

CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: A NATIONAL MODEL FOR CENTRAL EUROPE

Policy Brief

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On the eve of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE), this policy brief scrutinizes different options available for promoting deliberative democracy in EU member states and proposes an optimal model of the conference for Central European countries.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT?

National, regional and local stakeholders will all play a pivotal role in CoFE, no matter the European model ultimately chosen. These formats will likely precede EU level dialogues and will contribute to either the planning and/or implementation phase of the exercise. It must be taken into account though that deliberative engagement is considerably more embedded in older democracies across Europe. Central Europe, meanwhile, lacks a long history of public deliberation.

BACKGROUND

The perception that the European Union is in a state of perpetual crisis has taken hold in recent years. Over the past decade, the EU has indeed nearly continuously been in crisis-management mode, confronting an array of challenges from the economic and financial crisis to migration flows to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite differences in the nature of these crises, with some affecting only a few policy areas and others, like COVID-19, touching on a spectrum of policies at both the European and national levels, they have all posed existential questions and borne a direct impact on the lives of EU citizens.¹ This ‘poly-crisis’ has damaged the reputation of the EU and its institutions. The positive image of the EU, for example, has declined across the bloc by 12% over the past 14 years, according to Eurobarometer data.² The same survey also revealed that a total of 40% now hold the EU in high esteem compared to 52% in 2006. The numerous crises have also put a spotlight on the need for reforms to make the EU more resilient in the future. Partly as a consequence of the multiple crises encountered, the gulf between the EU and its citizens has widened, with society perceiving decision-making as a process taking place far removed from their lives. In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 54% of the Europeans expressed a lack of trust in the EU, with only 37% trustful, the lowest rating recorded since 2016, according to Europeans in 2019: Special Eurobarometer³.

The purpose of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) proposed by Germany and France⁴ and embraced by the European Commission and the European Parliament, is to both create a structured dialogue and elicit recommendations for European institutional and policy reforms.⁵ The aim, furthermore, is to incorporate all European stakeholders—citizens and decision-makers at the local, regional, national and European levels.

POSITION CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, THE EU COUNCIL AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

AGREEMENT



Scope - an inclusive (citizens), open (topics), and innovative process (use of digital platforms)

Citizens’ involvement - random and representative approach

Governance and organisation - citizens’ involvement, transparency, and use of digital platforms

DISAGREEMENT



Conference leader - no agreement

Topics - EP and EC include “democratic and institutional” components vs Council’s tepid reaction to these themes

Outcome and follow-up - “legislative follow-up” supported by EC and Council vs treaty change by EP

1 Anghel S. and Drachenberg R, [The European Council as COVID-19 crisis manager: A comparison with previous crises](#), EPRS, European Parliament, March 2020.
 2 [Standard Eurobarometer 93](#), European Commission, October 2020.
 3 [Special Eurobarometer 486](#), Europeans in 2019, European Commission, March 2019.
 4 Conference on the Future of Europe [Franco-German non-paper](#) on key questions and guidelines, Politico, November 2019.
 5 Kotanidis S., [Conference on the Future of Europe](#), EPRS, European Parliament, June 2020.

Previous attempts to broaden participation including the Convention on the Future of Europe in 2002 and the European Citizens' Consultations in 2018 have shed light on some benefits that could come out of this format. These prior events, for example, saw the mobilization of multiple stakeholders and enabled the EU to reach out, to some extent, to ordinary citizens. They also revealed potential pitfalls though, with the Convention on the Future of Europe resulting in an overly ambitious draft treaty on the European Constitution and the European Citizens' Consultations seeing citizen inputs largely disregarded afterwards.^{6,7}

The upcoming Conference should be designed to ensure opportunities for engaging in a more structured debate, with the aim of improving the functioning of the EU not only in terms of institutional dynamics but also policies. To avoid previous deficiencies, the Council of the EU, the European Commission and the European Parliament have agreed to sign a Joint Agreement, marking their official commitment to the concept in writing. More importantly, this accord outlines the scope, ambition, format and expectations of the Conference.⁸ Each institution has come forward with its own model for how the event will proceed at the European level. This in addition to the numerous additional possible concepts laid out by experts. The scope, ambition, format and expectations for national, regional and local level components, however, remains unclear.

