



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 3 December 2018
(OR. en)

14535/18

INST 457
POLGEN 224

COVER NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Citizens' consultations - Joint Report

Delegations will find in Annex a joint report on the Citizens' Consultations on behalf of the Austrian Presidency and the incoming Romanian Presidency.

Introduction

At their informal meeting on 23 February 2018, the European Heads of State or Government discussed the initiative presented by the French president to launch a pan-European process of citizens' consultations. The proposed initiative was intended to promote engagement with citizens and contribute to the debate on the future of Europe. Member States agreed to participate voluntarily in this process and to conduct the consultations according to their national context and practices.

The aim of the citizens' consultations was to involve a significant number of European citizens and identify their main concerns, hopes and expectations, in order to inform deliberations by the Heads of State or Government and help them to set out priorities for EU action over the coming years. The consultation process was designed as a means of identifying concerns and gathering ideas.

There is a longstanding tradition in Member States of using dialogue with citizens as a way to ensure and enhance public participation in the political process. The commitment made by the Member States represents the first time such a collective and coordinated effort to perform simultaneous consultations with citizens all over Europe has been agreed, and a unique contribution to the ongoing reflection process on the future of Europe.

The joint report, together with the different national reports and input from the other European institutions, may usefully feed into the debate leading to the informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government on 9 May 2019 in Sibiu and to the new Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

Methodology and participation

The Member States validated a joint framework that included a proposed timeline and common principles for the consultations. It was agreed that the consultations would be inclusive and non-partisan and that they would respect the principles of transparency, political pluralism and fairness and be open to all citizens. The citizens' consultations were largely held between April and November 2018, with, inter alia, the aim of presenting a summary report to the Heads of State or Government at the European Council.

The specific methodology to be used for the consultations was left to the discretion of Member States. The Member States agreed from the outset to frame the process according to their respective national practices, specific contexts and traditions. It was a significant concerted effort in terms of logistics, preparation and coordination, with Member States engaging with citizens in a range of settings: traditional town hall meetings, conferences, large-scale public events, interactive debates and online tools. Most events made use of new technologies and social media, including livestreaming, online questionnaires, digital platforms and crowd-sourcing of ideas.

The process in each Member State varied as regards the involvement of the government and the number of events and participants. The one constant was that all the consultations were focused on in-depth discussions and interactions with the public. Many events promoted multi-stakeholder participation across the political spectrum, civil society, academia, media and the business sector.

The consultations were generally attended by diverse audiences, and aimed to ensure gender equality, inclusiveness, and representation of almost all population groups. Many Member States also sought to engage with citizens across their entire territory, including remote areas, and reach citizens who do not usually participate in debates on EU affairs. Some Member States organised events focused on younger generations, including debates in schools and universities.

Most Member States used two types of approach: general debates on the future of Europe and thematic consultations on topics of current national or European interest.

Although the citizens' consultations were not a scientific way of identifying public opinion (cf. opinion polls), they were wider reaching in terms of participation than surveys such as the Standard Eurobarometer. Figures suggest that some 1 700 events were organised across the EU.

Besides those organised by the Member States, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) also conducted consultations and discussions with citizens on the future of Europe. The European Commission launched an online consultation involving a questionnaire based on the outcomes of a citizens' panel. Some of the questions will feature in a new Special Eurobarometer on the future of Europe. At the request of the President of the European Council, the Committee of the Regions organised a vast number of events in various European regions over the last two years, while the EESC promoted the involvement of key civil society stakeholders in dialogues about the future of Europe. The European Parliament hosted the first ever Youth Parliament.

This report does not claim to provide a representative overview of public opinion among all EU citizens, nor does it claim to do justice to the full diversity of views expressed at so many events. However, it does offer a useful insight into citizens' views on EU matters and highlights the importance of keeping civil society involved in the debate on the future of the EU. It aims to provide an overview of the salient features of and most common messages contained in the national reports on the consultations in the different Member States.

Main findings

Consultations with citizens across the different Member States show that, despite its challenges, the EU is seen positively by most participants. In particular, in several Member States citizens recognise the value of their country's membership of the EU and the benefits associated with it. However, many participants also identify the lack of a clear vision and leadership as something that is holding the EU back, sparking calls for reform.

Brexit is mentioned in only a few countries. Where it is mentioned it is a significant concern, but it is also seen as having strengthened the EU27's sense of togetherness and citizens' understanding of the importance of the EU and the value of membership.

