



Future of Democracy | 01.2022

## The Missing Piece: A Participation Infrastructure for EU Democracy

A resilient European democracy requires meaningful citizen participation. But the EU's participatory system is a patchwork of disconnected instruments. It is largely unknown and creates little impact. To give citizens a say and deepen democracy, the EU needs to develop a fully-fledged participation infrastructure. This should be one tangible result of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

**Europe has received a wake-up call: to preserve liberal democracy, the European Union (EU) and its member states must defend it against external and internal threats. The need to do so is not new: it has always been a necessity. But the war against Ukraine and its consequences for Europe's future political order make it even more imperative. Business as usual is no longer an option.**

**The Conference on the Future of Europe had already aimed to provide a novel impetus to the European integration process, with citizens participating in new and unprecedented ways. Major reforms and substantial policy changes in the EU will only be possible if they receive popular support across Europe. Already before the war, it was clear that Europe's massive digital and green transformation will only be possible if citizens support it. Now, an even greater political dimension has been added to this major transformation challenge. The EU will have to adapt its political**

**and institutional structures to the needs of the new era we live in.**

**This process can only succeed together with Europe's citizens. More and better citizen participation must not be a nice political add-on. It is an essential building block in a collective effort aiming to defend and develop democracy at the European level.**

**The EU already has many participation instruments at its disposal. But do they work? Except for the European elections, these instruments are hardly known and create little impact. They lack visibility, performance and political will. Four out of five Europeans want to have a bigger say in European politics, but only 15 per cent find it easy to participate in it. Therefore, the EU needs to move on from this participation patchwork towards a real participation infrastructure. Enhanced and extended possibilities of citizen participation are vital to strengthening EU democracy.**

## Citizen participation in the EU is a patchwork

It is fundamental for the EU, as for any democracy, that citizens feel they can participate in different ways in politics and policymaking. In fact, 78 percent of all citizens believe that they should have a bigger say in EU decision-making. Over the years, the EU has attempted to cater to this demand by putting in place a considerable number of participation opportunities for citizens. However, there still is a persistent image of the EU as a distant and complex institutional apparatus, where decisions are made behind closed doors. As a result, more than 54 percent of all citizens believe their voice does not count in the EU and 32 percent believe that their participation would not make a difference.

The Union wants to be (more) democratic and participatory. But if it is not perceived as such, it has a legitimacy problem. In fact, the EU's various participation instruments might function reasonably well on their own. But they do not add up to a visible and comprehensive participation infrastructure. In a participation infrastructure, many complementary instruments build a coherent system, and people should be able to know when and how to use which opportunity to participate. Unfortunately, as things stand, citizens are hardly aware of the existence of these instruments. In our eupinions survey, only 19 percent were, for example, able to identify the European Citizens' Initiative as an EU participation instrument. The actual impact of citizen participation on EU decision-making is often difficult to detect.

What we see in practice is a participation patchwork with many instruments but no overall coherent framework. EU institutions have no common strategy for well-defined, effective, and sustainable citizen participation. It is often unclear to citizens which instruments to use and for what purpose. Accordingly, 95 percent of all experts surveyed for this study believe that knowledge and usage of EU participation instruments is not sufficient. Learnings from one instrument are not used to improve other instruments or the overall participation infrastructure. The existing patchwork provides various participation opportunities, but it does not alter or positively affect a political process that is still driven mostly by elites. Thus, 83 percent of all experts surveyed for this study feel that EU institutions are not successful in facilitating participation. It might be convenient for policymakers to portray the EU as a Europe of the citizens, but citizens believe that the Union is pursuing a rather closed policymaking approach, from which they feel excluded.

## Seven EU participation instruments

**European Parliament elections** are the EU's most significant democratic instrument. Although voter turnout increased in 2019, it remains difficult for European citizens to see how elections make a real difference in the EU decision-making process.

**European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)** is an EU flagship participation instrument, allowing one million EU citizens to call on the European Commission to propose legislation. So far, it has lacked impact and often left organisers frustrated, but with an initiative called End the Cage Age, it seems to have produced its first true success story.

**Petitions to the European Parliament** are the Union's oldest participation instrument. They are relatively popular in a handful of EU countries, but the EP does not attribute a high priority to them.

