



The moderator **Christian Huesmann** (Bertelsmann Stiftung) explained that the aim of the panel was to widen the view on how the EU participatory infrastructure is evolving and engaging EU citizens. In this regard, the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is one of the milestones of the process: but what does this evolution mean for the ECI? Mr Huesmann opened the floor to speakers for their opening statements on the matter.

Bruno Kaufmann, Global Democracy Correspondent at the Swiss Broadcasting Company and author of the "[European Democracy Passport](#)", pointed out that the very idea of the EU as a transnational political union where citizens are in charge, is now 30 years old. The ECI is a child born of this development, with a long gestation period during the 1990s. The establishment of EU citizenship needed to be complemented with tools and rights. The European Parliament (EP) elections were a classical form of delegating votes to others, but in the EU, the idea of active citizenship was getting stronger. There were different processes and movements in the 1990s influencing the Amsterdam Treaty negotiations to develop the initial idea of the ECI. The Internet did not yet exist, so there were concerns as to whether its use was feasible. At the beginning of the 2000s, after the long pregnancy, there was a long birth process for the ECI: it was a paradigm shift for EU citizens to have the same right as the EP to propose legislation. Also having the ECI as a digital and transnational tool was a huge novelty, which did not exist in other places. After this long birth process, in 2009, the ECI was inserted into the Lisbon Treaty and the procedure started in 2012. Since then, the ECI has had a short baby phase: in its first five years of life, it had quite a hard start because there was little support infrastructure for it. However, there was already the idea of revising the ECI and making it more efficient, so after just five years, the ECI became a teenager. A bit of an angry teenager at the beginning, but now it is growing in maturity. The big challenge now is helping this teenager to reach legal age, which means making the ECI as powerful as the EP's legislative initiative right with regard to the European Commission – also involving the right to propose Treaty changes, for instance. The ECI cannot be limited to being just an agenda-

setter for the EU: it has to become a decision-maker. The CoFoE is a very interesting case in point; to help the ECI become a tool EU citizens can be very proud of.

Dolors Montserrat, MEP and Chair of the EP Committee on Petitions, highlighted the importance of the active participation of citizens in shaping and reinforcing EU democracy. EU democracy should function in two directions: top-down, from the institutions to the citizens, but also bottom-up, so that citizens can bring their particular requests to the institutions. The ECI is a great example of this bottom-up direction. The interesting aspect of the ECI is its community approach: an initiative must be presented by a citizens' committee, which consists of at least seven EU citizens who must live in at least seven different EU countries and must be old enough to vote in EP elections. This is a unique format and it helps shape EU identity and cross-border interaction and participation. Ms Montserrat saw this as a counterbalance to the EP's Committee on Petitions, which is also open to individual petitions. EU citizens are most likely to petition the EP in the areas of the environment, animal welfare, fundamental rights and justice. The subjects of some petitions often go hand in hand with those of ECIs, sometimes anticipating the launch of a specific initiative: for example, a petition for legislation on the cross-border transport of animals led to the launch of the successful ECI *End the Cage Age*. Nonetheless, Ms Montserrat shared some concerns: the European Commission should perhaps step up its efforts to study ECIs when the European Parliament has voted on a resolution on the ECI.

Mr Huesmann thanked the speakers for those first insightful assessments on the ECI, which set the stage for the **first Slido poll** of the session. The question put to participants was "In the light of the participatory wave we are now experiencing, will the role and the significance of the ECI change in the future?" and there were four possible answers:

- "Lifted by the wave: the role and the significance of the ECI will grow." (56%);
- "The future is uncertain and I am too." (28%);
- "A one-of-a-kind instrument: the role and the significance will stay the same" (17%);
- "Buried under the wave: the ECI will likely be diminished" (0%).

Mr Huesmann found that the poll had shown a very positive outlook, although some participants were somewhat uncertain. He then gave the floor to the next speaker in the session, asking him to elaborate on the kind of participatory innovations the EU will need in the future.

Karl-Heinz Lambertz, member and former president of the European Committee of the Regions and president of the Parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium, pointed out that the EU project can only achieve success if it puts its citizens at the heart of all the steps it takes. It was an obvious statement, in Mr Lambertz's view, but one unfortunately not reflected in reality. The ECI has been an important element and has awakened hopes in people, so it is a shame to disappoint them. As one of the organisers of the ECI *Minority Safepack*, Mr Lambertz thought there was an awfully long road yet to be travelled before the way ECIs are dealt with becomes a way to promote the European idea. The reaction of the European Commission was an example of its reluctance to question its monopoly on taking legislative initiatives. In the case of *Minority Safepack*, the organisers had

had to go to the European Court of Justice to allow for the admissibility of the ECI. Mr Lambertz recalled that, once the initiative had achieved one million signatures in various countries, it had a really positive reaction from the EP, while the Commission explained with a very technocratic and hefty document why the ECI's proposals had already been achieved and why the Commission could not change anything. There is plenty of room for new ECIs, but if they don't lead to results, then it really is counterproductive. Mr Lambertz also suggested that the CoFoE should take seriously the conclusions from the various citizens' discussions, to ensure there is some echo in the EU. He remained convinced that things could change and that there is a need for permanent dialogue at all levels.

Mr Huesmann thanked Mr Lambertz for his strong call for action so as not to disappoint EU citizens' expectations for participatory action. He then gave the floor to Maaïke Geuens, lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and researcher in participatory democracy, asking her what might be the best and the worst-case scenario for the ECI ten years from now.

