU cit-

izenship as a formal legal status, albeit one with limited participatory rights beyond voting in European and municipal elections (Bellamy 2009). At the same time, the early signs of the crisis of representative democracy facilitated the interest in and development of various participatory mechanism. Much of this was contextualised within EU democratic deficit debates.

With the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed efforts to enhance citizen participation. The Commission's White Paper on European Governance (2001) acknowledged the need for greater citizen involvement, promoting consultation mechanisms and dialogue with civil society organisations as means of improving legitimacy (European Commission 2001). Saurugger (2010) talked about a "participatory turn" in EU governance following the establishment of consultative bodies and the increasing official discourse on the need for civil society involvement in EU decision-making processes. The Lisbon Treaty (2009) represented the most significant institutional step towards recognising participatory democracy as a foundational principle of EU governance, as stated in Article 11 TEU. However, these initiatives primarily involved organised civil society rather than individual citizens, and critics argued they did not manage to increase public awareness of the EU and often served more to co-opt potential opposition than to genuinely democratise decision-making (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013)

Interestingly when it comes to citizens participation, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) (Article 11(4) TEU, operational since 2012) enables one million citizens from at least seven Member States to invite the Commission to propose legislation within its areas of competence. While representing an unprecedented transnational instrument of direct democracy, its impact proved disappointing. Of the numerous ECIs launched, only a handful met the demanding requirements for formal consideration, and even successful initiatives rarely resulted in legislative proposals (Kaufmann, 2012; Organ, 2014).

Parallel to these formal institutional developments, the 2010s witnessed growing interest in deliberative democracy as a means of revitalising democratic participation (Fishkin, 2018). These are referred to in REDIRECT project as redirection strategies. Deliberative forums – particularly "mini-publics" involving randomly selected citizens engaged in informed, facilitated discussion – emerged as innovative democratic instruments capable of generating legitimate public decision on complex policy issues at various governance levels (Smith, 2009). We can notably mention individual Member States, such Ireland with its Citizens' Assembly (2016-2018) on abortion or climate change, France's Citizens Convention for Climate (2018-2019), demonstrated the potential of deliberative bodies to address contentious political questions, notably related to climate (Farrel et al. 2019; Guiraudet et al. 2022). These national experiences influenced thinking within EU institutions about how deliberative methods might be scaled to the transnational level. We can mention the European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs) organised in 2018-2019, under the initiative of President Macron, even before the CoFoE (Butcher and Pronckutė 2019).

2.2 The Conference on the Future of Europe: A Deliberative Experiment

The Conference on the Future of Europe marked a specific exercise in the EU deliberative democracy, in the specific context of the “Debate on the future of Europe” (2015-2022) during which possible treaty reforms were discussed (Fabbrini et al. 2021; Góra et al. 2025).

The Conference on the Future of Europe concluded with both final recommendations for reform as well as hopes of future legislative changes or deliberative action. The Conference Plenary, supported by the other levels, presented a final report of 49 proposals and 326 detailed recommendations for EU reforms (Fabbrini 2024, 3). The key institutions of the EU promised to “examine swiftly how to follow up effectively on this report, each within the framework of their competences and in accordance with the Treaties” (European Commission 2022, 5). A feedback event was organised in December 2022, which focused on informing the participants of the Conference on how the institutions intend to address the final proposals (Romito 2023, 41). Examples of a push for major EU reforms include the European Parliament proposing a “Convention for the revision of the Treaties” (Fabbrini 2024, 10), nine member states initiating “a Group of Friends on qualified majority voting in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)”, an expert working group led by France and Germany (“The Group of Twelve”) (Bólya & Balogh 2023, 122), and inclusion of the proposals in the Commission’s work programme for 2023 (European Commission 2024). One of the recommendations from the citizens participating in the CoFoE was indeed to further deliberative democracy in the EU: “Holding Citizens’ assemblies periodically, on the basis of legally binding EU law. Participants must be selected randomly, with representativeness criteria, and participation should be incentivized. If needed, there will be support of experts so that assembly members have enough information for deliberation” (Proposal 36, Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022, 79).

The European Commission further integrated deliberative action into EU policymaking by announcing three new issue-specific citizen panels (Seubert 2024, 432). These “new generation Citizens’ Panels” initially focused on food waste, virtual worlds, and learning mobility abroad (European Commission 2024). While the panels of CoFoE were a joint effort of all the key EU institutions, these new generation panels were primarily led by the Commission and were intended to support the Commission’s Work Programme. The panels were each reduced to 150 randomly selected citizens, with two in-person sessions and one online session in between (Gjaldbak-Sverdrup et al. 2023, 10). The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators continues the pattern of new generation of Citizens’ Panels by utilising a deliberative format on a specific theme with a limited group of EU citizens in order to support EU policymaking (European Commission 2025d).