Migration, environmental challenges and education are among the most recurrent topics in many countries. Citizens express concerns – and expectations – in the following areas:

1 - A Union that is safe and secure

Migration features in many reports as one of the main concerns of EU citizens. It is consistently regarded as a high priority across almost all Member States. Illegal migration in particular is highlighted in several Member States as a key challenge for Europe. It is seen as requiring urgent EU action and considered to directly affect citizens' lives. Demands for better **protection of the EU's external border** frequently emerge in debates on this topic. At the same time, citizens in many countries also recognise a humanitarian imperative for the EU. A **common EU asylum policy**, distribution mechanisms, as well as solidarity and responsibility in the Member States are often mentioned. Furthermore, while some citizens are content with the current integration of migrants, others see an urgent need to do more in this respect.

There are frequent calls for the EU to do more to **stem illegal migratory flows**. Citizens in many Member States think the EU can do more to reduce illegal migration by tackling its root causes and improving security, living conditions and prosperity in countries of origin, for example through development aid, trade and investment, while placing a strong focus on supporting economic growth on the African continent. They would like the EU to establish better cooperation with countries of origin and transit in order to facilitate returns. They believe the EU should also increase its responsiveness to crises and engage in effective multilateralism to deal with this issue.

Finally, according to most, **organised crime, terrorism, radicalisation, corruption** and related threats are issues which, given their cross-border nature, should be dealt with more decisively at EU level. Citizens ask for more cooperation on **cybersecurity** and **data protection**, with many expressing concern about **disinformation** and highlighting the importance of media literacy among the general public in this regard.

2 - A Union of convergence and competitiveness

In several Member States citizens highlight the importance of the **single market** and its added value in securing economic growth throughout Europe. This is often coupled with demands to complete it, in particular in the area of services and the digital market. Citizens emphasise the need for the EU to promote a **sustainable growth model** on the continent. Some call for a deepening of the **Economic and Monetary Union**. The euro and future membership of the **eurozone** are mentioned in some countries – in both positive and negative terms – and often linked with the need to do more to prevent any future crises.

Citizens also voice the need for the EU to keep up with technological developments. Some express a wish for **e-governance** measures to be used more, and for **smart communities** to be developed as a means to strengthen the socio-economic engine of the EU. In the current context of a new **digital revolution**, consultations also reveal a perceived need to promote digital literacy and stimulate digital innovation. There is a clear call for robust and smart investment in research in this area. **Artificial intelligence**, for example, is frequently mentioned as a sector in which the EU should lead the way. The fear of the EU falling behind or doing too little in the field of **research**, technological development, **innovation** and digitalisation is prevalent among many citizens.

Stimulating and **supporting small and medium-sized enterprises** is also considered as a key vector to make Europe a better place for active **entrepreneurship**, thus fuelling the EU's **competitiveness**. While competitiveness is seen as important for driving progress and growth, citizens in several Member States are also critical of differing standards and quality of products across the EU. Calls to promote competitiveness are therefore counterbalanced by demands for **economic and social convergence**, and the promotion of territorial **cohesion**.

Views on **taxation** are mixed. Some citizens feel that there is a need for legislative initiatives on taxation, such as a digital tax, or even the harmonisation of tax policies. Conversely, there are also calls for tax to remain a national competence.

A recurring theme in consultations is also that of budget resources, in the context of the next **Multiannual Financial Framework**, as a means to ensure the EU is fit for purpose. A variety of opinions emerge with respect to resource distribution, including mixed feelings about potential budget cuts affecting the common agricultural policy and cohesion policy. Citizens in many Member States call for a balanced EU budget with clear added value for citizens.

3 - A Union that protects the environment and promotes sustainability

A salient feature of the consultations in most Member States is a call by citizens to strengthen the role of the EU in environmental policy, as well as a feeling that a stronger commitment to **environmental and climate protection** is urgently needed. Suggestions include working on more and tougher EU **legislation** in this field, more intervention in overseeing Member States' **implementation** of related EU legislation and tabling of more environmental initiatives. Participants explicitly mention, among other things, a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and of toxic and pollutant emissions, better recycling measures and better animal welfare. In some Member States, citizens believe that a larger part of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should be dedicated to **climate action**.

The fight against **climate change/global warming** is recurrently mentioned in almost all Member States, especially by younger citizens, and **perceived as one of the biggest challenges facing the EU**. In some cases, the European Union's climate protection requirements are seen as a counterweight to national policy. Climate change is perceived as affecting a variety of policy areas: not only energy generation and transport, but also agriculture and food, and our eating habits. More generally, citizens point to the need for **sustainable consumption**.

Sustainability is very often raised as an issue, including the idea that innovation should be assessed in terms of its long-term value for citizens. While some proposals refer to giving more consideration to environmental and social criteria in regulations, other participants feel that themes like local food production, the circular economy and up-cycling would need a European push.

