

## Citizens' Engagement for Ensuring the European Union Democracy

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### ABSTRACT

*The future of the European Union depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values that underpin its functioning, and democracy is one of those values, along with freedom, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including those of minorities. The commitment of citizens to participate in the democratic life of the European Union, ensuring free and transparent access to European democracy, strengthening the democracy of the European Union are challenges and, at the same time, perspectives that we have focused on in this article, starting from theoretical aspects that the construction of the European Union is based on, how European democracy materializes and is regulated at the level of European Union legislation, but also how citizens are involved in decision-making and public policy adoption at European level, including possible improvements, if any. In order to achieve the proposed objective, the literature, the legislation of the European Union, but also the topical issues that European democracy faces (brought to the public's attention through the Conference for Europe) were subjected to analysis. In addition, various statistical data provided by the European Union were analysed in order to capture a more complete picture of democracy and the commitment of citizens to the democratic life of the European Union. The key role of European democracy in the functioning of the European Union, the commitment of citizens and their inclusion in a consultative process offered by the Conference for Europe make us appreciate the need to apply as many democratic exercises as possible to develop, strengthen and protect European democracy, an essential factor ensuring the optimal functioning of the European Union.*



**KEYWORDS:** *European citizens, Conference for Europe, fundamental values, resilient democracy, European elections.*

## 1. Introduction

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The commitment and participation of European citizens in ensuring the democracy of the European Union finds its legitimacy in the fundamental values and principles on which the European Union operates. As the European Union has evolved, European democracy continues to capture the attention of the general public, on the one hand, by adapting to the present common realities and, on the other hand, by relating to the specific characteristics and challenges of each Member State. It is visible that the participation of citizens in the democratic life of the European Union takes on most diverse forms, and in the context generated by the physical distance caused by the SARS-COV-2 pandemic, these forms increasingly include digital tools, thus ensuring transparency, a sense of proximity, accessibility, openness to the European citizen, especially in relation to the European administration.

The future of the European Union depends on respect for fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, including those of minorities, and the mechanisms for citizen participation in the life of the Union, which should lead to better results also play an important role of public activity at European Union level. Thus, the visibility, acceptance and efficiency of public policies would be improved, at least theoretically.

In this context, the commitment and participation of citizens in the democratic life of the European Union is a key priority for the future of Europe, and the introduction of legislative mechanisms or various models to ensure the premises and even the applicability of civil participation are matters of concern for European decision makers.

This paper is a presentation of the impact of citizens' contribution to European democracy, not only by participating in the European elections which take place every five years, but also by actively involving citizens in shaping the future of the European Union.



At the same time, we aimed to highlight the mechanisms needed for active participation in strengthening European democracy, but also the perspectives and challenges currently facing the European Union, a central element of research being the recent initiative of the European Union to organize a conference - Conference for Europe, where European citizens can participate in events, present ideas or even organize events, thus contributing to the protection of European democracy, to the reshaping of European Union policies, etc. This conference seeks to identify answers to questions such as: What kind of European Union do we want to see in the future? What works well in the EU and what could be improved?<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this article is to present the actions recently taken by the European Union related to organizing the Conference for Europe, combining theoretical and practical aspects, in order to relaunch the project of integration and consolidation of European democracy.

Having as a starting point the idea/the concept that democracy in the European Union requires key actors - the citizen, the states, the entire institutional edifice of the European Union - through this research we tried to highlight the advantages of these new initiatives recently implemented by the European Union, but also the risks they entail, the uncertainty that looms over the unforeseeable future of the European Union being one of them.

Finally, by intertwining aspects of the literature, European Union legislation, with the initiatives and current issues facing European democracy, including the inclusion of citizens in a consultative process provided by the Conference for Europe, analysing various statistical data provided by the European Union, we tried to capture a faithful picture of the current democracy and the commitment of citizens to the democratic life of the European Union, being aware that a collaborative environment and as many democratic exercises as possible are needed to develop, strengthen and protect European democracy.