**European Ombudsman** is an independent institution that investigates complaints against maladministration by EU bodies. It has increased the openness and accessibility of EU public administration, but still lacks wide public attention.

**Public consultations**, organised by the European Commission, invite citizens and stakeholders to provide feedback on policy proposals. Though the Commission is increasing efforts to make them more visible, participation is often dominated by organised interests, and impact often remains unclear.

**Citizens' Dialogues** are town-hall meetings organised by the Commission with Commissioners or EU officials. They offer citizens an opportunity to receive immediate feedback on their questions and ideas, but mainly cater to a pro-European audience, with little actual deliberation.

**European Citizens' Consultations** in 2018 featured an EU-wide online survey, a European citizens' panel, and events in the member states. They influenced the objectives and shape of the Conference on the Future of Europe but lacked concrete follow-up by decision makers.

Despite various shortcomings, the existing set of EU participation instruments is a solid foundation, as 54 percent of all experts surveyed agree that the right tools are in place. However, to make these instruments fit for purpose, the Union needs to construct a participation infrastructure. In this infrastructure, the individual instruments would not only work for themselves, but would collectively establish the basis for a functioning participatory EU democracy next to the representative dimension of European policymaking. Democratic accountability in the Union would not only mean elections every five years, but would provide citizens with enhanced opportunities to shape policy outcomes at the EU level.

FIGURE 1

In percent

## Citizens want to participate but face obstacles: results from an EU-wide survey

Four out of five Europeans want to have a bigger say in EU decision-making

Imagine you witness two people discussing European politics on the street. Whom would you rather agree with?

"The EU is complex. That is why EU decision-making should be left to experts and politicians."

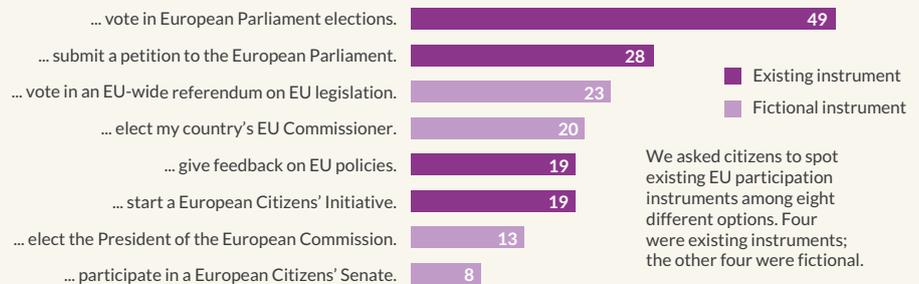
"The EU affects my daily life. That is why citizens should have a bigger say in EU decision-making."

22%

78%

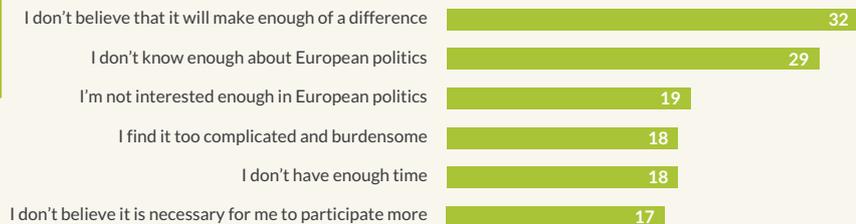
### Which of the following is true? EU citizens can ...

Citizens have a vague idea of their participation rights in the EU



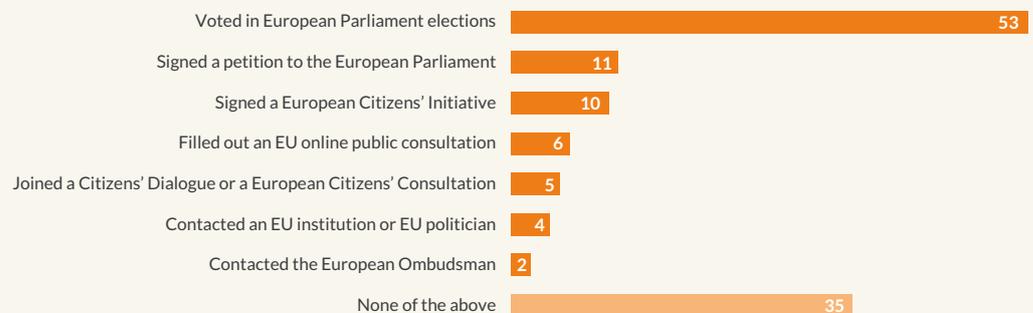
### What, if anything, is it that holds you back from participating more in European politics?