The CoFoE received mixed feedback, both politically as well as publicly. As already alluded to, the European Parliament was the most vocal supporter of reform following the Conference, whereas many EU member states were sceptical of any immediate major legislative changes (Fabbrini 2024, 11; Markowicz & Tosiek 2023, 175). Meanwhile, the CoFoE has been criticised that although it received positive feedback from the participating citizens (Jones et al. 2022, 74), it lacked broader visibility and media interest, failing to “generate excitement or a sense of collective endeavour” (High-Level Advisory Group 2022, 3), and being limited to the “usual

suspects” (Oleart 2023, 166).

A split reception also characterised the CoFoE and its follow-ups in the academic and expert fields, exemplified by the high regard for its innovation in combination with perceived methodological shortcomings. The European Citizen Panels were considered to be “a highly innovative experiment in deliberative democracy” due to their unprecedented EU-wide scale and high level of multilingualism (Jones et al. 2022, 3). Alemanno claimed that the CoFoE “marks the first explicit admission that they (citizens)—not the Member States or the EU institutions—are the EU’s ultimate source of authority and legitimacy” (2020, 508).

On the other hand, the CoFoE and its follow-ups also faced claims of being a form of “technocratic democratisation” due to the high levels of control by the Commission (Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al. 2023, 6), and a federalist bias in the selection of experts supporting the citizens (Bailly 2023, 23). The panels may have also been affected by self-selection bias, as “participants were either positive or indifferent towards the EU with no or very few examples of Eurosceptic attitudes” (Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al. 2023, 12). The broad themes and limited time allocated to the panels may have also negatively impacted the quality of deliberation (High-Level Advisory Group 2022, 6). Finally, the complex structure and policymaking may simply hold back deliberative action, such as the CoFoE, from having a significant and immediate effect on the functioning of the EU (Markowicz & Tosiek 2023, 161).

3 Case Study: The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators

The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators (YCAP) emerged as a targeted deliberative initiative within the broader framework of the European Commission’s commitment to participatory democracy following the Conference on the Future of Europe and ECPs (Tokarski 2024). Established under the auspices of the European Commission the YCAP was conceived as a pilot project aimed at engaging young Europeans in environmental policy-making while testing innovative formats for youth participation at the EU level (European Commission 2025b).

4 Methodological Remarks

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators, drawing on multiple data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the institutional positioning and political dynamics of this initiative.

The main research method consisted of participant observation of the YCAP. A researcher of the team attended the first (26-28 September 2025) and second (5-7 December 2025) Assembly sessions as an observer. This observational approach allowed for direct insight into the dynamics of deliberation (Emerson et al., 2011). Field notes were systematically recorded throughout the observation period, capturing both formal proceedings and informal interactions during breaks and activities.

To complement observational data, interviews were conducted with key actors involved in designing and implementing the YCAP. Interviewees included organisers responsible for concep-

tualising and overseeing the initiative. Formal interviews followed a pre-designed protocol exploring motivations for establishing the YCAP, expectations regarding its impact, challenges encountered during implementation, and perceptions of its success. Additionally, informal conversations with organisers and stakeholders provided contextual understanding and nuanced insights that supplemented formal interview data (Kaufmann 1996).

Several methodological limitations need yet to be acknowledged. As a single case study, findings have limited generalisability to other deliberative initiatives, though they offer rich insights into this particular experiment's dynamics and implications. The researcher's presence as an observer may have influenced participant behaviour to some degree, though efforts were made to maintain an unobtrusive presence, in accordance with the agreed Code of Conduct given to all observers of the YCAP by the EC. Additionally, access constraints meant that not all desired interviews could be conducted, and certain internal documents remained unavailable. Finally, as the YCAP is ongoing, measuring its success in terms of consensus found between assembly members or recommendations made has been impossible at this stage.

5 Analysis

5.1 Choice of Topic and Institutional Structure

The choice of pollinator conservation as the thematic focus of the YCAP was strategically significant. Pollinators – including bees, butterflies, hoverflies, moths, and other small animals – play a critical role in the functioning of the ecosystem, as well as for agricultural production, with approximately 80% of crops in Europe depending on animal pollination (Information Kit given to all Assembly members at the start of the first session, European Commission 2025d, 4).²² The dramatic decline in pollinator populations across Europe, driven by intensive agriculture, pesticide use, climate change, habitat loss, invasive species, and diseases, engenders significant ecological, economic and social implications regarding food security, biodiversity, and livelihoods (Ibid, 4).

