HOW TO BETTER INCLUDE CITIZENS IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY?
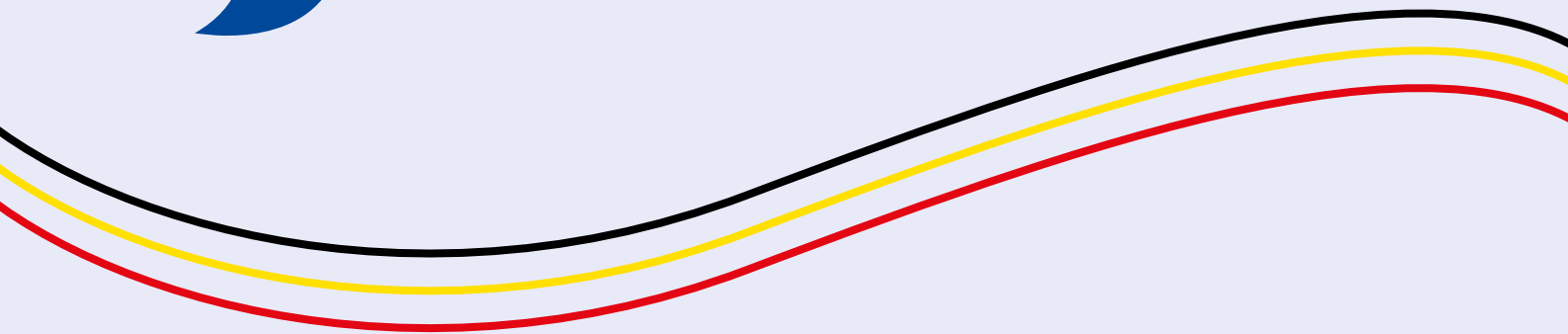
Belgian citizens' panel

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Conference on the Future of Europe

October – December 2021

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COLOPHON

INTRODUCTION

9 May 2021 marked the official launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe: a large-scale exercise initiated by the European Union, with one of the main objectives being to involve citizens more closely in defining the challenges facing the Union. At European level, this takes place through three means: a digital platform, citizens' panels and a plenary. First, the digital platform is the tool that is open for all: ideas can be exchanged and events shared. Second, four citizens' panels are organised, composed of 200 citizens who reflect the diversity of European society. The methodology used for these panels is in line with the Belgian panels discussed in this report and will therefore not be discussed separately. Finally, the Conference Plenary is composed of representatives of the various European institutions and ambassadors of the European citizens' panels. In addition, representatives of Member State governments and parliaments also sit in this assembly, as well as one citizen per Member State who represents the national initiatives. The plenary is responsible for formulating conclusions based on the input from the digital platform and the recommendations formulated by the citizens' panels and other initiatives taking place at European and national level.

To increase the involvement of citizens and Member States in the Conference process, the European Union invited all Member States to set up their own initiatives to make national contributions to the Conference. The various Belgian authorities responded positively to this request and several initiatives were set up. This report will deal with the federal contribution under the auspices of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign & European Affairs Sophie Wilmès: the organisation of a citizens' panel consisting of 50 Belgian citizens. Other federal ministers, the federated entities and civil society also made various contributions, which together form the Belgian contribution to the Conference. A separate, consolidated report will be published giving an overview of all initiatives under the umbrella of the Belgian contribution to the Conference, organised at federal level, by the federated entities and by civil society.

METHODOLOGY

The citizens' panels at federal level were organised over three weekends. The theme – the role of citizens in European democracy – was chosen by the minister from the topics that are part of the Conference on the Future of Europe (European democracy). It was subsequently narrowed down, in consultation with the scientific committee responsible for guiding the process, to the role of citizens in European democracy, in order to be able to develop a set of concrete and coherent recommendations within the time span of three weekends.

Scientific committee

A scientific committee was convened to guide the process, whose members are listed below. They were chosen for their relevant expertise with citizens' panels, their academic relationship with (participative/deliberative) democracy and their involvement with the G100 (which served as a model for the organisation of this panel).

- Dominik Hierlemann (Democracy and Participation in Europe, Bertelsmann Stiftung)
- Min Reuchamps (Professor of Political Science, UC Louvain)
- Ben Eersels (Coordinator, G1000)
- Yves Dejaeghere (Professor of Political Science, University of Antwerp)
- Soetkin Verhaegen (Assistant Professor of European Politics, Maastricht University)

Selection of participants

Based on best practices from deliberative democracy, the selection of the 50 participants was carried out with the goal of ensuring the greatest possible diversity according to five criteria:

- Age
- Sex
- Socio-economic background
- Rural/urban residency
- Language (Dutch/French)

iVOX, which has already selected citizens for similar panels, was hired by Glassroots to complete the citizen selection. iVOX has a database of 150 000 citizens, from which it selected a random group that meets the diversity criteria using stratification software. This group was sent an invitation to participate in the panel. Thanks to the experience of both iVOX and Glassroots, this form was designed to be as accessible as possible. Finally, iVOX made a longlist of the interested citizens and, following the demographic criteria, randomly selected the required number of citizens. These citizens were phoned to give them more information about the purpose, timing, set-up and details of the panel. Once 60 citizens had reacted positively, their details were given to Glassroots for participation in the panel.