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<sup>1</sup>European Parliament Research Service, *Citizens' engagement and expectations of The Conference on the Future of Europe*, p.1 available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698025/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)698025\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698025/EPRS_BRI(2021)698025_EN.pdf)



## **2.Methodology**

Mainly various qualitative but also quantitative methods were used to achieve the proposed objective, by researching the literature, also relevant information collected from national and international reference databases, as well as by using statistical data, involving the study and interpretation of information gathered on European democracy and citizens' commitment to strengthening European democracy. The historical and comparative methods have been mainly used to highlight the evolution over time of consolidating democracy in the European Union, in terms of the commitment and participation of citizens in the democratic life of the Union.

The documentation is based on the research of bibliographic resources and information provided on the official pages of the European Union institutions, the conclusions drawn giving us the opportunity to assess the impact of new initiatives launched by the European Union to encourage active participation in the democratic life of the European Union. At the same time, in the elaboration of the conclusions, the interpretation of the statistical data represented a catalyst of ideas, offering an applied vision of the legislation, the specialized literature and of the mechanisms regulated at the level of the European Union.

In this article, we have focused mainly on the recent initiative of the European Union to organize a conference - Conference for Europe, where, as mentioned above, European citizens contribute to the protection of European democracy, and to the reshaping of Union policies, closely following the current perspectives and challenges in the field of democracy at European Union level.

## **3.Theoretical aspects of the commitment of citizens to participate in the democratic life of the European Union**

To begin with, we will try to carry out research based on the functioning of the European Union and ensuring democracy at Member State level, giving citizens the opportunity to

participate in decision-making, which is extremely important in determining the effectiveness of European governance.

As the construction of the European Union is inspired by Europe's cultural, religious and humanist heritage<sup>2</sup>, and its universal values such as democracy, freedom, equality and the rule of law are emblematic for it and for the Member States, all these factors compel us to continue the process of “creating an ever closer union between the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as close as possible to the citizens”, so that European integration progresses. That is why Title II of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) contains provisions on the democratic principles underlying the functioning of the European Union, based on respect for the principle of equality of its citizens and the regulation of the concept of European citizenship, continuing with the fact that the functioning of the European Union is based on the principle of representative democracy (art. 10). In more detail, it states that citizens are represented directly, at Union level, in the European Parliament. Member States shall be represented in the European Council by their Heads of State or Government and in the Council by their Governments, who shall in turn be democratically accountable either to their national parliaments or to their nationals. Practically, “every citizen has the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions are taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen”, and political parties at European level are those which” contribute to the formation of the European political consciousness and to the expression of the will of the citizens of the Union”.

Article 11 of the TEU further complements these democratic principles, clarifying the competence of the institutions of the European Union to give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make their views known and to exchange views in public, in all areas of Union action. Thus, “the Union institutions maintain an open, transparent and constant dialogue with representative associations and civil society”, with the European Commission having the role to appeal through stakeholder consultations in order to ensure the coherence and transparency of the Union's actions. The citizens' initiative - an essential tool for ensuring

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<sup>2</sup>For more details on the European Union see the Treaty on European Union, consolidated version, published in the Official Journal of the European Union no. C 326 dated 26.10.2012, available at [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0001.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF)



participatory democracy in the European Union - is discussed<sup>3</sup>, by mentioning the conditions underlying the formation of the European Citizens' Initiative. Moreover, with regard to the European Citizens' Initiative, we can say that the current European legislative framework - Regulation (EU) 2019/788, aims to “make the European Citizens' Initiative more accessible, less burdensome”, “to strengthen the actions taken following the citizens’ initiatives , in order to fully exploit their potential as a tool to stimulate debate”; in addition to these statements, it is considered that in order for a European citizens' initiative to be “effective, transparent, clear, simple, easy to apply, accessible to people with disabilities and proportionate to the nature of this instrument”, procedures and conditions need to be met in order to ensure “a judicious balance between rights and obligations”<sup>4</sup>.

In this regard, even if perhaps the most important instrument demonstrating participation in the democratic life of the European Union is the European Parliamentary elections held every five years, given that the will of the people must be the basis of state authority<sup>5</sup>, and the turnout in the last elections in 2019 was the highest compared to the last elections, thus demonstrating the vitality of European democracy, we can not fail to point out that there is still a need for European citizens to play an increasingly important role in the decision-making process of the European Union. They must act in the same direction and ensure the transparency and integrity of the legislative process. Building a resilient democracy means promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom and combating misinformation<sup>6</sup>, so in the following we will focus on what is believed to contribute to building a resilient democracy, namely the Conference on the Future of Europe.