While scientifically complex and politically important, the topic of pollinator protection was perceived by organisers as relatively non-polarising compared to other environmental issues. As one interviewee explained, the accessibility of the topic was central: “Of course, nobody is an expert from the citizens, but it’s a topic that everybody can get into because everybody sees bees and bumblebees and butterflies” (Interview 1). The tangible, visible nature of pollinators – particularly charismatic species like butterflies – provided an accessible entry point for deliberation that did not require specialised technical knowledge, enabling young participants to engage regardless of their educational background or prior familiarity with environmental policy. As a relatively non-divisive environmental issue, it was also anticipated that stakeholders across the political spectrum could in principle support pollinator protection, even if disagreements may emerge regarding specific policy instruments or resource allocation.

²²The information kit provides information regarding 1) pollinators in the EU, their role and conservation, 2) EU institutional architecture and decision-making process, 3) the role of the YCAP, and 4) practical information regarding YCAP.

Moreover, pollinator decline intersects with concerns about youth futures and rural-urban divide. The same interviewee noted the challenge of attracting young people to agricultural sectors: “We really need to attract young people for agriculture, and I can imagine it’s the same for other environmental related services. So, urbanisation is attractive for young people, but they’re not so many people going outside” (Interview 1). This observation highlights how the YCAP was positioned not only as a deliberative exercise but also as a potential mechanism for reconnecting youth with ecological issues and addressing generational disconnection from nature and food production systems.

It also functions as a means of bringing young citizens closer to the EU institutions themselves. With almost 60% of young people across the EU declaring that they trust the EU, this represents a foundation to be further consolidated, especially considering that 19% of them declare they are not interested in politics (European Commission 2025a). Furthermore, as was emphasised repeatedly during the first Assembly session, younger generations will be the ones to live with the long-term consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss; hence, they should have a meaningful say in nature protection policies. The focus on youth participation also aligns with broader European Commission priorities. Youth engagement has been identified as a strategic priority for the EU, reflected in initiatives such as the Youth Strategy (2019-2027), which emphasises the importance of engaging, connecting, and empowering young people in democratic life (EU youth strategy 2019).

Regarding the institutional structure, the YCAP’s implementation involves collaboration across EU institutional units and external partners. Multiple Directorates-General (DG) participated: DG for Environment (DG ENV) and the Joint Research Centre (DG JRC) are the primary institutional organisers of the Assembly, while DG for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) and DG for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) and for Communication (DG COMM) are supporting the YCAP in the intersection of pollinator protection with their specific topic. The DG for Translation (DGT) is also involved in the process to allow all participants full understanding in their native language. This highlights the linguistic complexity of transnational deliberation. External providers were tasked of the practical organisation and facilitation of the YCAP. We can also note the presence of an Advisory Committee, made of independent experts on citizen deliberation and biodiversity conservation, to oversee the YCAP process. Observers (internal, i.e., EU official, and external) are also allowed to follow the YCAP with a strict non-interference rule.

5.2 Mandate of the Assembly

From the start of the YCAP, participants were tasked with addressing two interconnected questions that framed the Assembly’s mandate:

1. What do we need to do today to reverse the decline of pollinators?
2. What role should young Europeans play in biodiversity governance to best support these actions?

The first question positions young citizens as policy advisors capable of formulating substantive

recommendations on a complex environmental challenge. The second question explicitly foregrounds youth agency and generational perspectives, asking participants not only to solve a policy problem but also to reflect on their own positioning within EU governance structures.

This meta-deliberative dimension – i.e., deliberating about deliberation itself – connects to the YCAP’s pilot nature: “As a pilot project, the Citizens’ Assembly will test the feasibility and value of a youth-led mini-public as part of EU biodiversity governance. The aim is to create a permanent process for youth participation” (Bürgerrat 2025). The organisers positioned the initiative as simultaneously addressing an immediate policy challenge (pollinator decline) and testing institutional innovations for ongoing youth participation. A defining feature of the YCAP was its explicit pilot character, designed to “test a replicable participatory format” (Missions Publiques 2025). Organisers articulated dual objectives: generating substantive policy recommendations on pollinators while simultaneously assessing “whether a permanent youth assembly on biodiversity is feasible. By evaluating the scheme and keeping young people at its centre, the organisers aim to distil lessons that could justify repeating the assembly in future” (Ibid.) This pilot-dimension of the YCAP was repeated to Assembly participants during the first working group session, as well as highlighted during the plenary with EC officials during the very first in-person session of the YCAP. This positions the YCAP within broader institutional debates about whether the post-CoFoE Citizens’ Panels should become permanent features of EU governance or remain ad hoc exercises.