Ms Geuens replied that the best thing that could happen to the ECI is for it to truly become an instrument that EU citizens want to use, but also an instrument that EU institutions will look to in order to see what is going on within the population and to take action. According to Ms Geuens, it was especially important to realise that the ECI is not merely something to set the agenda of EU institutions, but is also something to be used to create an EU-wide debate, consciousness and awareness. To move beyond what the ECI is today, we need to improve the responsiveness of the EU institutions drastically: some steps have already been taken but, especially with regard to the Commission, a lot more can be done. Looking at the different requirements in the Regulation and in the Treaty, Ms Geuens believed that a lot of ECI organisers and supporters are disappointed when they look at what they have to do and the possible outcome of their action. In order to ensure that interested and confident EU citizens use the instrument ten years from now, the EU needs to focus on two aspects: educating EU citizens and the political will of the EU institutions.

Mr Huesmann introduced the **second Slido poll** of the session: "Will the CoFoE contribute to a better participatory infrastructure on the European level?", giving the participants four possible answers:

- "Good intentions, but uncertain outcome: I am still sceptical." (56%);
- "The CoFoE is a good start but needs to be supported by additional measures." (38%);
- "I don't think the CoFoE will improve citizens' participation on the European level at all." (6%);
- "The CoFoE will definitely lead to more sophisticated participatory infrastructure." (0%).

Mr Huesmann selected **three questions from the audience** sent via Slido:

- "Do you see any potential in introducing citizens' panels in the follow-up on successful ECIs, as some stakeholders have argued for?"
- "For the ECI to "mature" and become a real decision-making tool, the Commission must loosen its grip on legislative initiative rights. Is this probable?"

- "How can we make sure that the different instruments strengthen and complement one other, instead of competing with one other and confusing citizens?"

The moderator gave the floor to the speakers to answer.

Mr Kaufmann replied that the toolbox of participatory democracy could clearly be quite broad and diverse, all over Europe and the world. Cities, regions and countries are testing different kind of tools, citizens' assemblies and panels. The risk in all of that is to create a democracy only for the "nice days", while during times of serious crises (such as the ongoing pandemic) the dialogue disappears: the EU has to make sure it also takes place for "rainy days". So there's a need for EU citizens to step up their participation, because they are the foundation of EU democracy. In this way, the ECI is only one step in the right direction, albeit a very important one.

Concerning the use of citizens' panels to strengthen participatory democracy, **Mr Lambertz** replied that the ECI and the citizens' panels could create synergies and complement each other, something that can be organised in advance, upstream and downstream. An ECI can be the result of a panel, dialogue can become part of implementing initiatives. There is the possibility of combining different instruments in an intelligent way, but always distinguishing the essential from the non-essential. According to Mr Lambertz, the real problem is the EU institutional triangle formed by the Commission, the Parliament and the Council, which limits the possibilities for effectively integrating citizens' dialogues and initiatives.

On the concern that different instruments could compete with each other, **Ms Montserrat** replied that people can reach the EU institutions via different routes (the Ombudsman, petitions to the EP, ECI, CoFoE) but that these are all complementary. The ECI is not going to disappear with the dialogue opened now with the CoFoE. Some citizens prefer to submit petitions to the EP, because they can be present in person to hear the response: this is an approach that brings citizens and institutions together. In Ms Montserrat's view, the ECI also brings the two together, but the requirements are difficult to achieve and there can be little follow-up by the Commission. The CoFoE is a really good tool, really inclusive and close to young people because of its digital platform.

As to how the CoFoE can really strengthen the ECI instrument, **Ms Geuens** replied that the key element in both cases is going to be responsiveness. EU citizens have to truly participate in the CoFoE but then the EU institutions need to take into account the results of that participation. The same is true of the ECI. If the CoFoE has specific results feeding into EU policy, the path will be clear for citizens to engage more, not only with the ECI but also with other instruments like petitions. Ms Geuens hoped the results of the CoFoE will lead to a revision, or a boost, of the ECI – as Mr Kaufmann mentioned as well – so that it is actually possible to propose a Treaty change.

Mr Huesmann presented the **third and last Slido poll** for the audience: "What wish for the ECI in the light of the Conference on the Future of Europe do you share the most?". Three possible answers were suggested by the speakers before the session and proposed to the audience:

- "To generate a true dialogue between all actors in the EU, where EU institutions are responsive to all participatory instruments." (42%);
- "To develop the principle of the European Union Citizenship into full procedure and practice - by strengthening agenda-setting opportunities and introducing decision-making tools by citizens at the transnational level." (32%);
- "That the CoFoE proposes that the ECI conclusions are subject of a serious follow-up by European institutions." (26%).

Mr Huesmann opened the floor for the final statements by the speakers.

Ms Montserrat wished that EU citizens, especially the younger ones, would become more familiar with the ECI and engage more, so that they can help shape the EU and face the challenges that lay ahead.

Mr Lambertz believed there is hope. There are a lot of people counting on participation, it's essential to not disappoint them and to make sure that the outcomes of these dialogues/initiatives are reflected in EU decisions that are necessary for ensuring the future of Europe.

Ms Geuens reasserted that responsiveness by the EU institutions is key. When citizens participate in EU policy, the most important part is that they are actually heard and that it leads to real policy. Otherwise, the discrepancy between expectations and reality will destroy any participatory instruments that the EU implements.

Mr Kaufmann pointed out that, in a setting as huge and as complex as the EU, there is a need to have more than wishful thinking about responsiveness, there is a need for clear demands about power-sharing. The CoFoE is a good opportunity to prepare for such a process towards constitutional assemblies with directly elected members, which can really take the next steps to make Europe a fully-fledged democracy, where people's voices are not just counted on election day but are heard every day.