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<sup>3</sup>It is also governed by the provisions of Article 24 (1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and by Regulation (EU) 2019/788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the European Citizens' Initiative.

<sup>4</sup>For more details see Regulation (EU) 2019/788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the European Citizens' Initiative, published in the Official Journal of the European Union L 130/55 of 17.5.2019.

<sup>5</sup>Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>6</sup>See *The Action Plan for European Democracy?*, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en)

#### **4. Conference on the future of Europe - a consultative process of the European Union for the protection of European democracy**

We want to bring to the forefront the Conference on the Future of Europe, an event where the institutions of the European Union<sup>7</sup> - The European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission - have taken on the responsibility to take into account the voice of citizens and come up with concrete solutions to their initiatives, with the spring of 2022 being the deadline for the conference to draw conclusions and perspectives on the issues that the European Union confronts during this time. Page | 75

To begin with, it should be noted that all those who understand to participate in the proceedings of the Conference (citizens and / or event organizers), a first meeting being on September 17, 2021, must comply with the provisions of the Conference Charter, assuming respect for European values<sup>8</sup>, coming up with constructive and concrete proposals, on a voluntary basis, encouraging diversity in debates, respecting freedom of expression, encouraging the transversal participation of citizens, guaranteeing compliance with EU data protection rules, etc.

Although at first glance one might think that the purpose of organizing this conference serves the European Union, we must specify that in our opinion this conference crosses the union borders, relating individually to the challenges and perspectives of each state, the political objectives of the great European powers finding their basis in this conference.

We emphasize that “a key aspect of this initiative is to bring the public closer to the EU institutions, to listen to people's concerns, to involve them directly in the Conference process and to provide an appropriate and meaningful response. In this regard, the ambition is to set up pan-European discussion forums, for the first time, in which citizens of all Member States can debate

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<sup>7</sup>Moroianu Zlătescu, I., Marinică C.E., 2020, *Instituțiile Uniunii Europene*, Bucharest, Romania: Ed. Universul Academic și Editura Universitară, p.49 et seq.

<sup>8</sup>Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.



EU priorities and make recommendations, which should be taken into account by the political and institutional powers that be and, in particular, ideally, translated into practical measures”<sup>9</sup>.

Starting from the idea of an exercise of participatory democracy of the citizens of the European Union, the scheduled duration of this conference was two years, the year 2021 representing the year in which it started. Thus, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2021, under the auspices of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, the *Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe . Dialogue with citizens to promote democracy - Building a more resilient Europe*<sup>10</sup> was adopted; it provides the general public with information on the concept, mandate, organization and objectives of the Conference. The statement emphasized that “the European Union must show that it can respond to the concerns and ambitions of its citizens. European policy must provide inclusive responses to our tasks that define the current generation: achieving the green and digital transition, while strengthening Europe's resilience, its social contract and the competitiveness of European industry. European policy must address inequalities and ensure that the European Union has a fair, sustainable, innovative and competitive economy that leaves no one behind. In order to address the geopolitical challenges of the post-COVID-19 global environment, Europe needs to assert itself more, taking a leading role at international level in promoting its values and standards in a world increasingly marked by disorders”. In the literature<sup>11</sup> it is stated that “the Joint Declaration can be seen as an instrument for revitalizing EU constitutionalism” despite the absence in the Declaration of any reference to constitutional terminology.