Lack of knowledge and belief in their power to make a difference prevent citizens from participating



### Which of the following, if any, have you ever done?

Most participation instruments are rarely used except for European elections



Note: Data from an EU-wide representative eupinions population survey.

Source: Hierlemann, Dominik, et al. (2022). Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh.

## The EU needs to bridge three gaps to create a participation infrastructure

Over the past decades, the Union has considerably expanded its participatory scope, adding new instruments and reforming existing ones. Today, citizens are offered various ways to participate in EU politics. However, no new instrument and no reform has led to the development of a visible, coherent, comprehensive, and effective participation infrastructure. This is mostly due to three major gaps that need to be addressed: the awareness gap, the performance gap, and the political commitment gap.

### (1) The awareness gap: The EU participation landscape is a terra incognita to most citizens

Citizens want to participate, but many feel that their voices do not count. They see it as difficult to take part in EU policymaking processes and they have little knowledge of opportunities to participate. This creates a gap between citizens' ambitions to participate effectively and their perception that there is little opportunity to do so.

Almost four out of five EU citizens want to have a bigger say in EU politics. They feel that European policymaking should not be left to politicians and experts alone. At the same time, only a minority (46 percent) believe that their voice counts in European politics. Citizens experience a discrepancy between their own desire to participate in EU politics and the unclear effect of their vote, their opinions, their insights, and their participation on the Union. Most citizens do not perceive the EU's participatory system as one that they can actively and effectively engage with.

The primary level of participation for citizens is neither the European nor the national but the local level. 46 percent of citizens believe that it is rather easy to participate in local politics, compared to 28 percent on the national level and 15 percent on the EU level. Our research found that this is not primarily

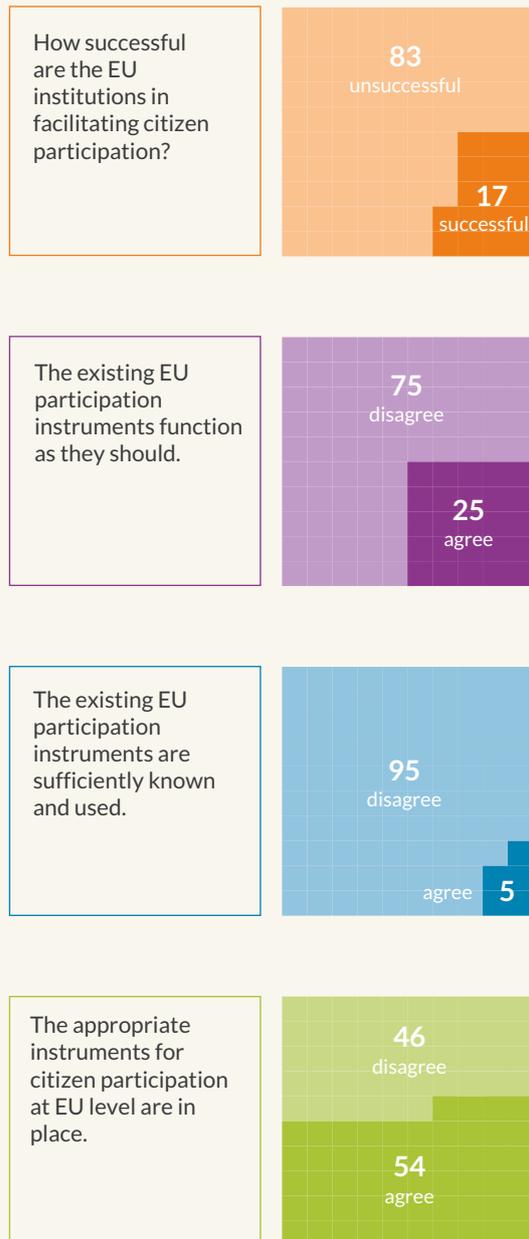
### Source:

This policy brief is based on the study "Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union", jointly conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the European Policy Centre. The study analyses seven EU participation instruments based on their own stated objectives and six criteria of good participation: visibility, accessibility, representativeness, deliberativeness, transnationality, and impact. It draws on four main data sources: interviews with 41 policy makers and experts, a survey among 59 EU democracy experts, a representative eupinions population survey, and relevant literature. Based on that, the study provides findings and recommendations on the EU's participatory system.