It would be naïve to expect that a unitary model adopted by all member states at the national level will deliver effective results. What works for France indeed might not work for Slovakia or Italy. Therefore, in preparation for the kick-off of the Conference on the Future of Europe, it is imperative to assess what national model could serve as the optimal fit for different countries and regions. Without a successful run at this level, the outcome of the grand project could prove dissatisfactory, possibly furthering the rift and alienation between citizens and Brussels.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN ACTION – MODEL OPTIONS FOR EU MEMBER STATES

The national, regional and local components will be a crucial part of CoFE, no matter the overall European model chosen. They will most likely precede the EU level dialogues (transnational discussions) and will contribute to either the planning (setting up topical frameworks) or implementation phases (conducting consultation in native languages) of the entire endeavour.

The key to organising a successful Conference is to set the same expectations for all aspects of the event. Recent experiences in deliberative democracy indeed show that politicians and citizens often understand citizen participation in very different ways, the European Citizens' Consultations a pertinent example herein. While the former generally see it as a tool for communication, the latter anticipate participating directly in decision-making processes.

Current discussions on expected outcomes appear to imply that a report will be developed from the Conference which will include recommendations for 'legislative follow up' (European Parliament and European Commission) or even 'treaty change' (European Parliament), a sensitive topic for national governments.⁹ If the European institutions indeed agree on a clear set of rules and expectations, citizens will have tangible incentive to participate.

Several EU member states, with increasing regularity, have been exercising different forms of deliberative initiatives. While the French, Irish and Austrians have been particularly keen, others including Poland and Estonia have also introduced their own Citizens' Panels and Citizens' Dialogues. In developing an appropriate model for CoFE in Central Europe, it would be prudent to heed lessons from the French, the Irish and the Austrian approaches that have already been tested and honed over time. These experiences provide a good point of reference, shedding light on both successes and shortcomings to the participatory process itself and enabling organizers to gauge the potential applicability of the different models in Central Europe.

FRANCE

Following the birth of the Yellow Vest movement, a social mobilisation movement in 2019, the call for more deliberative democracy gained momentum in France. Since then, two major initiatives have taken place: the Grand Débat National (Grand National Debate)¹⁰ and the Citizens' Convention on Climate.

The Grand National Debate, for its part, took place between January and March 2019, consisting of two parts: four thematic national conferences (town hall meetings) with President Macron (one-way communication) and 21 regional Citizens' Assemblies (with randomly selected participants) that were reserved for joint discussion and reflection.¹¹ Ad-

6 Fabbrini F., [The Conference on the Future of Europe A New Model to Reform the EU?](#), Brexit Institute Working Paper Series, Working Paper, 12 /2019.

7 Butcher P. and Stratulat C., [Citizens expect: Lessons from the European Citizens' Consultations](#), European Policy Centre – Open Society Foundation, May 2019.

8 [Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe – Questions and Answers](#), European Commission, January 2020.

9 Petzold W., [The Conference on the Future of Europe](#), European Committee of the Regions, October 2020.

10 [Grand Débat National](#), French Government, accessed on 29 October 2020.

11 Different channels and methods of participation online and offline took place around four topics: fiscal policies; climate change; democracy; and public services [in:] Buge É., Morio C. "Le Grand débat national, apports et limites pour la participation citoyenne", *Revue du droit public* 5, 2019, p. 1205.

ditionally, more than 10,000 local meetings were organised and online spaces were created for citizen input, resulting in close to two million contributions. While the overall exercise garnered positive reception, two primary shortcomings should be noted. First, the town hall meetings and the online space were essentially one-way communication channels. Only the regional Citizens' Assemblies, in fact, encompassed a true deliberative component during the Grand National Debate. Second, the government was widely criticized for its weak institutional follow-up, reinforcing why it is paramount that clear outcome expectations be set.

Paris also embarked on an ambitious project to engage its populace in addressing the climate emergency. The initiative, called the French Citizens' Convention on Climate, aimed at giving citizens a voice on endeavours to combat climate change.¹² And it took place against a backdrop in which France was pursuing greenhouse gas emissions reductions of 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels, in accordance with the Paris Agreement target that the country had signed on to in 2015. Over the course of seven three-day sessions, between October 2019 and June 2020, a group of 150 randomly selected people was directly involved in the preparation of legislation.¹³ To ensure adequate rigour to the process, the citizens were surrounded by experts and senior civil servants who assisted in, for example, the framing and wording of the final document.¹⁴ All told, the citizen panel developed 149 proposals of which three will be submitted to referendum.¹⁵ All other proposals will be put to a parliamentary vote.¹⁶ This success makes the initiative one of the most ambitious examples yet to have involved citizens in developing a policy response to the climate crisis. And it marks the first time in French history that a citizen participation process could lead to binding outcomes (referendum + vote in the Parliament).