Based on these aspirations, it is appreciated that this Conference “will open a new space for debate with citizens in order to address Europe's challenges and priorities”, the European Union institutions with competences in this area committing to listening to European citizens and to taking action following the recommendations made after holding the conference, “to support the

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<sup>9</sup>Kotanidis, S., European Parliamentary Research Service, *Conference on the Future of Europe*, May 2021, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)690590](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2021)690590)

<sup>10</sup>For more details see the text of the Declaration available at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/ro\\_-\\_declaratie\\_comuna\\_referitoare\\_la\\_conferinta\\_privind\\_viitorul\\_europei.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/ro_-_declaratie_comuna_referitoare_la_conferinta_privind_viitorul_europei.pdf)

<sup>11</sup>Avbelj, M., *Revitalisation of EU Constitutionalism (2021)* 46 *European Law Review* 3 in Fabbrini, F., *The Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe: Process, Promises, Pitfalls* (April 19, 2021). BRIDGE Network Working Paper Series No 13, 2021, p. 7, available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3829601> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3829601>





legitimacy and democratic functioning of the European project, as well as to promote the support of EU citizens for our common goals and values, giving them new opportunities to express themselves”<sup>12</sup>.

The creation of a platform where European citizens can authenticate based on a user name and password provides security, a pre-set circuit, data confidentiality, and the topics on which citizens can express opinions are among the most varied and current, as follows: Climate change and the environment, health, the economy, social justice, jobs, the EU in the world, values and rights, the rule of law, security, digital transformation, European democracy, migration, education, culture, youth and sports.

On this platform, a number of 800 citizens of the European Union, namely 4 discussion groups<sup>13</sup> of 200 participants chosen at random, but with the assurance of representativeness for the diversity of the European Union, will contribute to the consolidation and completion of representative democracy, in a way that is as inclusive as possible. Separately there is a diverse range of panels represented by the civic component. All this will culminate in the plenary session of the conference (in which the three institutions of the European Union will work together: the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council, and will be joined by the European Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee); conclusions will be drawn and the result of the activity on the panels will be presented; simultaneously, a series of decentralized events will be organized.

The panels will focus on topics such as: 1) climate change and the environment, 2) health, 3) a stronger economy, social justice and jobs, 4) the EU’s presence in the world, 5) values and rights, the rule of law, security, 6) digital transformation, 7) European democracy, 8) migration, 9) education, culture, youth and sports and 10) other subjects. Reports will be prepared periodically in order to identify the topics of interest to citizens and the proposals made by them in this regard. There are currently two interim reports on the platform, prepared in August 2021 and September 2021, respectively. The first report presents in summary form the contributions made on each

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup>In each group, young people aged between 16 and 25 will represent a third.



panel, until August 2, 2021, namely no less than 19,679 contributions, which are in the form of advancing 6115 ideas, 11879 comments and 1685 organized events<sup>14</sup>. The second report states that until September 7, 22498 contributions were registered, broken down into 7115 ideas, 13304 comments and 2079 organized events<sup>15</sup>.

Regarding Romania's contribution, at the end of the first report<sup>16</sup> it counted 160 contributions, and after the second report<sup>17</sup> it counted 237 contributions, ranking 16th, a relatively middle position in the ranking of Member States. However, compared to the first 6 countries in the ranking (Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Spain) or compared to the last two (Cyprus and Estonia) the difference is significant, as it is shown in the table below.

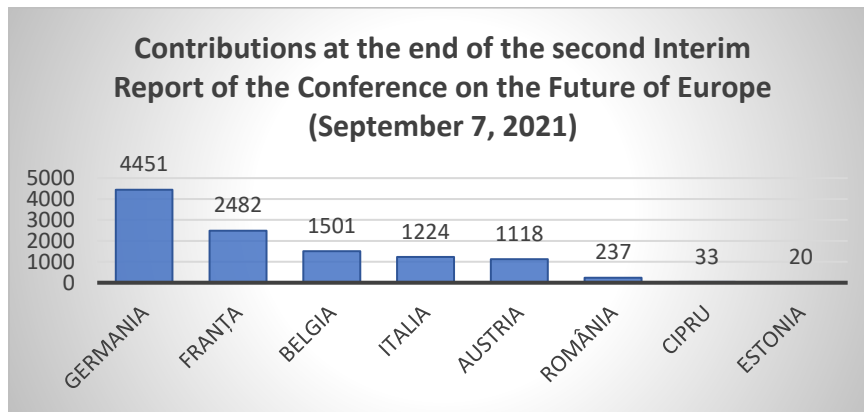


Figure 1: Romania's contributions compared to other states, at the end of the second Interim Report of the Conference on the Future of Europe (September 7, 2021)  
elaboration of author. Source: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

<sup>14</sup>For more details see *The First Interim Report August 2021 on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe* available at <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

<sup>15</sup>For more details see *The Second Interim Report August 2021 on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe* available at <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

<sup>16</sup>For more details see *The First Interim Report August 2021 on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe* available at <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

<sup>17</sup>For more details see *The Second Interim Report August 2021 on the Multilingual Digital Platform of the Conference on the Future of Europe* available at <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>, p.13.