FIGURE 2

In percent

## European democracy experts: participation instruments do not live up to their potential



Note: Data from a survey among 59 EU democracy experts from all over Europe.

Source: Hierlemann, Dominik, et al. (2022). Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung. Gütersloh.

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due to EU participation instruments being difficult to use; they are simply not well-known among European citizens.

Our eupinions survey also shows that most citizens find it difficult to identify existing EU participation instruments, except for the one that is best known – the European Parliament elections. One of the reasons is that there is hardly any media coverage in the member states discussing the different avenues EU citizens can take to participate in European policymaking. It is also largely unclear to citizens what a given instrument does and when to use one instrument or another. As a result, the EU participation landscape is still terra incognita to many citizens.

## **(2) The performance gap: The potential of EU participation instruments is underutilised**

Our analysis reveals deficiencies, unrealised potential and room for improvement with respect to all of the existing participation instruments. They are relatively unrepresentative in terms of participation, catering mainly to a relatively narrow group of highly educated EU supporters. Most instruments exhibit little transnationality, taking place either on the local or national level, with little cross-border interaction. Citizens are often left in the dark as to what happens to their input. Equally important, the actual effect of participation instruments on EU policymaking remains low.

Unsurprising, then, that Europeans feel they have little ability to influence EU decisions. In this sense, the Conference on the Future of Europe presents an important step forward in an attempt to make the Union more participatory. In particular, the European Citizens' Panels involving randomly selected citizens from all over Europe are a test case of whether citizens' assemblies could serve as an inspiration for future efforts aiming to modernise and enhance the EU's participatory framework.

## **(3) The political commitment gap: Participation rhetoric does not translate into meaningful and effective political action**

Citizen participation in the EU lacks the political will it needs to succeed. There is a gap between the Union's rhetoric on participation and the action taken and resources invested to make citizens' voices count. There is no common understanding among European politicians and policymakers as to the importance of citizen participation beyond elections, or the process it should follow. As a result, communication efforts are often

mistakenly perceived as citizen participation.

For example, Citizens' Dialogues are often treated as PR exercises rather than tools of concrete dialogue between citizens and EU policymakers. This mindset makes it difficult to develop citizen participation instruments further by taking them from window dressing to real political influence in EU decision-making processes.

Political enthusiasm and institutional commitment for more citizen participation is still low. For example, the organisers of European Citizens' Initiatives have often been left dissatisfied by the responses they received from the Commission; the Petitions Committee in the European Parliament still suffers from a lack of interest; a real discussion about the 2018 European Citizens' Consultations and their results did not take place; most EU governments have been critical about the role, ambitions and possible outcomes of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The understanding and knowledge of existing participation instruments is not strong, even among political insiders, although more and more instruments have been created over time. Consequently, the push for more participation often comes from a small circle of participation enthusiasts within EU institutions and is not widely shared among the Union's broader political establishment.

## **Five recommendations towards an EU participation infrastructure**

### **(1) Cultural change requires more political will from Brussels and national capitals**

EU institutions and member states are yet to change their basic understanding of participation from a 'nice to have' to a structural feature of EU democracy. They need to overcome their hesitations or even fears if they want EU democracy to adapt to the demands and developments of our time. Enhancing the involvement of citizens will not undermine but rather modernise and strengthen the foundations of representative democracy. The results of our survey clearly show that citizens want to be more involved in European policymaking, and EU institutions and member states should respond to their call.

While many politicians in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe talk about the need for new forms of participation, there still seems to be very little concrete appreciation and knowledge among national and European policymakers about their potential added

value or how these formats can work in practice. No one can expect this to change overnight. But to strengthen individual participation instruments and the participation infrastructure, more political leadership and buy-in is needed in the EU institutions and at the national level.

