

# BUILDING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP: FROM ELECTORAL REFORM TO PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

By Vladislava Gubalova,  
Senior Fellow, GLOBSEC Centre for Global Europe



The 2024 European Parliament elections are here. Yet, even though proposals for electoral reform abound, these elections will be no different procedurally than the past ones. The sense of citizens' agency will be just the same and bolstering of the EU's democratic legitimacy will mostly only stay in words. Toppled with the most likely scenario of far-right surge in the new European Parliament (EP), it is urgent to start acting in building European citizenship and work from the bottom up to avert future erosion of the Union's legitimacy and further citizens' disenchantment.

---

## THE ELECTORAL REFORM PROPOSALS

---

There have been times of heightened discourse on the need for electoral reform at an EU level, providing for numerous suggestions (e.g., around Brexit, Emanuel Marcon's Sorbonne speech) but rarely have led to concrete steps by the decision-makers.

Ahead of the 2024 elections and with the Conference of the Future of Europe conclu-

sions, in May 2022 the EP voted favorably to advance a new proposal for more comprehensive reforms in the European Electoral Act. The proposal included among others: the creation of transnational lists to elect twenty-eight additional MEPs (an EU-wide constituency), common minimum ages for candidates and voters, a common minimum electoral threshold (building up on the 2018 Council decision for larger national constituencies<sup>(1)</sup>) and establishing a quota to ensure gender equality.

Benefits of reforming the current European electoral process have been for long highlighted. These include the potential empowerment of citizens and actual bolstering of the overall democratic legitimacy of the Union, cultivating European identity and community, and elevation of the legitimacy and accountability of the EU institutions. To the very least the introduction of small size transnational list (28 seats out of 720 in 2024) can serve as useful experiment. However, no real advancement has been observed in the last 20 years. The Council did not move forward with the latest proposal.

The issue of constructing transnational

“... IT IS URGENT TO START ACTING IN BUILDING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP AND WORK FROM THE BOTTOM UP TO AVERT FUTURE EROSION OF THE UNION’S LEGITIMACY AND FURTHER CITIZENS’ DISENCHANTMENT.”

lists is often related to the process of appointing the President of the European Commission. The idea of giving even more say to the citizens in choosing the Commission president through the Spitzenkandidaten<sup>(2)</sup> procedure seems reasonable. Yet, in the current system and observing the 2024 pre-EP election preparations by the European parties—the possibility is all but gone. Nevertheless, appointment of the Commission president through a legally binding interinstitutional agreement between the Council and the EP would be highly beneficial for the transparency and the credibility of the President.

In the context of surging far-right, anti-systemic and Eurosceptical parties ahead of the EP elections, there is the lingering feel of major missed opportunities in bolstering the sense of ownership and engagement by the European citizens, in making advanced towards a more unified European community and in strengthening the legitimacy of the Union, democratically and institutionally.

Certainly, any reforms come with challenges. In the case of transnational lists, for example, these include non-exhaustively: the balance between all MS (small, mid-sized and

large)<sup>(3)</sup>, the harmonization of the election procedures, their implementation and financing, logistical difficulties of transnational campaigns, and challenges with voting preparations. Not to the least reforms require unanimity within the Council, the formal assent of the EP and the ratification of all national parliaments—a process that can take years. ►

(1) The Decision related to setting a minimum threshold of entry (2-5%) in large constituencies/large member states (MS). It has not been ratified by all MS and therefore is not at disposal for the upcoming elections.

(2) The term Spitzenkandidaten has been not successful in gathering support to the process itself and should be dropped from use.

(3) Even though the geographical balance proposed by the EP rapporteur in the 2022 Proposal is more effectively respected than in the previous proposal, it remains a concern.

---

▶ same OLD, same OLD...

---

There is reassurance in the known. Having the EP elections as virtually twenty-seven separate national elections, with little involvement and engagement from the European parties locally makes it all too comfortable for the member states. So far EP elections, especially in the Central and Eastern European countries, have been focused almost exclusively on domestic issues.

Yet, there is not much appetite to transform the EP elections campaigns as more European-minded, rather the preference lays in nationalizing the EP elections. National parties see an additional platform to present themselves to the local voters as a springboard for next national elections. Such outlook on the 'use' of the EP election for domestic gains, hardly leaves place for the possibility of transnational lists introduction, which would necessitate also European-wide campaign with European issues on the agenda.

Furthermore, many national parties make little effort to explain the transnational dimension of these elections. The absence of connecting their campaigns to their European

party family, questions the transparency of the process and stifles awareness-raising and visibility of the European dimension of the European elections.