IRELAND

Ireland is increasingly taking on the mantle of a European leader in deliberative democracy. The country has already hosted two such events, the Convention of the Constitution (2012-2014) and the Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality (2016-2018). The Irish parliament has recently established a new Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality. Each of these prior Citizen Assemblies left their imprint including through contributions to the legal framework that made marriage equality the law of the land (May 2015) and legislative recommendations on a range of topics like abortion, fixed-term parliaments, referendums and climate change. The Irish approach, involving reiterative deliberative processes, underlines how people's attitudes towards certain issues can change. The strategy also mobilizes citizens to become more engaged and enhance their knowledge of government and civic education. In this regard, there is a learning curve for both the organizers (who learn how to engage citizens better) and the participants (who grow familiar with different methods and channels availed to various stakeholder groups).

In terms of format, the assemblies consist of a group of randomly selected citizens (circa 100 people) including a chairperson and 99 additional participants who vote on proposals.¹⁷ The entire process takes around two years. With the aim of putting citizens in the position of policymakers, the model provides a platform for a cross-section of the public to absorb presentations from experts and civil society groups, engage in deliberative and reasoned discussion and make policy recommendations to government based on available options. Similar to the French format, an expert advisory board is also typically availed to provide background information on different topics and consult participants as needed.

AUSTRIA

In Austria, Citizens' Councils started at the local and regional level and were institutionalized at the national level in 2013. Indicatory of its success, the model has now spread to nearby countries. The German Federal Ministry for the Environment, for example, emulated the approach in 2016 in its Integrated Environmental Plan.¹⁸

The Citizens' Councils consists of 400-600 people who are chosen by lot using a mathematically randomized process. Participants are invited to partake in a one-and-a-half day facilitated gathering that culminates in a presentation at a public event. Divided into groups of around 12 to 15 people, participants are tasked with arriving at a consensus statement on their chosen policy area. Once a Citizens' Council finishes deliberations, participants are asked to share their output at a public meeting officially called a 'Citizens' Café'. These events adhere to the World Café method, an easy-to-use method for creating a living network of collaborative dialogue around pre-selected questions or issues.¹⁹

12 Its exact mandate was to define a series of measures that would allow the achievement of a reduction of at least 40% of greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (compared to 1990) in the spirit of social justice, [in:] [The Citizens' Convention on Climate](#), What is it?, accessed on 29 October 2020.

13 The members of the Convention were selected at random and embody a representative sample of French society, based on a range of criteria such as gender, age, and residence [in:] Jacques M., [Convention pour le climat : les citoyens confrontent leurs propositions au réel](#), Les Echos, October 2020.

14 Achouche N., [The Citizens' Convention on Climate](#), Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, August 2020.

15 The referendum proposal is still pending the approval by the lower house of parliament and the senate.

16 [The Citizens' Convention on Climate](#), Democracy International, June 2020.

17 [The Citizens' Assembly](#), Irish Government, accessed on 29 October 2020.

18 Zubizarreta R., [Citizens' Councils: What are they, and why are they so popular in Austria?](#), New Democracy, August 2020.

19 [A Quick Reference Guide for Hosting World Café](#), the World Café, 2015.

Like the French and Irish models, experts are at the disposal of participants as needed. A Responders Group, moreover, is created that meets monthly to monitor and support the implementation of the recommendations. Councils have already been held on a diverse range of topics including, among others, quality of life issues, the creation of family-friendly policies, the improvement of transit and regional energy autonomy.

What is particularly noteworthy about the Austrian model is that it allows participants to more directly shape the process through the small-discussion group format. This, in turn, can lead to more out-of-the-box ideas while simultaneously still delivering well-suited recommendations on the broader issues at hand.

A WORKING MODEL FOR CENTRAL EUROPE

With Central Europe carrying its own context-specific particularities based on, for example, its history, culture, governance and economy, national models for CoFE need to be moulded accordingly.

