

## Recommendations towards Sustained Inclusive Democratic Participation and Civic Engagement

Within the activities of **EUact2 project** supported by the CERV Action Grant, GLOBSEC, in partnership with ELIAMEP, European Movement Ireland, and the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM), held a two-day-long Transnational Reflection Group event in Bratislava, Slovakia in March 2023. We brought together over 30 young leaders from 11 EU countries, seeking their suggestions on European topics from education to democracy and values, foreign policy and security, and environment and sustainability. Moreover, participants in working group discussions reflected on **developing civic space and citizen participation**, part of EU's Defence of Democracy Package priorities.

With the Commission's planned reveal of the Package, the young leaders took upon proposing their own recommendations connected to **sustained inclusive democratic participation and civic engagement**, by working on the following:

- Top-down channels allowing EU institutions to better reach and engage EU citizens;
- Bottom-up channels enabling EU citizens to impact EU decision-makers;
- Better-tailored and more effective EU strategic communication to reach a more significant number of EU citizens.

Focus was placed on finding new channels and expanding existing ones to increase the reach to more diverse groups of EU citizens. Participants stressed the need for more significant involvement of EU officials engaging and explaining their work within European institutions to ordinary citizens as a knowledge-enhancing tool while furthering indirect democratic legitimacy for the EU. It is recommended to expand the existing EU projects and initiatives, including Europe's day, Erasmus or the Blue Star to reach particularly young people to positively shape their image of the EU.

Furthermore, existing bottom-up channels of engagement should be expanded, especially in relation to creating transnational political and NGO networks and establishing various forms of regular citizen assemblies.

Lastly, reaching citizens is crucial for the European project to stay the best available alternative for them. The EU needs to further work on its outreach, from focusing more on storytelling to breaking the stiff and overcomplicated language barrier, and return prominently with sizable campaigns that account for similarities and differences among member states and the diversity of today's population. Moreover, the EU should establish a "franchise" of the House of European History in every country to strengthen the spirit of belonging to one European family and to facilitate the creation of connections between Europeans through personal experience through pen pals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Recommendations

#### Top-down channels to better reach and engage EU citizens

- Establish a trusted group of **influencers and 'ambassadors'** to motivate students and citizens to participate in various actions, events, and programs;
- **Facilitate meetings** and discussions in schools and cultural centres between acting EU officials, representatives of national government and locals to share their experiences;

- **Provide access to technology**, such as WiFi, TVs, and computers, **to people in need** – used in their communal spaces, to facilitate awareness of local, national and eventually European matters;
- Talk with minorities and other less represented groups and **explain concrete and particular EU benefits** that matter to them and influence their daily lives;
- Involve more **local governments** to bring the EU closer to the local communities – local governments usually know what their communities need and want;
  - Enhance already existing EU links with local, regional, and national governments towards engaging citizens.
- Create a series of **Europe Day** beyond May 8 that would reflect different themes and activities to encourage citizens with various interests to engage;
- **Engage school children** – involve pan-European programs such as the **Blue Star Program** in Ireland;
- **Supplement existing curricula** with European and EU references, such as by speaking more about geography, culture, literature, and art of other European countries, and also striving for school courses on EU civic education and identity;
- **Further enhance the Erasmus program** and expand it to primary schools, high schools, the EU neighbourhood, entrepreneurs, and employees.

#### Bottom-up channels that allow EU citizens to impact EU decision-makers

- Create and enhance **national and transnational networks of schools** that would conduct informal activities about the EU for their pupils, inspired by Euroscola
  - These activities would include “peer parliaments”, where pupils discuss current challenges in the EU followed by presentations to MEPs, interaction with other students, and visits to the European Parliament (Brussels, Strasbourg);
- Support the creation of **branches of European political groups at national universities**
  - This would increase political awareness about the EU while transcending national political issues/conflicts;
  - European political groups would have active and regular feedback from politically active young people about their policies.
- Facilitate the creation of a **pan-European civil society**
  - Striving towards a common platform - an open but safe space for expression that will be reachable and regarded as useful by ordinary citizens, various civil society organizations and diverse populations;
  - EU institutions would then consult this platform, engage with return communication, and submit yearly reports on which proposals they have followed up.
- Organise **more editions of the Conference on the Future of Europe** on national and regional levels;
  - Allow to be partly conducted through an online platform to become more affordable and democratic;
  - The regularity in time will increase knowledge and engagement as long as the process is accessible, accounts for the topics of interest in the country, region, or municipality, and draws a direct connection to the EU through two-way communication;
  - EU institutions would gain more direct access to citizens and can drive policies based on these interactions.
- Organise **citizen assemblies** in every member state inspired by those in Ireland:

- The principle of random selection is essential, while also tracking if less engaged groups are reached;
- Incorporate the role of regular consultations with experts, local and national decision-makers;
- Conduct a vote on the proposed policies – although the vote would not be legally binding, it could carry a strong moral value further publicised by media;
- Organise a regular **European Youth Parliament**:
  - Allowing young people to make actual proposals to the Commission and the European Parliament is a good way to empower young people.
- Similarly, **citizen panels** could be organised on an annual basis, in parallel with the European Council summits or various Council formations:
  - Citizen panels would be more focused and smaller constellations;
  - Reflections by citizen panels would be delivered to the Council, Commission, and European Parliament for a check on alignment with citizens.
- Adjust the requirements for a successful **European Citizens' Initiative**:
  - Provide the possibility to use verified digital signatures

### Stratcom for the EU

- **Simplify the political language** to be more understandable and reliable;
- Try to use **storytelling** in communication towards citizens as much and as widely as possible, thus reasserting European values without “being a teacher” or a “Brussels diktat”;
- Deploy vigorous **pro-EU ad campaigns** featuring well-known personalities;
  - These campaigns should not be only around the time of European Parliament elections but also have a regular presence;
  - Collaborate on regular basis with interesting and influential artists who spread the message in unique ways (through animation, songs, kids plays, etc.).
- Tell **citizens' real stories** enjoying the benefits of EU membership, such as working, studying, living, or interacting across the EU, focusing on applying a Benefit Oriented Approach;
- Support the streamlining of the concept of **the House of European History** (museum of European Identity and History located in Brussels) into other member states;
- Support the initiative of **social media pen pals** where voluntary participants would share their contact data to be connected with Europeans living in other MS.