Weighting/scoring of selection criteria; composition panel

Quota		Goal	Obtained	% Obtained
Gender	**Male**	50%	27	54%
	Female	50%	23	46%
Age	**18-30**	33%	15	30%
	31-45	33%	14	28%
	45+	33%	21	42%
Place of residence	**Rural**	50%	24	48%
	Urban	50%	26	52%
Language	**Dutch**	50%	25	50%
	French	50%	25	50%
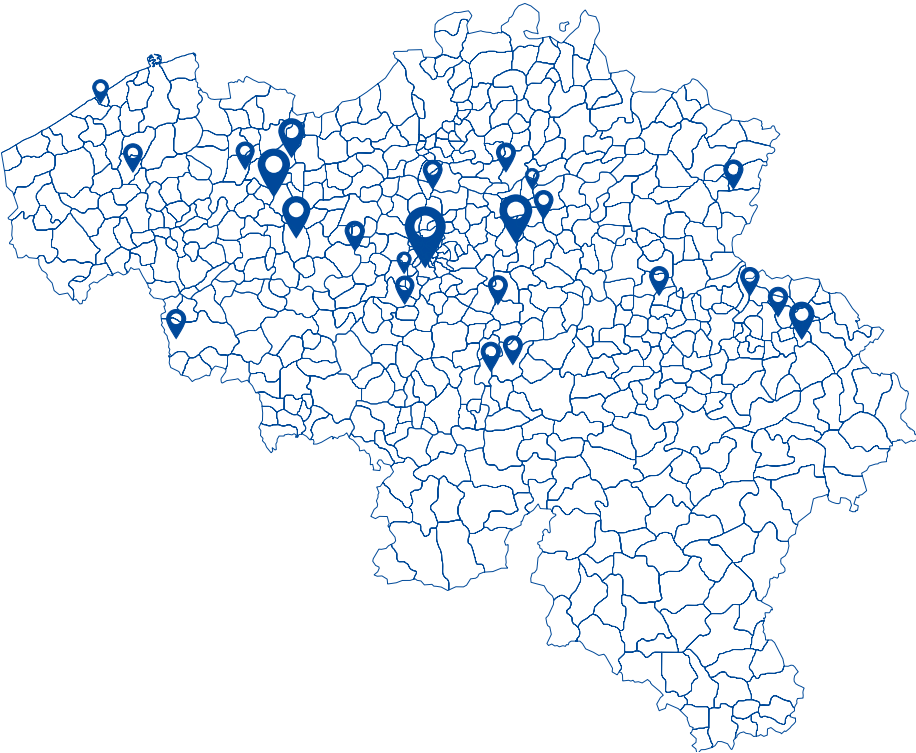
The process for the weekends

The deliberations took place over three weekends, in principle each three weeks apart. However, due to the deteriorating of public health conditions, the third session could not take place physically and had to be postponed for a fortnight so that it could be organised virtually.

During the first weekend (23-24 October 2021), the European Union and its democratic decision-making processes were explained by two journalists (to avoid politicizing the process): Rob Heirbaut from VRT (the Flemish national broadcaster) and Annick Capelle from RTBF (the Walloon national broadcaster). In addition, an expert, Maaike Geuens (Lecturer in Public Law and Governance at Tilburg University) was invited to explain the theme of deliberative and participative democracy. After these introductions, small working groups discussed the themes that they wished to deal with during the second weekend. Based on the scores that the citizens gave to the various proposals (see Annex 2), the topics with most support were subdivided into several sub-topics. Four subtopics (Improving communication about the EU; Detecting and countering disinformation and fake news about the EU; Citizens' panels as a participatory instrument; Referenda in European affairs) were deliberated during the second weekend. A final sub-topic (Reforming existing participatory instruments) was discussed during the final weekend.

At the beginning of the second weekend (13-14 November 2021), Peter Van Aelst (Professor of Political Science at the University of Antwerp) gave a presentation on political communication, disinformation and fake news. The theme of communication was extensively discussed during the first weekend's deliberations, and his expert input provided citizens with the necessary knowledge to formulate recommendations concerning these themes. The methodology for the second weekend was based on the work of the G1000: four rooms were planned, each working on one of the topics. The 50 citizens were divided into four groups and rotated among the different rooms. In this way, each group had the opportunity to contribute to the different topics. Each group visited each room once, before returning to the room they had started in to gain insights into how the other groups had developed the questions and recommendations they had started, and to formulate final recommendations. The recommendations on the different topics are therefore the result of a joint effort by the entire group.

During the third weekend (11-12 December 2021), citizens deliberated on the final topic (Reforming existing participatory instruments). Maaike Geuens again explained the existing instruments for participation and how they work. In addition, all recommendations from the second and third weekends were voted on, with the possibility of final amendments.

Plenary sessions were also organised throughout the three weekends, so that citizens were regularly updated on the progress of the other working groups and could give feedback on the process.

On the basis of guidelines from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Grassroots ensured the organisation of the work, both in terms of the general course of the process and the organisation and moderation of each of the three weekends. The Egmont Institute participated as an observer in the different phases and supported both the drafting of the recommendations and the editing of the report. The constant interaction between these three actors contributed to the successful completion of this initiative by facilitating the most faithful record of citizens' exchanges.

The result of this process can be found below, with the recommendations divided according to the subtopics within which they were formulated.

VISION OF EUROPE

"

Which goals do you want to see achieved in Europe in 2050?

SOCIETAL

- Peace in Europe
- European law enforceable in every member state
- Making lifelong learning possible
- Compulsory inclusion of Europe and its history in education
- Attention to animal welfare

POLITICS

- Leadership with vision and enthusiasm
- Respect of politicians for citizens and vice versa
- Voluntarism

SOCIAL

- Healthcare for everyone
- Poverty reduction
- Gender equality
- Inclusivity
- Europe as community
- Universal Basic Income
- Attention to mental health
- Work-life balance
- More collectvity and less individualism

TECHNOLOGICAL

- European counterparts for foreign technologies and platforms
- Fostering access to technology
- Protecting technology and data

COMMUNICATION

- All EU citizens master one extra EU language
- Technology as a facilitator between languages
- Clearer and simple communi-cation from the EU to citizens

ECONOMIC

- Combatting fraud
- One economic block across from Asia and the USA
- Independent production and supply chains
- Fostering develop-ment cooperation as a response to migration

ADMINISTRATION

- Simplification of administration
- Better accessibility of the administration
- Uniformity of administration throughout the EU: VAT, traffic signals…

5 SUB-TOPICS

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION OVER THE EU

How can we bring the EU closer to citizens? What and how to communicate? How can information about the EU be made more accessible? How to ensure the quality and objectivity of information? Which target groups should be targeted, and how can they be better reached?

DETECTING AND COUNTERING DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS ABOUT THE EU

How to measure the extent of disinformation and fake news? How can we protect ourselves from this? How to control the media most likely to spread disinformation or fake news?

CITIZENS' PANELS AS A PARTICIPATORY INSTRUMENT

How to ensure the representativity of citizens' panels? What are the right methods to organize these? For which subjects is it appropriate to use them?

REFERENDA IN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

How can we make referendum culture more positive? For which subjects should referenda be used? How to avoid misuse and manipulation? What conditions should the referendum meet if it is to be used at European level?

EXISTING PARTICIPATORY INSTRUMENTS

How can we improve the democratic effectiveness of elections, the European Ombudsman, public consultations, the European Citizens' Initiative and the right of petition?