Citizens in some Member States identify the importance of sustainability goals in **agricultural policy** too. While some concerns are voiced about the impact of modern farming on the environment, there are also calls for more protection of rural landscapes and for a concerted effort to close the rural-urban divide.

In some cases, the discussions reveal a feeling that there is insufficient **education** on the EU's environmental policies and a lack of practical incentives to encourage people to "go green", with citizens in some Member States particularly pointing to the need for incentives to encourage the **transition to renewable energies**. This is coupled by a demand in some Member States for more engagement and debate on how the climate action agenda impacts people's daily lives.

While the existing cross-border infrastructure in the area of **electricity supply and mobility** is often mentioned as a positive achievement of the EU, participants in some countries also see a special need to develop a common European mobility strategy. Some citizens stress the need for Europe to take action to address the future of energy supply, in areas such as the phasing-out of coal-fired power generation.

The need to enhance the EU's **global role** on the environment is also highlighted as an important objective in the current changing and challenging international context. Many participants want the European Union to be a global leader on the sustainability agenda and in tackling climate change.

4 - A Union of wellbeing and opportunities

Social protection is also a major concern for citizens. However there is disagreement on the extent to which the EU should be active in this area. Participants in several Member States are very protective of their national social security systems. Still, many want the EU to play a stronger role in combating poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, discrimination, threats to workers' rights, limited access to services, as well as problems arising from societal and technological changes, including the need to bridge the **digital divide**. A perceived lack of – or even threat to – **social and standard of living convergence** between and within Member States is also a recurring concern expressed by citizens.

Specific Proposals - Citizens brought a great wealth of ideas and suggestions to this debate about the future of Europe, which vary broadly. Here are a few examples from different Member States and across the thematic areas:

- a unified deposit-subjected packaging system in the EU to reduce packaging waste; and a mandatory recycling of PET bottles system across the EU
- a Gross European Wellbeing Index
- a curriculum on European civic education citizenship in all educational systems across the EU
- internet platforms should offer the same quality of service across the EU Member States
- a European public holiday on Europe Day

There is a clear call for more and better **jobs**. Citizens in some countries are calling for the coordination of **labour market** rules, including access and mobility. Many citizens place a special focus on the younger generation and the fear of a brain drain facilitated by the free movement of persons which, paradoxically, is perceived by many citizens as one of the most important benefits of EU membership. The **future of work** and how it will affect them is a prominent topic for citizens, as is **gender equality**. Many people insist on the need to address the gender pay gap and the obstacles women still face in entering the job market. Participants often link general demographics and the ageing population in particular to labour market issues, and to **healthcare**. The EU as a whole is generally seen as doing too little to address health issues and social and economic inequalities.

Citizens also strongly demand more action at the EU level in the field of **education**. Demands focus mainly on developing new skills in line with the requirements of the labour market, increasing educational mobility, mutual recognition of diplomas and professional and technical qualifications, and increased investment in science and research, and in life-long learning. **Erasmus+** is generally mentioned as one of the biggest success stories of the EU which should be further strengthened. Learning other European languages should be encouraged, according to many of the participants.

5 - A Union that is strong on the global stage

Though this is not a prominent topic, the EU is generally seen as a **force for good in the world**, with citizens emphasising the Union's normative power in its relations with third countries. They perceive the EU to be successfully using peer pressure - the power of example - to project its values, in particular those of democracy and human rights, beyond its borders. There is a frequent call for EU external action to be values-driven in its relations with third countries; this is seen as both a global responsibility and a moral imperative. This call is often linked to the desire for the EU to become a global leader in some sectors, and especially on environment protection.

There is a consensus among citizens that stronger engagement by the EU in world affairs, and **more unity** on foreign policy, are needed in order to defend its interests and values, and, most importantly, to protect its citizens. The EU is often seen by participants as too weak, without sufficient influence on the global stage and sometimes incapable of dealing with the crises that are taking place in its strategic neighbourhood. The EU's external action is perceived as **lacking in effectiveness and credibility**, and there are calls to strengthen the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Citizens underline the need to **speak with one voice**, particularly in the context of the EU's relations with other great powers (the US, China and Russia). The focus here is on defence policy, enlargement and trade.