To this end, the Assembly brings together 100 randomly selected young Europeans aged 18 to 29. The YCAP employed civic lottery (door-to-door) for the recruitment of participants, conducted by the Sortition Foundation in partnership with local organisations across all 27 Member States. This approach aims at ensuring that participants mirror the broader population’s diversity, i.e., descriptive representation taking into consideration, gender, age, education, occupation and rural-urban spectrum. Importantly, the selection criteria extended beyond standard demographic variables to include attitudinal dimensions. “The organisers took into consideration two attitudinal factors: attitude to the EU and to environmental issues” (Bürgerrat 2025).

5.3 Assembly Process

The YCAP is structured around three in-person sessions in Brussels, each with distinct objectives:

- 26–28 September 2025: First assembly session to explore the topic, learn, and set the direction of the YCAP
- 5–7 December 2025: Second assembly session to discuss options, reflect on challenges, and start working on recommendations
- 6–8 March 2026: Third assembly session to finalise recommendations

Observation of the first two sessions revealed a consistent organisational pattern designed to balance small-group deliberation with broader stakeholder engagement. The first day of each session involved primarily small group settings (groups of 10 or 25 people from different nationalities, always provided with translation into their own languages) focusing on delibera-

tion. The second day centred on plenary meetings (or sub-plenaries) with EU officials, experts, and key stakeholders. The final day of each session returned to smaller group settings to discuss insights gained from stakeholder meetings and to determine the way forward. During the first session, a fieldwork visit to a Brussels-based urban farming project was organised, providing participants with direct experiential engagement with pollinator-friendly practices. The sessions incorporated elements of co-design to enhance participatory engagement, though this approach proved somewhat static given the constant need for translation.

Between in-person sessions, Assembly members are encouraged to communicate via an online application providing direct AI-powered translation, enabling them to continue thinking and deliberating about the topic across linguistic boundaries. Furthermore, task forces were established to maintain momentum and encourage active participation of members beyond formal deliberative sessions. Task forces included: Communication task force (engagement with external audiences), Artistic task force (creative outputs), Evaluation/Monitoring task force (internal process assessment), and Follow-up task force (planning for post-Assembly impact). Participation in these task forces was encouraged but on a voluntary basis; participants were offered Open Badges to credential their involvement. This attempted to translate civic engagement into recognisable competencies, potentially valuable for young people seeking to demonstrate skills and experience in educational or professional contexts.

Furthermore, organisers set up a digital platform “for reflections, discussions, and supplementing the Assembly” (European Commission 2025c). This online platform was open to everyone, not only Assembly members, reflecting an ambition to connect the mini-public’s deliberations with broader publics. However, engagement remained limited, with 19 contributions as of 2 January 2026 (Ibid.). This illustrates persistent challenges in integrating online and offline participation – a tension observed throughout the Conference on the Future of Europe (García-Gutián & Bouza Garcia, 2024). While digital platforms promise to democratise participation by enabling broader publics to contribute, in practice they often struggle to attract sustained engagement or to meaningfully connect online input with formal deliberative processes.

The expected outcome of the YCAP is for young citizens to produce recommendations on the two questions mandated to them (i.e., pollinator protection and the future of youth participation in environmental policy). As stated during the first session, these recommendations will be considered by EU institutions, with European Commission representatives emphasising their commitment to ensuring this consideration. The Follow-up task force is also envisioned as a mechanism to ensure that these recommendations have tangible impact.

6 Concluding Thoughts

We can see a gradual evolution toward more citizen participation in the European Union as a response to its persistent democratic deficit, in a deliberative form. The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators represents the latest initiative in this trajectory, forming a redirection approach, with a clear political aim of establishing it as a permanent mechanism for youth participation in biodiversity governance.

The YCAP's focus on an environmental topic of critical importance for young generations reflects strategic thinking about involving those who will live with the long-term consequences of policy decisions today. The choice to begin with a relatively non-divisive issue – pollinator conservation – appears calculated to demonstrate that young citizens can engage productively with complex policy challenges, potentially strengthening the case for permanent youth assemblies.

However, this strategic choice also raises important questions about the YCAP's capacity to address more contentious aspects of environmental governance that inevitably arise when moving from abstract support for biodiversity to concrete policy implementation. The extent to which deliberation on a relatively consensual topic can translate into meaningful policy change in contexts characterized by competing interests and structural constraints remains a central tension in evaluating the initiative's significance. This echoes Petit and Olear's (2026) concerns about the "citizenwashing" at play in EU tech deliberative mini-publics: to what extent does this constitute true participation rather than a simple "performative role" (p. 14) for citizens designed to render EU policy more acceptable? This will become clearer in the coming months as EU institutions respond to the Assembly's recommendations. The ultimate test of the YCAP will be whether it represents genuine democratic citizen involvement or primarily symbolic engagement – a question that depends on institutional follow-up, policy implementation, and the extent to which young Europeans' voices are not only heard but also concretely acted upon.

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