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the whole process, the organisers were very careful to respect the opinions of the citizens. They did not try to influence them, for example by using institutional arguments or by suggesting that what was recommended might already exist, if only partially. Any redundancies may ultimately be explained by the fact that there is simply little to no knowledge of the European Union's action in a particular area. The fact that some proposals can only be implemented if the legal framework is adapted is an indication of the participants' level of expectation.

To reflect the full input of citizens, this report lists all recommendations, including those which did not receive a simple majority in the final vote. These are clearly identified by the percentage in **red and bold**.

Moreover, some of the recommendations contradict each other and were even divisive during the final discussions. These recommendations are provided in *italics*.

For one recommendation, the gap was so clear that an equal number of citizens voted for and against the proposal to introduce compulsory attendance in European elections. This is shown in **orange and bold**. The citizens express the fact that opinions were divided on these recommendations. They therefore recommend that the Conference bodies and the EU institutions be vigilant in the implementation of these recommendations, since the vote is split.

1. BETTER COMMUNICATION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION

In addition to recommendations that call for new policies, these recommendations also point to areas where the EU is already taking action. The choice to include these recommendations is therefore twofold: on the one hand, they express citizen support for continued action in these areas. On the other hand, they also demonstrate that the EU does not yet (always) reach the general public with the policies it pursues or the actions it takes. This is one of the reasons why the citizens also discussed the broad target groups present in society and the channels the EU could better use to reach them. The list of possible communication strategies is only exemplary and mainly aims to encourage the EU to be more 'citizen-centric' in communicating its activities, pointing out that the customer is the citizen.

Communication on the EU is not satisfactory.

	Recommendations	Supported by
1.1	We propose that lessons on the European Union be integrated into the school curriculum from the third cycle of primary school. The aim is to reach all citizens and to improve knowledge of the European Union.	88.4%
1.2	The European Union, and especially the Commission, should provide educational material on the functioning of Europe to the Ministries of Education of the Member States. In addition to explaining the functioning, composition and powers of the institutions, this training should also include a brief overview of the history of European integration. Particular attention should be paid to the use of clear, understandable and accessible language, as well as to educational tools such as documentaries, clips or school TV programmes, in all 24 languages.	95.0%

Issue 2:

The European project remains alien to citizens.

	Recommendations	Supported by
2.1	We propose that the European institutions ensure that their communication better explains what is within the EU's competences, but also what is not within its competences.	97.6%
2.2	The European Union should incorporate familiar examples from the daily lives of Europeans into its communication. These explanations should be spread within the Member States through agreements between the European institutions and national public television channels so as to reach a wide audience.	80.5%
2.3	In addition, nationals of all Member States should be regularly informed about the role of the European Union in the other Member States – through video clips, for example. The advantages and disadvantages of Europe would thereby be better put into perspective in the debates on the future of Europe.	85.7%

		Supported by
2.4	In order to strengthen European identity, we propose that information be made available and regularly communicated on what Europeans' life would be like without the EU and its concrete achievements.	92.7%
2.5	We also propose that Europe Day (9 May) be made a European public holiday for all EU citizens.	81.4%
2.6	We recommend that the European institutions pay even more attention to the simplification, comprehensibility, and accessibility of information on priority topics dealt with at European level.	97.6%
2.7	We recommend that the European Union provide a dashboard showing the resources allocated by the EU per country and priority topic. All this information should be available on the EU websites.	93.0%
2.8	We recommend that the EU provide a clear presentation of legislative work in progress. All this information should be available on the EU websites.	90.7%
2.9	We want the European institutions to be more accessible to Europeans. Their participation in debates during sessions of the European Parliament should be facilitated.	79.0%
2.10	We recommend that participation in the Erasmus programme be extended to all students regardless of their educational background (vocational and technical training, work-study). Everybody should be able to participate in European exchanges.	79.5%
2.11	We recommend that the working population should be able to benefit from European exchange programmes, regardless of sector of activity, also for local businesses. Everybody should be able to participate in European exchanges.	83.7%
2.12	We recommend creating European citizenship courses for all European citizens.	83.7%

Issue 3:
European legislation is not applied in the same way across Member States.

Recommendations	Supported by
3.1 We recommend that the European Union make more frequent use of legislation that is directly applicable in the Member States. This would reduce national differences in the implementation of European legislation, which undermines the European project. In this way, the EU will be better able to safeguard and promote the integrity of the achievements such as the internal market, the euro and the Schengen area.	81.4%

Issue 4:
European democracy is threatened.

Recommendations	Supported by
4.1 We recommend that communication from the EU on European democracy constantly and unambiguously recall what Europe means for Europeans.	78.0%
4.2 The values and principles of the EU-Treaties, to which the Member States subscribed on accession, are irreversible. Their protection must continue to be ensured.	81.0%
4.3 The protection of the values and principles of the Treaties is ensured by the European Court and cannot be called into questions by the Member States.	81.0%

Issue 5:
Information on the EU is not easily accessible and understandable.

Recommendations	Supported by
5.1 We recommend strengthening fact-checking on European issues. This information, disseminated and verified by the institutions, should be easily accessible to the European public and to the national media in each Member State.	83.3%

Issue 6:
National media often conveys a negative image of the EU.

Recommendations	Supported by
6.1 The EU must also be more present in the everyday lives of Europeans by communicating more proactively. (For example, by sponsoring events, particularly cultural events, which bring citizens together and make them proud to be EU citizens. The production of reports and teasers would also allow Europeans to have access to contextualised information on the EU).	85.7%

Issue 7:
Citizens do not know the people who represent them in the European Parliament.

Recommendations	Supported by
7.1 We recommend MEPs make themselves better known in their home countries, especially outside of election periods. They must be more accessible. The motivations for their votes in the European Parliament should be made more easily accessible to European citizens on the European Parliament's website.	92.7%
7.2 We recommend that national political parties ensure that younger candidates are also put on their lists for the elections of the European Parliament. Such a mandate should not be seen as a reward for good and loyal service in national politics.	74.4%

Issue 8:
Communication from the EU is too uniform; it does not take into account the diversity of the population.