However, if we refer to the volume of contributions per country, by reference to one million inhabitants, during 19.04.2021-07.09.2021<sup>18</sup>, Romania surpasses only Poland, counting a total of 12 contributions per million inhabitants, compared to 173 in Malta, or 138 in Luxembourg. From this point of view, we could appreciate that countries with a small population are more advantageous in this comparison, but the reality is that compared to a larger population, the lack of involvement is worrying.

Regarding the gender of the participants<sup>19</sup>, most of them are men, and the most common age group is 55-69 years old, with a percentage of 22 and almost equal to it, the one between 25-39 years old, with a percentage of 21.

Concerning the panels<sup>20</sup>, most of the contributions which reveal the interest of European citizens, are held by the panel dedicated to “European Democracy” with 4026 contributions, followed by the panel dedicated to “Climate Change and Environment” with 3791, in third place the panel “Other ideas” (2963 contributions), and at the end of the ranking there is the panel “Health” (1159 contributions).

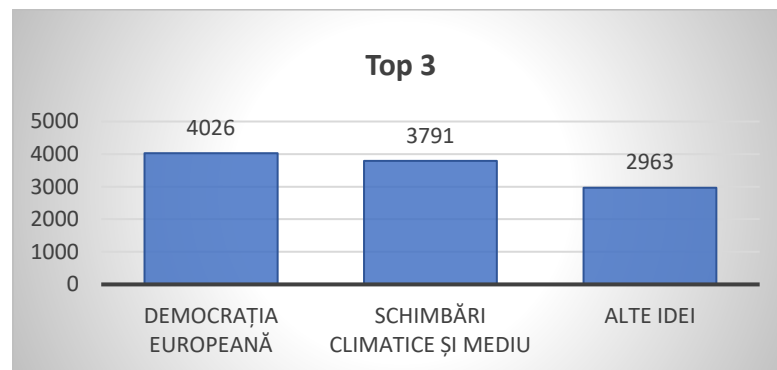


Figure 2: Top 3 panels as volume of contributions, at the end of the second Interim Report of the Conference on the Future of Europe (7 September 2021) elaboration of author. Source: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

<sup>18</sup>*Ibidem*, p.13, figure.3.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibidem*, p.14, figure 4.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibidem*, p.15, figure.5.

As the subject of this article concerns the involvement of citizens in ensuring that European democracy is upheld, it should be noted that the panel dedicated to “European Democracy” “counted 1,129 ideas, 2524 comments and 373 events presented on the digital platform”<sup>21</sup>.

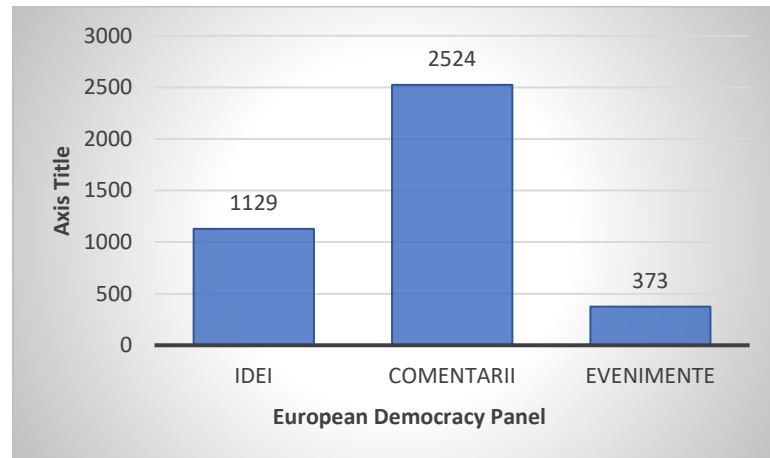


Figure 3: Contributions to the European Democracy Panel at the end of the second Interim Report of the Conference on the Future of Europe (7 September 2021) elaboration of author. Source: <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/reporting>