Many citizens believe that the EU should not be dependent on other actors for its own **security and defence**. However, many consider that any EU approach should be complementary to NATO and not replace it. Views range from merely improving coordination and integration of national civilian and military capabilities to a recurring call for a common defence policy with own capabilities. Some citizens would also like more public dialogue on security initiatives, such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Citizens also place values at the heart of the EU's **neighbourhood** and **enlargement** policies. They only want countries that adhere to the EU's values and norms and to democracy to become members. However, there is some disagreement about the timing. While some people clearly advocate for enlargement to the Western Balkans, most emphasise that the EU needs first to consolidate its current status before any further enlargement can occur. In general though, citizens see a strong European perspective for the Western Balkans, and to a lesser extent, in some Member States, also for a few countries in the Eastern neighbourhood.

The EU's **trade** relations are generally perceived as positive, but there are also concerns about social and environmental standards in free trade agreements with third countries, which again highlights European citizens' desire for the EU to act on the basis of its common values. Some citizens also call for the EU to use its economic clout even more to exert its global power.

Divisions between Member States are a recurring source of concern across several countries. Citizens, particularly from smaller Member States, highlight the perceived lack of a genuine partnership between small and big countries as problematic. They often feel that the interests of the largest players are the main driver of Union policies, although this perception is far from unanimous. Dialogues in several Member States also point to a perceived **lack of fairness and double standards**, with common rules seen as not always applying in a uniform way to all. As well as the small/big divide, frequently identified divisions include those between 'old' and 'new' Member States, as well as splits along geographical lines. In response, calls for greater **cohesion** and **solidarity** are common.

In the face of divisions, the EU continues to be recognised by a majority of its citizens as a **force for good** and as a community bound together by **shared values**. Naturally, a plurality of voices emerges. Human rights, the rule of law, peace and democracy are among the most widely cited values. The role played by the EU in securing **peace** on the continent attracts special attention. But discussions with citizens also tend to highlight the imperfections of the EU as a community of values, and in particular the gap between the Union's rhetoric and its action. This frequently sparks calls for more decisive action to bridge this gap.

In order to strengthen the feeling of togetherness, calls are occasionally heard in some Member States to step up efforts to promote the development of a **common "European identity"**, which, according to many citizens, is still more an aspiration than a reality today. Mobility and exchanges, in particular for young people, are seen as key to success in this process.

Whilst a commitment to common values is considered as being at the very roots of the EU as a community, **diversity** among Member States is also seen as a major Union asset. According to many participants, a European identity should coexist with, rather than replace, national identities. Similarly, several citizens stress the need to respect different national cultures. Insistence in many Member States on the need to respect **national and cultural differences** often triggers reflection on institutional issues. Contrary to common belief, which suggests a lack of interest of citizens in such matters, the question of respective **competences** appears quite relevant for many.

In line with the principle of **subsidiarity**, a majority of European citizens expect the EU to focus on areas where it can bring **added value**. A correct division of competences between the national and the European level is often highlighted as pivotal for the success of the European project. In this respect, an extension of tasks to areas where Member States can achieve better results is seen as potentially detrimental to citizens' perception of the EU by widening the capability-expectations gap. Opinions naturally vary as to the preferred division of powers, but there is a widespread perception that the current situation can be improved. That said, there is some confusion regarding the respective competences of Member States and the EU, which partly contributes to explaining a frequently cited general **mistrust** of the EU institutions. This is also fuelled by a perceived **lack of transparency**, with frequent mention of a **democratic deficit**, and perceptions of **excessive bureaucracy**, which is often linked to difficulties with accessing EU funds.

Final remarks

Citizens' consultations were welcomed by civil society, with numerous voices expressing appreciation for this exercise in gauging citizens' opinions. In that sense, this exercise contributes naturally to addressing a general demand for engagement from and with civil society, which was regularly mentioned in the dialogues.

Dialogue appears particularly important in view of the desire, which was also consistently stressed by citizens throughout the consultations, for a better understanding of how the EU functions, and of the meaning of EU membership. Numerous calls were heard to step up efforts to promote better education about the EU. According to many citizens, this should be done through dedicated initiatives, though also by simplifying the language used by the EU in communicating with citizens. An excessively obscure and bureaucratic language is often highlighted as a key obstacle in interaction between EU institutions and citizens.

The success of the dialogues organised in the different Member States is also reflected in calls for continued engagement. Encouraging action and debate on EU issues at grassroots level is perceived as particularly important by citizens. In fact, the citizens' consultation initiative does follow in the path of other practices, already well established in several Member States, that aim to foster dialogue about the EU at grassroots level.

Given the above considerations, this report is an attempt to reflect a process that is diverse in both form and content. It does not purport to be a final summary of engagement with citizens at national level, which will continue in various forms. Rather, it should be understood as a contribution to ongoing efforts to engage civil society better, with a view to informing leaders' discussions about the future of Europe and the definition of the next strategic agenda.