	Recommendations	Supported by
8.1	To address a sufficiently broad and varied audience, we recommend that the EU takes into account the educational level of the target group and any disabilities they may have, by means of inclusive communication, from the design stage. Furthermore, we also recommend that people and organisations (street educators, neighbourhood agents, social workers, civil society) are involved in the transmission of this communication.	73.2%
8.2	To reach the working population, we recommend investing more in the use of existing communication channels to regularly provide appropriate information about the EU, for example through explanatory programmes. Furthermore, we recommend relying on ambassadors (both individuals and organisations) who promote the EU project.	83.7%
8.3	To reach young people and students, we recommend that, in addition to existing channels such as education and relevant youth movements, ambassadors should be used, in particular to target influencers who can reach young people through social media. Another recommendation would be to organise a pan-European competition to create a cartoon character that appeals to young people and brings European messages to them.	69.8%
8.4	For seniors, we recommend using the same channels as those proposed for the working population. In addition, we recommend finding the right balance between digital and non-digital communication (print, radio, face-to-face events) to meet the needs of everyone, including those who are less comfortable in a digital environment as well as those who are less mobile in society.	85.7%
8.5	We recommend that through the integration courses that already exist in many Member States, the EU should commit itself to including "new Europeans" (people who through one or another legal immigration procedure reside in the EU) and should make them aware of the other traditional channels through which the EU communicates. Finally, we also recommend that a role be given to local associations.	76.7%
8.6	Furthermore, we recommend taking the EU to the streets with inclusive communication. For example, (digital) billboards could be used, as well as traditional and new means of communication like QR codes.	62.8%
8.7	Other recommendations would be to make the EU more visual (through short films or infographics), the creation of a European sports movement to create a bond/sense of belonging, and to make the European anthem better known.	68.2%

2. DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS ABOUT EUROPE

From the beginning, the panel participants showed an acute awareness of the risks of disinformation and misinformation, especially in more technical areas or areas removed from the daily concerns of citizens. The importance but also the dangers of using social networks were emphasised in this context, even though traditional media are also far from being free from any risk. Discussions also focused on the need to strike a balance between control or even punishment on the one hand, and freedom of opinion and information on the other.

The risk of disinformation is increasingly present in the media.

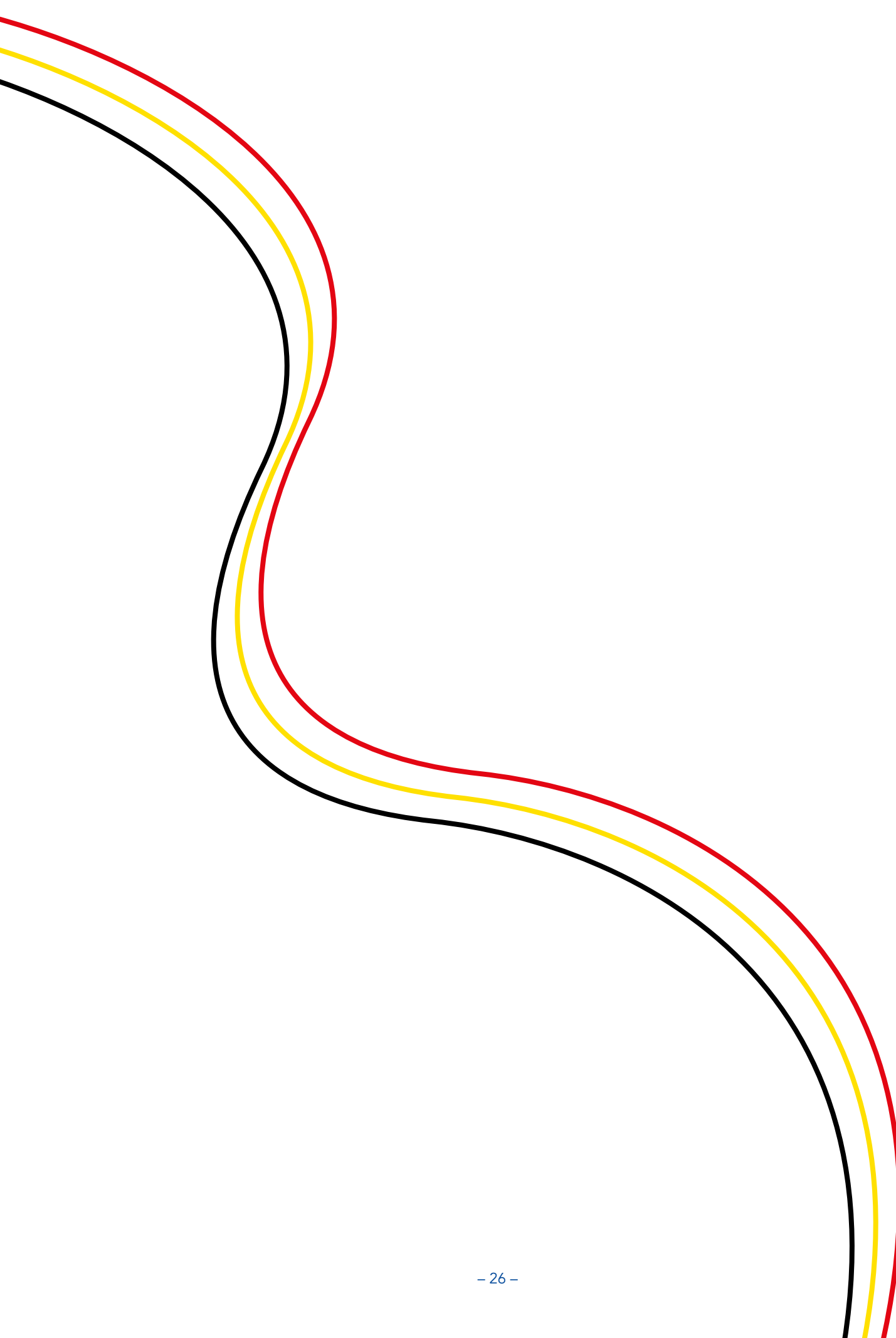|	Recommendations	Supported by
1.1	We recommend a review of the media funding model, including mandatory publication of revenue sources, in a clear and accessible way. The funding model of the media leads it to sensationalise information, taking it out of context and transforming it into disinformation.	73.8%
1.2	We recommend that media outlets be obliged to cite their sources and provide links to verify them. Otherwise, information should be labelled as unverified.	90.2%
1.3	We recommend that the European regulator in charge of the fight against disinformation (see point 2) should also be in charge of accrediting fact-checking organisations.	85.4%
1.4	We recommend the establishment of an independent authority in each Member State to monitor media neutrality. This authority should be financed and controlled by the European Union.	75.6%
1.5	We recommend disseminating information about the URLs of the official websites of the EU to reassure citizens about the origin of the information.	90.2%

Issue 2:

Many citizens doubt the neutrality of the media.