## (2) EU institutions and member states need to elaborate and agree on a common strategy.

A common strategy demands that EU institutions and member states discuss and develop a shared vision and a shared understanding of the meaning, purpose and benefits of the Union's participation infrastructure. What are the main objectives of individual participation instruments and what purpose should the overall participation infrastructure fulfil? How do the instruments function together and how can they benefit from one another? What kind of positive change is being envisioned and how does it relate to the future interplay between representative and participatory democracy at the EU level?

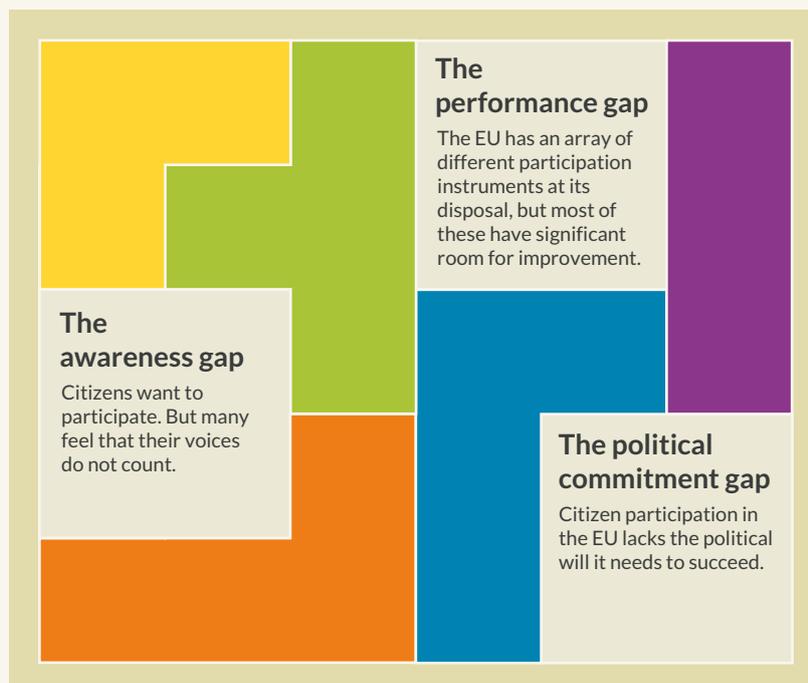
The key criteria of good participation in the EU – visibility, accessibility, representativeness, trans-nationality, deliberativeness, and impact – should be the foundation of an EU participation infrastructure, and all need to be reflected in a comprehensive EU participation strategy. While not all participation instruments need to maximise all criteria by design, each of them should be acknowledged and collectively enhanced in a comprehensive participatory system.

## (3) EU citizen participation needs more visibility and exposure

The best infrastructure is not worth much if citizens are not aware of it. The EU thus needs a joint communication effort to make the participation infrastructure visible to the wider public. It should not only be the 'usual suspects' who know about opportunities to participate and influence the EU; citizens from all over Europe need to know more about how they can get involved in European policymaking.

FIGURE 3

To develop a visible, coherent, comprehensive, and effective participation infrastructure, the EU needs to address **three gaps** in its current participatory system.



Source: Hierlemann, Dominik, et al. (2022). Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung. Gütersloh.

Our opinions survey data clearly show that citizens currently only have a vague idea about their participation rights. And 95 percent of the democracy experts we surveyed do not believe that the current EU participation instruments are sufficiently known or used. Increasing knowledge about the instruments and their visibility demands political will at the European and national level and sufficient resources to make citizens aware of the instruments they have at their disposal. An effective participation strategy thus requires an effective communication strategy.

#### **(4) An EU participation infrastructure requires a central online hub for all participation instruments**

The overwhelming majority of citizens in Europe do not know where to go in order to participate in European policymaking processes. Therefore, a participation infrastructure needs a central entry point, including a user-friendly website enabling citizens to explore their participation opportunities at the EU level.

It should draw on existing experiences at the European level, particularly with the [Have your say](#) portal, as well as the [digital multilingual platform](#) of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It should also draw inspiration from tested and proven hubs in individual EU member states. One good example at the national level is the Finnish platform [demokratia.fi](#).