Similarly, European parties' leadership, structures or their links to different national parties are practically unknown to the ordinary citizens. Such 'Brussels is too far' separation is a missed opportunity to engage voters in a meaningful and sustainable manner. With the possibility for much more Eurosceptic European Parliament to be elected this year, the mainstream parties seem disengaged and slow, still comfortable even if their positions will erode (seats loss).

---

## WHAT TO DO?

---

In the current state, where the probability for forthcoming election reform is not encouraging, focusing on building citizens' sense of European identity from below can be one possible step in achieving their empowerment. Consequentially, their heightened awareness and regular involvement in various participatory formats has the potential of building a demand for change from below.

Some important lessons can be learned from the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE). Beyond the final conclusions which ambitiously point out at reforms in all European policies and dimensions (often necessitating treaty changes), the process itself is perhaps the most valuable benefit for the citizens. While in countries like Ireland or France participatory and deliberative democratic mechanisms have been demanded, facilitated, and successfully implemented, in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) these are relatively rare, unknown, and even if enacted often not implemented successfully.

On the one hand, the COFE process exposed the lack of participation culture in the CEE. It was seen at times from the approach by the national governments, conducting pro forma activities and stifling the potential for actual participation. In other cases, as in

“THE SUCCESS OF SUSTAINABLE AND REGULAR CITIZENS' ENGAGEMENT DEPENDS ON EFFORTS FROM MULTITUDE OF STAKEHOLDERS FROM NATIONAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES TO CIVIL SOCIETY, LOCAL AND EUROPEAN PARTIES, AND EU INSTITUTIONS.”

Slovakia, the government proceeded with serious commitment to the exercise. For the most parts the effort was not immediately rewarded. The participation was mainly triggered by the usual suspects, gaping holes were exposed in lack of knowledge and interest of the population in deliberating European issues.

On the other hand, through the exposure of some COFE activities an opportunity came about to learn what deliberative democracy might look like, to start on building a sustainable culture of participation. Most CEE countries are celebrating this year 20 years since their accession into the EU. The societies have transformed significantly since their communist past. However, often there is lingering sense of that communist legacy in hesitation to be part of participatory actions, to speak up, to ask questions. Toppled with continued prioritization of daily socio-economic challenges in most debates related to European affairs, the participatory culture in the region is lower to in their Western European and Nordic counterparts. With new generations basing themselves in the digital space, where one click is enough to become a participant in a debate, CEE societies, given the right learning process, can accelerate in bolstering meaningful citizens engagement.

The success of sustainable and regular citizens' engagement depends on efforts from multitude of stakeholders from national and local authorities to civil society, local and European parties, and EU institutions. Some recommendations could be advanced for next steps.

**First**, improvement of EU participatory instruments. Currently, there are many such tools (e.g., European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), petitions to the EP, citizens' dialogues, and public consultations). However, often only already committed entities or citizens with high awareness and expertise take advantage of the set participatory channels. These should become more visible through European-wide public campaigns and approachable through user friendly online platforms and accounting for different groups' needs in in-situ formats.

Furthermore, crucially the instruments need to conduct significant connections to

actual decision-making. Without real follow up on the results of these activities the participation loses its meaning and fails to serve its purpose—engaging and empowering citizens (contributing to the overall democratic legitimacy of the Union). Therefore, rather than designing more and new tools strengthening the existing ones is a worth investment. For example, Citizens' Panels, an element with high success during COFE, should be permanently institutionalized to become not only a regularly used mechanism but to have an integral contributing part to drafting, evaluating, and reorienting EU policies.

**Second**, the European Parliament elections should be approached through a different paradigm. An initial step is to create a participatory element in debating the party platforms (European party citizens panels) and at national level some sort of primaries for the EP candidates. It carries the potential for bolstering linkages between citizens, national parties and European parties and increasing the commitment from citizens.

Another step in the right direction would be launching election campaigns much earlier. When asked citizens often state that the European elections are secondary in importance for them. Instead of seeking solutions on how to entice voters, parties have resigned to such reality. Candidates are often revealed just couple months before with little to no awareness- raising until the very end. Such leisurely approach to campaigning not only prevents the building of engaged citizenship but also falls prey to disinformation and malign influence.

Citizens of the European Union are concerned. It is time to invest in building European citizenship, a committed community that, given the shaped opportunities and redirecting European policies, can truly contribute to the future of the Union. To achieve this goal, it is essential to recognize and address the obstacles to participation and engagement, tackling the roots of the problem and fostering a culture of active participation within the EU.

This entails not only revising and improving existing mechanisms but also innovating ►

# “ESTABLISHING YOUTH COUNCILS AT THE EU, NATIONAL, AND LOCAL LEVELS CAN PROVIDE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A VALUABLE AVENUE TO EXPRESS THEIR IDEAS AND CONTRIBUTE TO PUBLIC DEBATE.”