	Recommendations	Supported by
2.1	We recommend that a European regulator in charge of fighting disinformation be created. This regulator's mission would be to set the criteria for a 'neutrality label' and to establish, if necessary, a system of sanctions or incentives linked to compliance with neutrality standards. Alternatively, adherence to an ethical charter could be considered. The label would be granted by the independent national authority and would take into account the measures applied by the media to combat disinformation.	87.5%
2.2	We recommend the installation of a European 'hotline' allowing citizens to report any disinformation concerning European political and economic competences.	82.1%

Issue 3:

Citizens are not aware of the risks of disinformation to which they are exposed.

	Recommendations	Supported by
3.1	We recommend that platforms be required to publish clear and understandable information about the risks of disinformation to which their users are exposed. This information should be automatically communicated when an account is opened.	85.7%
3.2	We recommend mandatory media literacy training, starting at an early age and adapted to the different levels of the education system.	74.4%
3.3	We recommend that the European Union launch repeated campaigns on disinformation. These campaigns could be identified by a logo or a mascot. The EU could oblige social networks to relay them by broadcasting advertisements.	87.5%

Issue 4:
The means to fight disinformation are insufficient.

	Recommendations	Supported by
4.1	We recommend that clear and easy-to understand information be published about the algorithms organising the messages received by users of social media platforms.	83.3%
4.2	We recommend that users have a simple way to disable algorithms that reinforce behavioural biases. The obligation to provide users with access to other sources that present different views on the same topic could also be considered.	80.0%
4.3	We recommend that the European Union support the creation of a social media platform that meets its own standards of neutrality and tackles disinformation. Alternatively, new functionalities could be added to the multilingual digital platform created to support the Conference on the Future of Europe.	56.4%

3. CITIZENS' PANELS AS A PARTICIPATORY INSTRUMENT

The members of the citizens' panel note that there are insufficient instruments to involve citizens in the democratic life of the Union. They would like to make use of a well-known participatory instrument that is not currently used at European level (the referendum, see below) but a more recent tool (the citizens' panel) to involve citizens more in European democracy. This could make it possible to have debates on issues where political representatives have failed to reach decisions, and to give citizens a voice in issues that are important for European society.

Issue 1:
The difficulty of ensuring the representativeness of a citizens' panel. In the end, only a small part of the population is involved.

Recommendations	Supported by
1.1 We recommend following what the most recent scientific work on deliberative democracy suggests in terms of sampling, design and scientific validation of the selection method to ensure the best possible representativeness.	89.7%
1.2 We recommend that there be enough people around the table to ensure a diversity of opinions and profiles, including – but not limited to – people who are directly concerned with the topic.	90.2%
1.3 We recommend adding the criterion of parenthood (i.e. does the person have children or not?) to the governmental sampling criteria, in addition to more traditional criteria such as gender, age, place of residence or level of education.	**33.3%**
1.4 We recommend establishing quotas by geographical area, i.e. specifying that a European citizens' panel must be made up of x people per European geographical area (to be determined) in order for this panel to be truly qualified as European and to deliberate legitimately.	73.2%
1.5 We recommend using population registries (or their equivalent, depending on the country) as the main database for sortition to give everyone an equal opportunity to be selected, and to generate interest in a topic among the population.	70.0%

1.6 We recommend that participants be compensated to recognise the value of their investment and to attract people who would not participate if they were not compensated.	87.5%
1.7. a. We recommend informing participants in advance through presentations by experts - in a relatively minimal way without too much information or too much complicated information - to ensure that even those without prior knowledge feel comfortable participating in the discussions.	82.9%
b. We recommend that the theme of the citizens' panel be communicated in advance so that people know what topic they will be discussing.	78.6%
1.8 We recommend that citizens not be obliged to participate.	97.6%

Issue 2:
The difficulty of organising panels at European level.

Recommendations	Supported by
2.1 We recommend that the European citizens' panel meetings be held in a hybrid format (face-to-face/virtual). This would allow people who cannot physically travel to participate.	70.0%
2.2 We recommend that the EU, for greater ease of access and organisation, delegate the organisation of citizens' panels on European issues to the national level.	69.0%
2.3 We recommend that a single topic be chosen for each panel organised at the European level. This way, all participants can discuss the same topic, no matter where they come from in Europe.	80.5%

Issue 3:

Preventing the citizens' panel from being used for purposes other than those declared.

	Recommendations	Supported by
3.1	We recommend that any citizen should be able to submit a topic for discussion, and therefore that this right should not be reserved for politicians or lobbyists.	82.1%
3.2	We recommend that the right of initiative belong to the European Parliament, so that it defines the topic to be discussed and subsequently adopts the necessary texts to follow up on the recommendations that emerge from deliberations.	63.4%

Issue 4:

The difficulty in deciding how best to organise the process to best represent citizens.

	Recommendations	Supported by
4.1	*a. We recommend setting up one or more permanent European citizens' panel(s), which would take on specific tasks alongside Parliament. The panel(s) would be renewed regularly. This would make it possible to bring citizens together over the long term and to take the time necessary for such debates to take place. This time allows for nuanced debates and consensus-building. Alongside this permanent panel, ad hoc citizens' panels would debate topics chosen by the permanent panel. We propose following the model of the German-speaking community of Belgium.*	*54.8%*
	b. We recommend setting up one or more non-permanent European citizens' panel(s), which would only meet to discuss a specific topic for a set period of time.	*58.5%*
4.2	We recommend not organising European citizens' panels for urgent issues, as sufficient time is needed to ensure the quality of debates.	63.4%

Issue 5:

Too often, citizens who participate in participatory democracy initiatives such as citizens' panels do not receive feedback on the follow-up given to their work, in the short or the long term.

