Draft Blueprint ECA
December 2022

Building a permanent European Citizens Assembly (ECA) together

Citizens in the Conference on the Future of Europe have called for regular citizen assemblies as a meaningful part of the EU policy process (plenary proposal 36.7).

To contribute to the discussion of how this should be achieved, Citizens Take Over Europe (CTOE) presents this draft blueprint as the basis for a crowdsourced document, and as a stimulus for further public debate. Please feel free to introduce *comments* in the document itself as well as sign up as a signatory of the blueprint (at the end of the document) to express your adhesion.

As an umbrella for more than 70 civil society organisations, one of the objectives of CTOE has been to coordinate European civil society around our shared mission: to promote meaningful citizen participation in EU decision making. This crowdsourced process to develop a strategic blueprint for a European Citizens' Assembly from below is part of CTOE's overall philosophy (see Manifesto https://europeancitizensassembly.eu). The draft is based on collaborative work and responses to a survey, to which everyone is welcome to continue to respond.

In contrast to the currently proposed models of top-down citizens' assemblies in the EU, our approach to citizen participation is premised on citizen-centred public discourses and deliberative democratic transnational practices.

To allow citizens to engage with this approach, our strategic blueprint seeks to avoid overly technical language and attempts to be widely open for discussion among citizens. We therefore call on citizens as well as European democratic civil society to contribute to this strategic effort: to reflect on their discursive practices, to re-conceptualise their role - actual and desired - in European democracy, and to imagine citizens' assemblies as democratic innovations that put novel, inclusive transnational democratic practices on the political stage.

Ultimately, with this crowdsourced strategic blueprint we hope to demonstrate why and how to institutionalise a fully-fledged European Citizens' Assembly that empowers European civil society and is a permanent asset of Europe's democratic future.

Drafting editors on behalf of CTOE: Paul Blokker, Michele Fiorillo, Carsten Berg, James Organ, Ulrike Liebert, Kalypso Nicolaidis, Niccolò Milanese (1 December 2022)

The Conference on the Future of Europe needs a robust follow-up

Recently, CTOE has put forward seven sets of recommendations under the heading "The EU must follow-up on its promises!" as essential preconditions for the EU's effective follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) proposals (for an earlier statement, see: citizenstakeover.eu/blog/strenghtening-citizens-recommendations-on-democracy-participation/)

1. Robust, including long term, "follow-up".
2. Open and transparent provision of information and communication.
3. A permanent European Digital Platform.
4. The need for engaging, Europeanised European Parliamentary elections.
5. Reviewing the European Citizens' Initiative.
6. Citizen participation in EU Treaty change.
7. **Making the European Citizens' Assembly permanent.**

The following blueprint lays out how recommendation no. 7 should be pursued.

Towards a Permanent Citizens' Assembly

Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) - bodies formed from randomly selected citizens to deliberate on important issues - in the European Union (EU) serve two goals. Part of our challenge is whether and how to reconcile them. On the one hand, the CAs support decision making in the EU and its member states. They can help tackle sensitive issues and thus help overcome governance deadlocks in the EU, that is, contribute to resolving political problems that the EU is unable to address. Overall, the involvement of CAs can lead to higher quality decision-making thanks to citizens' input into policies that affect them.

On the other hand, these CAs have a broader, more systemic role to play in fostering a sense of ownership of the EU by its citizens, thus addressing their dissatisfaction and channelling their frustration towards productive participation. Randomly selected citizen deliberation is more immune to corruption than some other spaces of political discussion, and can help temper oligarchic tendencies and the dominant role of wealth in politics. We believe that Citizens' Assemblies, if made in a way that empowers people, can release democratic creativity and imagination.

Top-down or bottom-up?
To differentiate between CA models, it can be useful to identify three categories of questions: 1. Who *initiates* the CA process (from the top-down or from the bottom-up)? 2. Who *authors* the recommendations? (random citizens alone or with representatives)? 3. Who *decides* on the CA recommendations in the end (top-down or bottom-up)?

In the case of CoFE (and will equally be so with the "new generation of Citizens' Panels" the Commission is about to start), the process was organised **only vertically**: triggered top-down, and with the decision on the approval and follow up of the recommendations

also top-down. Unsurprisingly, it is EU institutions who decide. Hence, the CAs - called European Citizens' Panels in CoFE - were not as deeply embedded in the wider public as they could have been, which explains in part the low media and public attention paid to the CoFE. There is a risk that nothing will change with the Commission's Citizens' Panels to come. It is this mode of operation that increases the risk of recommendations being ignored or the institutions only choosing to follow up on those they like. This is not giving citizens a real say in the future of Europe.