Participants considered topics of interest such as: federalisation of the European Union, institutional reforms, elections to the European Parliament, representation of citizens, citizen participation and citizen consultations, media, languages and the promotion of the European spirit, protection and strengthening of democracy. We turned our attention to the proposal for institutional reform at the level of the European Union because, following this reform, we want to “make them more efficient and transparent and bring them closer to the citizens”. Also, referring to the European Parliament, “participants most often request that it be given real legislative initiative”<sup>22</sup>, to be given budgetary competence, etc. At the same time, “discussing the European Council and the Council of the European Union, a recurring idea presented on the platform is to

<sup>21</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 52.

move to a qualified majority vote to end national veto power”<sup>23</sup>, establishing at the same time the role of the Council in the institutional structure of the EU. As for the European Commission, “a number of contributions discuss the election of the President of the Commission and the appointment of Commissioners, including the procedure of the top candidates (Spitzenkandidaten), as well as the direct election by the citizens of the President of the Commission. In addition, mention should be made of the reform of the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, in order to ensure their more efficient functioning. [...] The idea of having a directly elected EU President by merging the roles of President of the European Commission and the European Council is widely discussed”<sup>24</sup>.

Regarding the elections for the European Parliament<sup>25</sup>, they too are facing a series of reform proposals aimed at “changing the way elections for the European Parliament are organized, as a way of creating a stronger civic engagement in the EU's democratic processes. One of the most discussed proposals concerns the creation of transnational electoral lists at EU level to encourage candidates to focus on European issues, rather than domestic ones”. Of course, there are other proposals that aim to increase turnout in the European elections, including the possibility of introducing compulsory voting or a variant of facilitating participation to be ensured by introducing voting by mail or on the Internet. Age is another aspect discussed by the participants, 16 years being preferred as the minimum voting age.

Citizen participation and citizen consultations<sup>26</sup> pursue a better involvement of citizens in the decision-making process at the level of the European Union, ensuring they are accountable, the EU also wants to identify other strategies to ensure “participatory democracy and interaction between citizens, to strengthen and complete representative democracy, including by leveraging the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe”. The proposals aimed at “a more systematic use of citizens' assemblies and expert groups to prepare the most important and difficult political decisions in the EU”, the creation of an “online digital forum” in which EU citizens could

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 53.

discuss EU law, using a system of positive votes and comments similar to the architecture of social media platforms, “creating a platform” for lobbying citizens, as an alternative way for ordinary EU citizens and smaller businesses to channel their expertise and opinions on legislation in the EU decision-making process”, even suggesting the creation of a “one-stop shop online platform that centralizes all public contributions, whether it is European citizens' initiatives, complaints or petitions, in the participatory institutional architecture of the EU, the organization of referendums at EU level as an alternative to national referendums on institutional issues, EU policy” etc.

As for the representation of citizens<sup>27</sup>, the discussions start from a different approach to the matter depending on the generation it is addressed to, so there are “proposals to have a European Commissioner dedicated to the elderly and to give young people the opportunity to present their points on a regular basis within the European Parliament”, including “an idea to create a list that respects gender parity in elections to the European Parliament”. The idea of creating “a European citizenship not linked to the citizenship of an EU Member State” is also discussed, as this idea is closely linked to the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union; another aspect related to the rights deriving from European citizenship concerns the allowing “non-EU citizens living in a Member State for a long time to vote in their country of residence in the European elections”.

The plenary session of the Conference, the place where the final decisions are taken, is subject to some Rules of Procedure of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and its composition is relatively varied. Thus we speak of 449 representatives divided into: 108 representatives of the European Parliament, 108 representatives of national parliaments, 80 representatives of citizens' panels, 54 representatives of the Council, 27 representatives of national panels or events, 18 representatives of the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, 12 representatives from the social partners, 8 from civil society organizations, 6 elected representatives of local authorities from each region, 3 representatives from the European Commission, and the President of the European Youth Forum. The Executive Committee is the

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.



decisional body that prepares the final report of the conference, which will be made available to the public on the multilingual digital platform.