	Recommendations	Supported by
5.1	We recommend giving feedback to citizens on the follow-up given (or not given) to the recommendations issued after European citizens' panels. If the recommendations are not followed up, the relevant European institutions should give reasons for their decision (e.g. lack of competences). To this end, we recommend that regular summaries be drafted throughout the process following a panel.	97.5%

	Recommendations	Supported by
6.1	We recommend organising citizens' panels also with children from a young age (e.g. 10 to 16 years old) to raise their awareness of participation and debate. This can be organised in schools.	59.5%

4. REFERENDA IN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

	Recommendations	Supported by
0.1	We recommend that it should be possible to organise referenda at European level on European issues.	73.3%

Issue 1:
Referendum culture varies strongly from one Member State to another.

	Recommendations	Supported by
1.1	We recommend commissioning research on how to create a common referendum culture in Europe.	70.7%
1.2	We recommend that an independent panel examine whether it is appropriate to hold a European referendum on a specific issue.	77.5%

Issue 2:
The wording of the question asked in a referendum can have a negative impact, as can fact that the answer is only 'yes' or 'no', which often polarises debates and societies. The choice of subject is also sensitive.

	Recommendations	Supported by
2.1	We recommend the creation of a scientific committee that would be in charge of determining how to ask the questions that would be the subject of a European referendum in the most neutral way possible.	87.2%
2.2	We recommend asking multiple choice questions, going beyond the simple alternative of 'yes' or 'no' to provide nuance, even attaching conditions to both 'yes' and 'no' (i.e. 'yes if…', 'no if…').	65.0%

		Supported by
2.3	We recommend that blank votes not be included in the calculation of any majority, whether a simple or absolute majority. There must nonetheless be enough votes (the quorum must be respected).	75.0%
2.4	a. We recommend that a question asked in a European referendum can be on any subject within the competences of the European Union.	87.5%
	b. We recommend excluding subjects that could be a source of conflict between Member States.	**39.0%**
2.5	We recommend that technical and difficult questions can also be asked, worded clearly, because people have the capacity to be sufficiently informed.	77.5%

Issue 3:
Referenda are not a democratic tool if only the political sphere can decide to organise them.

	Recommendations	Supported by
3.1	We recommend that the European Parliament have the right of initiative to organise European referenda, and that it should then be able to implement the results (the European Commission and the Council should follow, without the possibility of blocking it).	67.5%
3.2	We recommend that the initiative to organise a referendum can also come from the citizens themselves (following, for example, similar rules as the European Citizens' Initiative).	77.5%
3.3	We recommend that the practical organisation of a European referendum be the responsibility of a neutral body.	75.0%

Issue 4:
The binding or non-binding nature of a referendum must be clearly defined.

	Recommendations	Supported by
4.1	a. We recommend that the result of a European referendum should only be binding if certain conditions are fulfilled in terms of rate of participation.	92.7%
	b. We recommend that the results of a referendum should only be binding if certain majorities are reached (51/49, 70/30). These conditions should be determined before each referendum.	72.5%
4.2	We recommend that the result of a European referendum should be binding if the initiative to organise it was taken by citizens (who would have managed to collect a certain number of signatures for this purpose) but non-binding if the initiative was taken by a political institution.	**47.5%**
4.3	We recommend that the result of a European referendum be binding only for certain issues, but not for those where the consequences of the vote could be very serious.	**40.0%**

Issue 5:
The public is often poorly informed before being asked to vote in a referendum. At the same time, it is important to control the information provided to avoid negative influences (domestic or foreign) on the vote.

	Recommendations	Supported by
5.1	We recommend that before any European referendum, the population be clearly informed on the impact of the result of the vote on their daily lives through pamphlets, as is done in Switzerland, and/or through information sessions.	97.5%
5.2	We recommend that a scientific committee be created for each European referendum to guarantee the neutrality of the information provided.	87.2%

Issue 6:
Although a referendum invites the whole population to directly participate (in contrast to a citizens' panel), there is always a certain proportion of people who do not vote.

	Recommendations	Supported by
6.1	a. We recommend that voting in a European referendum be mandatory.	**43.6%**
	b. We recommend that voting in a European referendum be voluntary.	52.5%
6.2	To reduce the number of non-voting people, we recommend allowing electronic voting in addition to paper voting (or even in addition to other means of voting, such as postal voting). Electronic voting is particularly interesting for people going on holiday, and it also encourages people who are less interested in voting because the constraint of travelling to the voting location is removed.	90.0%

Issue 7:
Too often, citizens who participate in participatory democracy initiatives such as referenda do not receive feedback on the follow-up given to their work, in the short or the long term.

	Recommendations	Supported by
7.1	We recommend giving feedback to citizens on the follow-up given (or not given) to the decision taken by citizens in a European referendum.	92.5%

5. EXISTING PARTICIPATORY INSTRUMENTS

The panel members note that the existing participatory instruments (elections, European Ombudsman, public consultations, European Citizens' Initiative and right of petition) are good tools that they would like to keep, but they need to be reformed. Some instruments are not sufficiently known, but they also see room for improvement in the accessibility of the instruments themselves, which is reflected in the recommendations below.

ELECTIONS

Issue 1:
Different rules exist between the different Member States.

Recommendations	Supported by
1.1 *We propose that voting be compulsory for the elections of the European Parliament, but with sufficient information for citizens to understand the reasons.*	**50.0%**
1.2 Our recommendation is to make the rules for elections of the European Parliament as uniform as possible in all countries, including the minimum age.	87.2%

Issue 2:
There is not sufficient diversity of MEPs in terms of age, origin or gender.

Recommendations	Supported by
2.1 a. We propose that MEPs should be of all ages and backgrounds.	82.1%
b. We propose that MEPs should deliberately choose a European career, and not just because they are at the end of their career.	82.5%
c. We propose to strive for balanced gender distribution, for example by alternating genders on the electoral lists. The EU must establish these criteria and respect them in the composition according to the quota. If a candidate refuses their mandate, the following candidate by preference and with the same gender takes over the mandate.	82.5%
d. We recommend that candidates on European lists exercise their mandate if elected.	89.2%

Issue 3:
Citizens vote for the European Parliament, but have no say in the composition of the European Commission.

Recommendations	Supported by
3.1 We propose that there should be a treaty change whereby the largest party group in the European Parliament can appoint the President of the European Commission.	**48.6%**
3.2 We recommend that the composition of the European Commission be made more transparent, according to some basic rules, so that the composition reflects citizens' voice and citizens know how the selection was made.	88.9%

Issue 4:
There is a lack of knowledge about the candidates for the European elections, both their program and the political group that they will be part of in the European Parliament.