- in how we conceive citizen participation and political engagement. It is crucial to make EU politics more accessible and understandable for its citizens, breaking down the perceived barriers of distance and complexity that often separate EU institutions from its citizens.

Civic education plays a significant role in this context, informing citizens not only about their rights but also about their responsibilities as active members of the European community. Educational initiatives should emphasize the importance of political participation and how each citizen can contribute to European democracy, whether through voting, participating in citizen dialogues, or engaging in local and European initiatives.

Furthermore, leveraging technology and digital platforms to facilitate broader and more inclusive participation can play a transformative role. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown societies' capacity to adapt to virtual forms of communication and participation, thus opening new avenues for democratic engagement.

Finally, it is imperative to restore trust in EU institutions and in the European democratic process. This requires increased transparency, accountability, and effective communication on how decisions are made and how citizens can influence those decisions. Strengthening the legitimacy and cred-

ibility of EU institutions involves the active involvement of citizens in the political and decision-making process.

Building an engaged and informed European citizenship is a long-term project that will require continuous and concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including EU institutions, member states, civil society, and most importantly, the citizens themselves. It is only through active and informed participation that we can hope to build a stronger, more united, and more democratic European Union for future generations.

The path to a more engaged and democratic European Union lies in the ability to translate civic engagement from concept into concrete action. This means creating tangible opportunities for citizens to play an active role in policymaking not only at the European level but also within their local communities. Decentralizing democratic participation to better reflect and serve the needs and concerns of grassroots citizens is essential for strengthening the sense of belonging and European identity.

An essential step in this process is to encourage a culture of dialogue and ongoing exchange between citizens and decision-makers. This could take the form of regular public forums, online consultations, and citizen assemblies addressing European, national,

and local issues of importance. These dialogue spaces must be inclusive, allowing all segments of society to share their perspectives and contribute to decision-making.

Collaboration between EU institutions, civil society organizations, educators, and the media is crucial for effectively disseminating information and combating misinformation that can undermine trust and engagement. By providing citizens with reliable and accessible information about the EU, its policies, and its impact on their daily lives, we can increase their capacity to participate meaningfully in debates and decisions.

The importance of youth in this process cannot be underestimated. By actively engaging young Europeans through civic education, exchange programs, and dedicated participation platforms, we can cultivate a future generation that not only feels concerned but also capable of influencing the course of the European Union. Establishing youth councils at the EU, national, and local levels can provide young people with a valuable avenue to express their ideas and contribute to public debate.

Ultimately, building a stronger European citizenship relies on recognizing and valuing diversity within the EU. This means acknowledging different identities, cultures, and languages as assets that enrich the European project rather than as obstacles to unity. Celebrating this diversity through cultural and educational initiatives can help build bridges between citizens of different member states, strengthening the sense of a common European identity.

Long-term commitment to European citizenship requires bold vision and renewed commitment from all stakeholders. As the European Union continues to evolve, the need for active and informed citizen participation has never been more critical. Through a collaborative, inclusive, and forward-looking approach, we can not only address current challenges but also lay the foundations for a more resilient, democratic, and united European Union for years to come. ■

Sources:

Asier, A. (2023) [https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2023/european-democracy/2023\\_IED\\_Report\\_ASIER.pdf](https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2023/european-democracy/2023_IED_Report_ASIER.pdf)

Costa, O. et al. (2023) <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/19/Paper-EU-reform.pdf>

European Parliament (2022) <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-constitutional-affairs-afco/file-reform-of-the-electoral-law-of-the-european-union>

Gatterman, K., 2019. The Role of Transnational Lists in the European Parliament Elections 2019. *European Policy Analysis*, pp. 5(2), 206-217.

Gubalova, V. and Kinga Brudzinska, K. (2021) <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/CoFE-a-National-Model-for-Central-Europe.pdf>

Gubalova, V. and Dravecky, L. (editors) (2023) <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/EUAct2%20report.pdf>

Hobolt, S. B., 2020. The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent. *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp. 27(3), 442-457

Quaritsch, L. (2024) [https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2\\_Research/1\\_About\\_our\\_research/2\\_Research\\_centres/6\\_Jacques\\_Delors\\_Centre/Publications/20240201\\_PolicyBrief\\_EP\\_Elections\\_Luise\\_Quaritsch.pdf](https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/20240201_PolicyBrief_EP_Elections_Luise_Quaritsch.pdf)

Verger, Ch. (2022) [https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PP279\\_Listes-transnationales\\_Verger\\_EN.pdf](https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PP279_Listes-transnationales_Verger_EN.pdf)