The culture of participatory processes is indeed considerably more rooted in older democracies across Europe. Understandings of deliberative democracy in Central Europe, meanwhile, can often be blurred with memories from the socialist era. Though participation existed in theory during that time, it was tightly controlled by government. There has, however, been a recent spike in deliberative democracy initiatives, particularly at the local level. Rather than generating recommendations for policymakers, these bodies, nonetheless, often merely serve the function of informing citizens about particular policy issues and/or eliciting general ideas and opinions. Some exceptions exist. In Poland, for example, Citizens' Panels ("panel obywatelski") have been organized, among other places, in Gdańsk, Lublin and Łódź.²⁰ Comprised of randomly selected representative samples of residents drawn from the voter register (based on district, age and gender), the meetings were spread out over numerous weeks and targeted towards formulating and voting on policy recommendations on pre-selected municipality issues. These experiences, in general, demonstrated the willingness of residents to engage with and discuss issues important to the city.

In Estonia, regarded as a deliberative and digital pioneer in the region, randomly selected Citizens' juries, meanwhile, often address more than one policy question and are similarly entrusted with presenting recommendations. Throughout the process, jury members are provided opportunities to listen to different views and consider information from a variety of expert witnesses. The Citizens' jury enables participants, in other words, to learn in depth about one or multiple issues relevant to the public and employ that information to give relevant advice.

For Central Europe as a whole, the Conference is an opportunity to launch a broader democratic dialogue on the European project and its needed reforms and priorities. Several components will be necessary though to ensure a meaningful process. These include the selection of adequately representative cross-sections of societies, the use of tried-and-true structures and formats (e.g. networks, Citizens' Dialogues and other deliberative body arrangements), optimal employment of existing technology and appropriate linkage between the national models and CoFE at the European level.

A review of the key ingredients necessary to foster a successful model:

RANDOM SELECTION

Random selection is increasingly becoming an indispensable part of citizen engagement at all levels, promising unbiased feedback and input on particular issues to policymakers.²¹ Successful models are marked by voluntary cross-cutting participation across society. The initiatives in Ireland, France, Austria, Poland, Estonia, and a planned initiative in Germany,²² in fact, all include a sortition element. Attempts to encourage broad citizen participation in discussions, focus groups, and town hall meetings solely through publicizing the event, meanwhile, often lead to skewed representation. The European Commission-initiated Citizens' Dialogues in Slovakia, for example, regularly attract pro-European, well-educated and generally engaged citizens.²³ This leaves many citizens from a range of socio-economic strata and age demographics excluded and these groups are often more likely to be sceptical of European policies and institutions. Like in Western Europe, outreach and inclusion with respect to a broad spectrum of citizens is vital in Central Europe.

20 [Civic Panel. Residents decide](#), the City of Gdańsk, Medium, December 2016, and [The citizens' panel in Poland – the second city to take up the challenge!](#), the City of Lublin, June 2016.

21 Huesmann, Ch. and Roch, S., [Shortcut 2: Random selection for citizen participation](#), Bertelsmann Stiftung, October 2020.

22 Hierlemann, D. and Renkamp, A., [More citizen participation within the EU](#), Bertelsmann Stiftung, August 2020.

23 Observation expressed by Citizens Dialogues organizers during "Resilient, recovered and reformed European Union" side-event at GLOBSEC Forum 2020, October 2020.

USE OF EXISTING STRUCTURES

Utilizing participatory structures that already exist or have been successful in the past ensures a shorter learning curve and financial and organizational efficiency. The Conference will test national, regional, and local capacities and the ability of citizens to debate various complex issues and develop recommendations in the process. By employing familiar existing formats, however, organizational and learning “shortcuts” can be utilized to streamline the process, mitigate pitfalls and comply with likely modest budgetary resources. Central Europe, more importantly, needs to strengthen its deliberative culture. Adoption of national models that make use of existing formats will further legitimise the value of deliberative democracy and embed the process into the relationship between government and citizens. With fewer existing structures in operation across the region, nevertheless, it will prove more challenging for Central Europe to prepare for CoFE.

YOUTH

An innovative component for the national model could be a special forum involving youth. A National Youth Assembly could, in fact, yield promising recommendations. While youth movements and mobilisation have a long history in some Western European countries, in Central Europe, youth political engagement is still evolving. That said, youth in the region are increasingly willing to actively immerse themselves in public debate and stand up for their beliefs.²⁴ A good example is the changing culture in Slovakia on sustainable and green issues, developments that have been primarily steered by young people.²⁵ Incorporating a youth element in Central Europe, consequently, could be even more appealing than in other member states.