The EU hub for participation needs to fulfil four basic functions:

- a) coherence building: to organise all participation instruments under a central logic, with the role and added value of each instrument clearly shown.
- b) networking: citizens should be able to engage with each other and with the platform in any language through automated translation, to share their experiences with the instruments and ask for support to be guided to the relevant tool.
- c) effective communication: through a central hub, the EU would have a better chance of communicating about participation opportunities and the instruments in a more coherent fashion than it currently does, with different instruments being communicated through different channels and different institutions.

d) civic education: the hub would be able to demonstrate the vibrancy and the functioning of European democracy in an accessible format.

#### **(5) Modern citizen participation needs stronger digital components and new participation formats**

Digital participation can enhance the visibility and effectiveness of existing instruments by bringing them to new audiences. Petitions and European Citizens' Initiatives, for example, could gain the support of larger numbers of citizens more quickly through targeted social media campaigns, while organisers could coordinate online wherever they live and operate in the EU. The recent boom in video conferencing triggered by the Corona pandemic and experiences with the Conference on the Future of Europe have shown that transnational exchange in different languages is increasingly feasible.

However, simply providing digital participation formats does not suffice. There must be an added value in the digital mix for every citizen: something for those who want to deal intensively with a subject and contribute with their personal expertise, as well as for those who want a quick way to feed their opinion into a discussion process.

At the same time, the increased use of new formats, such as citizens' assemblies, can show a way forward in making citizen participation in the EU more representative, transnational, and deliberative. Such initiatives have been tested in many parts of Europe, as well as in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe. These experiments at the national and European level can help to further improve and extend the EU's current participation toolbox.

The debate on the possible institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies at the EU level has only just begun in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The addition of new instruments to the EU's participation toolbox could pave the way towards making citizen participation more transnational, representative, and deliberative. However, we need to ask how the establishment of new instruments would be linked to existing instruments and what impact they would have on the EU's overall participation infrastructure. Most importantly, it must be clear who will have the authority to initiate these processes, and who will be accountable for the results that citizens jointly produce.

## Moving beyond the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe has demonstrated both the necessity of creating a participatory infrastructure, and the systemic problems that persist in the Union's participatory system. It has shown that 800 randomly selected citizens from all over the continent can work together in European Citizens' Panels to deliberate on policy priorities for Europe's future.

At the same time, the Conference reinforced the existence of participation gaps in the EU and the need to bridge them. Visibility, effectiveness, transnationality, and political commitment was far too often lacking throughout the process. Despite these flaws and [while the final effects of the Conference on EU policymaking are unclear](#), the experiment of adding participatory democracy to the Union's representative set-up has indicated what is possible if EU institutions and member states join forces and are willing to develop EU democracy further.

Participatory democracy is here to stay. EU institutions and national governments can ill afford only to pay lip service to democratic participatory processes. A functioning participatory infrastructure must ensure that existing instruments thrive and live up to their potential. At the same time, new spaces should be created where citizens can inject their opinions, ideas and recommendations into the Union's day-to-day policymaking, while ensuring that the outcomes of

citizens' deliberations find their way into actual policy practice.

The Union must understand that citizen participation cannot be a chain of one-off processes. Reflecting the lessons from the Conference and taking up [recommendations from one of the European Citizens' Panels](#) calling for a higher level of citizen participation in EU policymaking, the Union should incorporate novel participatory elements. Many feasible options and innovations are already [on the table](#) – they must now be implemented as one major tangible result of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Efforts aiming to develop a fully-fledged participation infrastructure will only succeed if EU institutions and member states will actively support a gradual evolution in the Union's democratic culture. EU countries need to be convinced that the future of EU democracy depends on the ability of the Union to enhance and extend the possibilities for more effective and continuous participation by European citizens in EU policymaking. Governments should thus endorse and actively promote the process of moving democracy to another level by adding new elements to the Union's citizen participation toolbox as complementary add-ons to the representative dimension of EU democracy. This is a fundamental task aiming to strengthen liberal democracy, and the EU27 cannot afford to fail to meet this objective, given the new era in which we live in.

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### Further reading:

Hierlemann, Dominik, et al. (2022). Under Construction: Citizen Participation in the European Union. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung. Gütersloh.

Emmanouilidis, Janis A., et al. (2022). "Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?". High-Level Advisory Group Report.

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#### A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Democracy and Social Cohesion" program deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, and the sustainability of democratic politics, as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizen participation. It is published 6–8 times per year on an unfixed basis.