At the end of this section, it remains to be seen whether beyond the optimism of the Conference's initiators, especially France, there are doubts concerning the extent to which the Conference will succeed in meeting the expectations of the European Union and its Member States, such being the position of some Member States during this period<sup>28</sup>, including regarding this conference. Even the chosen period is considered inappropriate, as the challenges facing the European Union today are among the most delicate and sensitive, with devastating effects on the health of citizens following the SARS-COV2 pandemic, as well as a possible economic crisis; The European Union must respond to these challenges promptly and as efficiently as possible, in the spirit of human rights and freedoms, solidarity and the public policies it has promoted over time.

Along the same lines, “the initiative of a group of 12 Member States has joined forces to reduce the outcome of the long-awaited Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) - seen as an opportunity to have an inclusive dialogue with citizens on the way forward for the EU”<sup>29</sup>. States such as Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden “have established a list of common interests”, which “include topics such as the state of law, digital transition, recovering following the pandemic, climate policies and migration challenges”, arguing that this “conference should not create legal obligations”, sending a clear signal to the European Parliament - which had previously called for improvements in EU democracy before the next 2024 European elections<sup>30</sup>. The same article also mentions that, in the opinion of MEPs, “CoFoE will be an opportunity to examine issues such as strengthening the process of the main candidate (Spitzenkandidaten), setting up a European electoral authority or creating transnational lists”.

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<sup>28</sup>Ex. Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden. Austria, together with Ireland, Greece, Spain and Hungary, signed the Declaration in order to increase the visibility of the Conference.

<sup>29</sup>For more details see Sánchez, N. E., *Dozen EU states spell out 'Future of Europe' priorities*, Brussels, 23 March 2021, available at <https://euobserver.com/democracy/151319>

<sup>30</sup>*Ibidem*.



## 5. Conclusions

In this paper we wanted to emphasize that an increased participation in the democratic life of the European Union can only be a positive factor for its evolution, demonstrating how healthy European democracy is, while giving citizens the opportunity to get more and more involved in decision-making and policy-making at European level. This is also the reason why this initiative was created - the Conference on the Future of Europe, its main objective being to strengthen the resilience of the democracies in the Member States.

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However, even if the aim of the Conference is not fully achieved, we believe that it can be seen as a prelude to the future prospects and projects for the European Union to pursue. Why? Because it provides a current diagnosis of the challenges to which European citizens believe that the European Union must actively respond, strengthening the idea of democratic exercise, resilient democracy, civic participation, accountability and transparency. It is appreciated that if it remains in the discussion stage, this conference will be a disappointment for the citizens, as once it has been launched it is necessary to prove to the citizens that their voice is heard and their contribution is considered seriously. Otherwise, the participation of citizens in the democratic life of the European Union may fall sharply, in addition to the critical current figures, which would be a severe blow to the future of the European Union, stressing that it has failed to ensure compliance and promoting one's own core values.

We cannot help but wonder if, through the development and permanent updating of these participatory instruments in the democratic life of the European Union, the result obtained is not necessarily the expected one, more precisely if a better understanding, awareness, involvement and application is not obtained from those that already play similar roles (to a greater or lesser extent), updating the instruments of participation by focusing more quickly on reinterpreting their relationship with the European Union and the Member States.

We support the idea that “The Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe has opened a process to reflect on the EU for the next generation. Despite the inherent ambiguities of the Declaration, the Conference on the Future of Europe is a potentially promising initiative,





which is reminiscent of prior out of the box enterprises to relaunch the project of European integration, such as the Conference of Messina and the Convention on the Future of Europe”<sup>31</sup>.

At the same time “it is clear that the EU must start a serious reflection on itself, with a view to increasing the effectiveness and legitimacy of its governance system. From this point of view, the Conference on the Future of Europe represents an important opportunity to take stock of the positives of the EU – something that people visibly experienced during Brexit. In fact, according to the Joint Declaration, the Conference should be a citizens-focused bottom-up exercise to identify citizens’ priorities for the EU’s future. Yet the Conference should also tackle what is not working within the EU system of governance”<sup>32</sup>.

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