ONLINE COMPONENT

Against the backdrop of both the pandemic and emerging new technologies, a digital component is inescapable at both the national and European levels. In Central Europe, virtual panels have been quickly adopted but have generally been defined by passive participation akin to that from the expert panels and town hall meetings. A better use of online spaces would involve the organisation of expert-level ‘roundtables’ and youth deliberation events, with these two groups demonstrating more interest in actively using technology. Crowdsourcing platforms in Latvia and Iceland have been met with success in helping, respectively, shape parliamentary agendas and constitutional reforms.^{26,27} Yet given a lack of citizen deliberative experience in Central Europe, including in the online environment, the learning curve could prove too steep for this method to produce satisfactory results as a whole during the Conference. What needs to be avoided is the use of digital spaces merely to solicit individual comments, as unfolded in France, or to organize online panels with only a few speakers. Such one-way only channels will not be able to deliver on the expectations for the Conference in terms of deliberation.

EDUCATIONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL FORMAT

Before citizens in Central Europe can advance constructive recommendations for EU reforms, they should possess a sound level of knowledge about the Union itself including relevant information about EU institutions and key issues facing the bloc. Yet Central Europeans often lack comprehensive knowledge about the EU and the place of their countries and themselves in it.²⁸ A Eurobarometer survey from February 2020, revealed that 83% of Europeans, on average, could answer questions about EU citizens’ rights. But particularly subpar performance was recorded in Romania (59%), Latvia (63%) and Lithuania (68%).²⁹ The Central and Eastern European region as a whole, meanwhile, scored 73%, also below the EU average. In some member states like Romania (46%), Latvia (34%), Slovakia (32%), Lithuania (30%) and Bulgaria (29%), the mistaken belief that there was a need to apply to become a citizen of the EU was prevalent.³⁰

The Citizens’ Dialogues format, which involves experts debating EU policies and decision-making mechanisms, could, nevertheless, serve to be a prudent method for starting this civic education process. A commitment to take the initiative to all corners of society, from rural hamlet to small town to urban centre, will further increase outreach to citizens less knowledgeable about the EU. Trusted experts will also be a necessity in participatory activities and their guidance, framing and clarifications could fundamentally impact the viability of drafted recommendations. In time, as citizens gain a better understanding and familiarity with the deliberative process, they, presumably, can take more initiative.

24 GLOBSEC, [Young People, Citizenship and Activism, Vol II](#), EUact Final Report, December 2019.

25 [The Climate Needs You Initiative](#), accessed November 2020.

26 [ManaBalss Platform](#), accessed November 2020.

27 [Citizens Foundation Platform](#), accessed November 2020.

28 GLOBSEC, [Young People, Citizenship and Activism](#), EUact Report, March 2019.

29 [Flash Eurobarometer 485](#), EU Citizenship and Democracy, European Commission, July 2020.

30 Ibid.

LINKING THE NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

The European Parliament, the Commission, the Council, and several European think tanks have already proposed models that place an emphasis on the European level of the Conference.^{31,32} While little has been proposed for national level dialogues, all stakeholders stress the importance of ensuring a connection between the different components. Suggestions largely revolve around making use of multilingual online platforms to promote multinational citizen discussions.³³ In the context of Central Europe, there is some doubt concerning whether this proposed channel would be effectively used. Engaging experts and young leaders through transnational dialogue, however, has been successful in the past. A similar approach could present itself as a plausible middle ground that would enable national level outputs to be relayed to the European level through the participation of, among others, civil society organisations, members of academia, youth representatives and perhaps selected delegates from the regional assemblies.³⁴

THE PROPOSED MODEL

The proposed national model for Central Europe draws on best practices from already tested deliberative models in other European countries. This includes the random selection of citizens and use of existing deliberative structures and prior formats that have achieved success. Whereas online components and multilingual linkages between the national and the European levels may include ordinary citizens in Western Europe, in Central Europe, a tilt towards experts and young leaders will yield better results. For Central Europe, the educational component, furthermore, is nearly as important as deliberative elements. Given the lack of a strong deliberative culture at present, additional effort will need to be expended to stimulate participation in the process.

Type of activity	Format	Purpose
Regional Assemblies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ random selection of citizens ▶ experts as guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ draft reform recommendations (topical and institutional)
National Assemblies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ representatives from the Regional Assemblies ▶ representatives from the Youth Assembly ▶ representatives from civil society and academia ▶ representatives from parliament, government and presidential institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ initially inform the country about the purpose of the Conference ▶ compile drafted recommendations ▶ propose additional recommendations
Youth Assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ random selection of young people ▶ experts as guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ draft reform recommendations (topical and institutional)
Citizens' Dialogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ panel of experts ▶ open participation of citizens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ inform citizens about the EU and its values, policies, institutions, and mechanisms
Online deliberations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ expert roundtables ▶ young leaders discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ draft recommendations ▶ evaluate the process and suggest improvements
Transnational Dialogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ civil society, academic experts, young leaders, selected delegates from the Regional Assemblies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ relay citizens' recommendations ▶ enhance recommendations ▶ find convergences and divergences across Europe

31 Perzolt, W., [The Conference on the Future of Europe: State of Play](#), Work in Progress, European Committee of the Regions, October 2020.