Recommendations	Supported by
4.1 We propose that the European candidates should present themselves, their objectives and their programme in a more concrete way locally and through different channels of communication.	84.2%

EUROPEAN OMBUDSMAN

Issue 1:
The non-English webpage only contains information in English on the first two pages. This causes an obstacle to citizens who are not proficient in English.

Recommendations	Supported by
1.1 We propose to put information on the homepage in all European languages and, if translation is not possible, to post news in English elsewhere on the site.	89.2%

Issue 2:
The Ombudsman is not involved in the sanction and possible damages for the complainant.

Recommendations	Supported by
2.1 We propose that the Ombudsman should be part of the process of finding and implementing the solution, sanction or compensation, and should have a voice in the process.	71.1%

Issue 3:
The wait to validate registration to the website can be very high, up to 24 hours, discouraging citizens who may not continue further.

Recommendations	Supported by
3.1 We propose installing a system for immediate validation.	**47.4%**

Issue 4:
When a complaint is filed, the question is asked whether all possible procedures have been tried. The citizen does not know all of them and cannot respond to the question.

Recommendations	Supported by
4.1 We propose to include a link to a simple presentation or explanation of the other procedures.	89.5%

Issue 5:
The website of the Ombudsman is well made but does not have a proper European 'image', what raises questions with the citizen (am I in the right place, is this website credible?).

Recommendations	Supported by
5.1 We propose to revise the website's graphic design and to bring it more in line with that of the EU. A first tip would be to raise the European flag to the top of the page. It must be clear at the first "click" that the citizen is on the site of the Ombudsman.	78.4%

PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

Issue 1:

The consultation website has changed, and the citizen is sent in first instance to an outdated site. You have to search to find the URL of the new website.

Recommendations	Supported by
1.1 We propose to delete the old site and reference the new site first.	81.6%

Issue 2:

The roadmap and received submissions of a consultation are not translated into all EU languages but are in English and the original language of the submission, respectively.

Recommendations	Supported by
2.1 We strongly recommend that the roadmap be translated into the language of the citizen. Having the roadmap only available in English blocks any citizen who does not speak English from participating.	81.6%
2.2 We propose to put a tab or icon "Automatic translation" on each individual submission, which would link to an opensource translation engine such as Google Translate or DeepL.	65.8%

Issue 3:

The citizen has to register to receive follow-up information about the process.

Recommendations	Supported by
3.1 We propose to send the follow-up of the process automatically to every person who responds, with the possibility to unsubscribe.	89.5%

Issue 4:

We don't know whether the number of opinions influences the Commission, i.e. if they are weighted or not. If the number of opinions in one direction accumulates, we are worried that the voice of lobbyists/activists/large companies may outweigh that of citizens and NGOs in the consultation, and therefore in EU policy.

Recommendations	Supported by
4.1 We recommend providing clear information on the subject on the website.	81.6%
4.2 If the number of opinions in one direction has an impact, we recommend that a system is put in place to filter out lobbyists, activists or big business so that they are not given undue weight.	60.5%
4.3 We recommend the creation of artificial intelligence software that classifies the different opinions and counts the opposing or favourable opinions.	**47.4%**
4.4 We propose to organise meetings between citizens and (activist) associations: places where citizens can express their opinions, in the form of "Europe Houses" that can help spread citizens' views at European level. These should exist at different locations and at the local level.	62.2%

Issue 5:

The opinion form is unclear: there is both an open question and a questionnaire. What is the role of each document, what needs to be completed?

Recommendations	Supported by
5.1 This information should be clarified on the website.	81.6%

Issue 6:

There are too many levels of competences that are involved in the instruments.

Recommendations	Supported by
6.1 We propose the creation of a dispatching centre to direct requests to the appropriate level of authority.	78.9%

EUROPEAN CITIZENS' INITIATIVE

Issue 1:
Citizens without internet access are harder to reach.

	Recommendations	Supported by
1.1	We suggest that local authorities or libraries, which are independent of government, could be involved in the dissemination of initiatives and collection of signatures, both electronically and on paper. The EU should draw up an inventory of this network per country and make it available to the citizens starting the ECI.	71.1%

Issue 2:
The number of countries required to participate is too low to create sufficient support.

	Recommendations	Supported by
2.1	We propose to raise the number of countries from which signatures are collected to 13 in order to have more support for the proposal. The number of signatures should be respected in proportion to the number of inhabitants.	64.9%

Issue 3:
The cost and effort to gather the signatures is high.

	Recommendations	Supported by
3.1	We propose that there should be EU funding to support these initiatives.	71.1%
3.2	We propose that a body be set up to facilitate coordination between countries.	75.7%

Issue 4:
The procedure is complex for citizens.

	Recommendations	Supported by
4.1	We propose the creation of a helpdesk to assist citizens in completing the procedures.	83.8%

Issue 5:
It is unclear what the result of a citizens' initiative is.

	Recommendations	Supported by
5.1	We propose that the European Commission should be obliged to discuss and work on the follow-up to the proposal, not simply respond and acknowledge receipt. If the Commission decides to not act on the proposal, it must justify this.	100.0%
5.2	We propose to organise a citizens' consultation when a European Citizens' Initiative is received to ask for their opinion on it before the Commission follows it up. This would avoid having only extreme opinions or votes and include the opinion of people who did not sign the ECI. In addition, if all citizens give their opinion, the suggestion will have more weight at EU level and in its follow-up.	55.3%

RIGHT OF PETITION

Issue 1:
The European Commission takes the final decision, with no certainty on the outcome.

Recommendations	Supported by
1.1 We propose that the European Parliament's recommendation be followed up by the Commission.	81.1%

Issue 2:
There is a lack of transparency on the process and motivation for the decision.

Recommendations	Supported by
2.1 We propose that the person who submits the petition be kept informed about the progress and decisions at regular intervals. Reasons should also be given for the final conclusion.	94.4%

Issue 3:
It is hard for citizens to address the need for new legislation.

Recommendations	Supported by
3.1 Our recommendation is that a petition should also be used as a tool to demonstrate the need for new legislation.	78.4%

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Overview of participating staff

Glassroots is a consulting firm that facilitates change by engaging internal and external stakeholders and building ecosystems between companies and organisations. As a specialist in innovative democratic systems, Glassroots has practical experience in connecting citizens with policy through participatory democracy. Glassroots' clients are companies, governments, political parties, knowledge institutions and organisations. Glassroots is led by Cato Léonard, who is also the founder and gives keynote speeches on stakeholder engagement and citizen participation. In addition to strategic guidance for companies, governments, political parties and organisations, Glassroots offers the following services related to deliberative democracy: process design, methodology, sortition, implementation and moderation.