32 Hierlemann, D., [Conference Talk](#), Bertelsmann Stiftung, Policy Brief, Issue 4, April 2019

33 Perzolt, W., [The Conference on the Future of Europe: State of Play](#), Work in Progress, European Committee of the Regions, October 2020.

34 For good practices see: [GLOBSEC EUact Project](#) and [GLOBSEC DiffGov Project](#)

CONCLUSIONS

The overarching expectation is that CoFE will provide citizens the opportunity to ‘speak’ to and ‘change’ the EU for the better. Presuming the process elicits useful recommendations for institutional and policy reforms that are subsequently put in place, the EU’s legitimacy as a whole will be strengthened. The event can, moreover, contribute additional benefits including a bolstering of deliberative democracy practices across Europe, improvement in citizen civic knowledge and the fostering of a sense of belonging. The Conference, in this vein, could serve to enhance democracy at the local, national and European levels.

This process is particularly timely for Central Europe. While some politicians are adopting an ever-harder line that involves discounting the legitimacy and benefits of the EU, societies in the region continue to express positive sentiment towards membership. In Hungary, 77% associate the EU with better prospects for future generations, with corresponding numbers of 82% in Poland, 80% in Slovakia and 53% in the Czech Republic, according to GLOBSEC Trends 2020.³⁵ CoFE could provide the reassurances needed for Central Europeans to recognize that the EU, including its benefits and responsibilities, belongs to them.

Not yet launched, though, doubts are seeping in about whether CoFE will reach its full potential. Disagreement remains on the question of the European “leader” of the Conference and the content of the Joint Agreement. Member states and their citizens, meanwhile, are starting to lose interest in the process. Agreement needs to be reached swiftly. Organization of a prominent kick off at the European level, however, would represent an important step that could motivate member states to deliver at home. The event is indeed a worthy one that will make citizens feel that they are part of something greater and that they too can contribute to building the European project.

The Conference should not be ‘one model fits all’ but rather ‘tailored made’ for each member state. A clear timeline, milestones and goals for the conference will aid in guiding governments while they embark on national deliberations. Once the organized events conclude, the follow up process will be vital too to ensure that citizens feel their voice has been heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR THE MEMBER STATES AND EU POLICY MAKERS

- ▶ Need for **scope and purpose to be clearly defined** to avoid mismatch between expectations from citizens and national and EU institutions.
- ▶ **Follow-up** by the EU to be unequivocally agreed upon and **to be ambitious** in scale based on the generation of concrete recommendations rather than merely a report to the Council.
- ▶ **Communication is key** – there needs to be an active process to “win people’s hearts and minds” and to combat disinformation.
- ▶ **Actively use already existing local/regional/national participatory infrastructure** and enhance it where necessary.
- ▶ **Rely on experts** to be there to consult citizens on the functioning of the EU and to help frame discussions.
- ▶ Whatever the result of CoFE, it is important for **citizens’ participation structures to be used on a permanent basis**, thereby increasing levels of participation, knowledge and engagement over time.

FOR CENTRAL EUROPE

- ▶ Align national approaches to the overarching **CoFE model** adopted by the EU institutions and leaders but **tailor it to the region and country specific contexts** to avoid unwarranted ‘imitation’ of Western models.
- ▶ **Allocate appropriate funds and assign a core team** (in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister offices) who will coordinate CoFE at the national level and serve as a liaison with Brussels.
- ▶ **Bolster deliberative democracy practices** on EU topics which could increase citizen civic knowledge and sense of belonging in the EU.
- ▶ **Engage in outreach to and involve Euro-neutral and Eurosceptic audiences** that have not typically been interested or included in similar discussions in the past.
- ▶ **Take advantage of digital tools** to reach young people and connect citizens across countries via transnational dialogues.
- ▶ When designing citizen dialogues, **create a ‘safe zone’ for honest, two-way communication** where citizens are provided a space to express their opinions, pose questions and engage in meaningful conversations.

35 GLOBSEC, [GLOBSEC Trends 2020](#), December 2020.