Staff:

- Cato Léonard – CEO
- Mieck Vos – Strategic advisor
- Sophie Devillers – Strategic advisor
- Ariane Molderez – Moderator
- An Van Damme – Moderator
- Arsenia Corcoba Santamaria – Moderator
- Rania Bounasser – Student employee
- Lauriane Cornu – Student employee
- Mélanie Atieh – Student employee
- Louise Nicolaï – Student employee
- Paul Toadar – Student employee

iVOX is an interactive research and marketing agency based in Leuven, Belgium. iVOX specialises in bridging the gap between research and marketing, brands and consumers, tools and goals, citizens and government, media and content, etc. The iVOX panel, Belgium's largest online panel with 150,000 members, is central to its operations. Every year, more than 1,000 surveys are carried out and responses from over 1 million Belgians are collected, analysed and used as input for communication, marketing and strategy development for more than 300 clients.

Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent think tank based in Brussels. Its interdisciplinary research is conducted in the spirit of total academic freedom. Based on the expertise of its own research fellows, as well as external Belgian and foreign specialists, it offers analysis and policy options that are intended to be as operational as possible.

Staff:

- Jean-Louis de Brouwer – Director European Affairs Programme
- François Roux – Senior Advisor
- Marcel Muraille – Research Fellow
- Guillaume Van der Loo – Research Fellow
- Francesca Colli – Associate Fellow
- Benjamin Bodson – Associate Fellow
- Ward Den Dooven – Research Trainee

MFA:

- Hendrik Van de Velde: Coordinator for the Conference on the Future of Europe
- Elvine Miala: Bernheim Attaché for the Belgian exercise for the Conference on the Future of Europe

Experts:

- Rob Heirbaut is a political journalist and Europe expert with the VRT news service. He follows the European Parliament, the Commission, the Council and European summits.
- Annick Capelle is a journalist and editor-in-chief of Pôle Europe at RTBF.
- Maaike Geuens is a lecturer and course coordinator at Tilburg University in the Public Law and Governance department. She completed her PhD focusing on the European Citizens' Initiative and its impact on the democratic functioning of the European Union in May 2021. She conducts research on European law and comparative constitutional law.
- Peter Van Aelst is Research Professor of Political Science at the University of Antwerp and founding member of the research group 'Media, Movements and Politics' (M2P). He is specialized in political communication.

Annex 2: Overview of scores for sub-topics

Sub-topic	Votes	Initial group
COMMUNICATION	**139**	
Why/Objective		
European leadership: build support for the EU	22	4
Raise interest of citizens in European questions	11	2
Make Europe more concrete for the citizen	22	4
Build a European "nationalism"	0	1
Citizenship and history in education: improve knowledge about the history of Europe with the goal of strengtheninging involvement and combat negative discourse	17	5
About		
European identity (our values, …)	9	3
Communication and popularisation (both on the EU participatory processes and on the functioning of the EU, and the role that citizens could play)	16	2
Education (for all, but mainly for youth): awareness-raising	38	4
Education	4	1
Communicate about what our state does in the EU and on all other Member States	0	2
Citizenship and history in education: improve knowledge about the history of Europe with the goal of strengthening involvement and combatting negative discourse		5
Access to information on the existing participatory processes	0	3

COMMUNICATION: HOW	122	
To whom?		
Communication and visibility of what the EU does, the involvement in Europe of different target groups: inclusivity, diversity and regional specificity: how to make Europe more understandable and by using which channels?	18	5
How/Channel and message		
Communication and visibility of what the EU does, the involvement in Europe of different target groups: inclusivity, diversity and regional specificity: how to make Europe more understandable and by using which channels?		5
Communication and popularisation (both on the EU participatory processes and on the functioning of the EU, and the role that citizens could play)	16	2
Proactive, clear and enthusiastic communication, including success stories	17	1
Improve the information flow from Europe to the citizen	6	1
More pedagogical communication from elected officials	0	2
European social network	0	1
Communication and media	0	3
Citizenship and history in education: improve knowledge on the history of Europe with the goal of strengthening involvement and combatting negative discourse	17	5
Transparency in the follow-up of processes: knowing who decides and what they decide	3	2
More transparency on the different processes	3	5
Education (for all, but mainly for youth): awareness-raising	38	4
Education	4	1

DISINFORMATION	49	
Disinformation, fake news, foreign interference	11	5
Information against disinformation	32	4
Prevention of disinformation	6	1
NEW INSTRUMENTS	**60**	
Citizens' panels		
Evaluate and make recommendations on different existing and proposed tools to involve citizens + recommendations on the different levels where they could be used: referenda, citizens' panels, permanent representation of citizens	17	5
Allow citizens to participate in the most urgent measures (eg recovery measures, creating expedited tools that favorize participation)		4
Give everyone the possibility to participate: all age groups, minorities, …		1
A continuous citizens' parliament organized on the regional level (cf Ost-Belgien)	3	1
Digital gap: how to close it to introduce online participation		2
Referenda		
Direct democracy	3	3
European referendum	11	2
Evaluate and make recommendations on different existing and proposed tools to involve citizens + recommendations on the different levels where they could be used: referenda, citizens' panels, permanent representation of citizens		5
Allow citizens to participate in the most urgent measures (eg recovery measures, creating expedited tools that favorize participation)	20	4

Give everyone the possibility to participate: all age groups, minorities, …	2	1
Allow European referenda	1	1
Digital gap: how to close it to introduce online participation	3	2
EXISTING TOOLS	**36**	
Elections: compulsory vote	4	2
Support citizens in participatory procedures: petitions, …	2	2
Simplify tools and make them more accessible for the citizens (including simplifying the EU institutions)	18	1
Digital gap: how to close it to introduce online participation	3	2
More democratic functioning of the European institutions	9	2
OTHER SUB-TOPICS		
Enlargement (new Member States): under what conditions	0	3
Stock and production (EU-organized/not dependent on other continents)	2	3
Economy	7	3
Social (Housing, poverty, …)	15	3
Climate and ecology	17	3
Education (recognition of degrees, content of educational programmes, …)	0	3