This corresponds to a general challenge often observed in the evolution of CAs: once mini-publics have finalised their deliberations and submitted the recommendations to the institutions, the participative process is essentially considered as finished. In contrast, we underline that **the follow-up process is as important as the deliberation process**, so as to ensure appropriate impact and democratic legitimacy to the CA instrument. First of all, for evident accountability reasons: the likelihood of a responsive follow-up will increase, the more the CA process is embedded in the wider public, which is able to scrutinise the process. If the CA is largely disconnected from the wider citizenry and public debate (European society), the risk is high that the recommendations are ignored, rejected, or cherry-picked by decision-makers. Secondly, in pure practical regards, it is not solely in the power and competences of the institutions to specify recommendations and decide on the practical implementation.

At EU member state level, we find different CA modalities that could inspire the EU in order to facilitate better chances for effective follow-up to the CoFE, as they allow for more public involvement. By way of example, listing the CAs from the more prudent to the most radically ambitious: the Eastern-Belgium model, with autonomous agenda setting and deliberation made both by random citizens, but where final decision on implementation rests with public authorities; the Western-Austrian model: with Citizens' Assemblies triggered both bottom-up and top down (via citizens' initiatives or authorities), but where the final decision is taken by authorities; the Irish model, a combination of sortition and direct-democratic voting with one-off CAs triggered top-down, agenda setting top-down but the final decision taken by the citizenry, with a citizens-to-citizens approach. Beyond EU Members States, another other ambitious point of reference is the Oregon model, a 'reactive' procedure, that in EU terms could be transposed to a Citizens' Initiative Review after a successful European Citizens' Initiative (and with a pan-European referendum to follow).

Situating ECAs in the EU landscape

The model of a permanent CA on the European level (ECA) is proposed here as a more democratic variant on current proposals, such as the Commission's initiative to include CAs in some of its policy initiatives or the European Parliament's idea of a pilot CA. Such a permanent ECA would be autonomous yet embedded in the broader EU institutional landscape.

How? We distinguish between three phases as laid out above (see Fig. 1 below): *initiation*, *deliberation/authoring* and *follow-up*.

1. Initiating an ECA

The role of initiating Citizens' Assemblies is crucial, but often left to the institutions. In CTOE's view, the initiation phase should be based on various forms of involvement from the bottom-up, by citizens themselves. This could be on the basis of new institutions or on the basis of existing instruments. A new institution could be a permanent *Citizens' Council or Board*, which is made up of randomly selected citizens (sortition). This Council would be in charge of selecting proposals for themes to be discussed in ad hoc assemblies, but it would not itself deliberate on policy themes. The level of citizen empowerment is rather weak, as the process is controlled from above, while only a small number of citizens are included.

A second option could be to use the existing *European Citizens' Initiative*. In this case, an ECA would be triggered by citizens and civil society, when their ECI proposal reaches an agreed level of support. and when successful, would lead to the establishment of an (ad hoc) citizen assembly. Citizen empowerment is more extensive, as citizens and civil society initiate the process, and the number of citizens involved is potentially larger.

Our third, preferred option would be for citizens to be granted a new right or instrument – a *European Assembly Initiative* – whereby they would gather signatures calling for a Citizens' Assembly (made up of randomly selected citizens and then stratified for diversity) on a specific theme (and where the quorum would be lower than for the ECI, which is currently 1 million signatures).

2. Deliberation/authoring phase

Here again there are three options:

The deliberation and recommendation authoring phases could be entrusted to an ad hoc, randomly selected Citizens' Assembly. Such an assembly would meet for a circumscribed period of time and formulate recommendations on a distinctive theme. Citizen empowerment is limited, as citizens are selected from above, have a limited mandate, and only very few will be involved.

A second option could be to have a Permanent Citizens' Assembly with randomly selected, but rotating, citizens, whose core function is deliberation and which will deliberate on 2 or maximum three themes a year. This Assembly could be in charge of selecting themes itself (proposed in phase 1). Citizen empowerment would have more impact, in that citizens have more control over the agenda, but remains limited due to the involvement of few citizens.

Our third, preferred, option would be for **a Permanent Citizens' Assembly, which also connects to the maxi-public (wider European society). This connection would be through channels for participation on an online platform and social media**, where citizens can both discuss recommendations and provide input into deliberative sessions. Citizen empowerment would be more extensive, in that more European citizens would have the possibility to participate. We underline that a core question regards public communication around and interaction with ECAs. This includes social and conventional public information media and also direct communication with European citizens. **We stress that a permanent CA needs to be 'owned' by citizens as much as possible, to avoid impressions of 'masquerade' and 'co-option'.**

3. Follow-up

The final phase is about what happens after deliberation, in other words, how to ensure an effective follow-up on citizens' recommendations, or asking how citizens' proposals influence EU decision-making? Different options exist according to the level of impact. One option is that there could be an obligation on the EU institutions to consider recommendations in their decision-making and to provide reasoned justification for how they do so. This citizen empowerment is relatively weak, as the follow-up is entirely in the hands of the institutions (with the CoFE, we see that the follow-up is opaque, piecemeal and relatively unaccountable).

A second option could be to introduce an obligatory referendum – where citizens decide Europe-wide on follow-up - when institutions do not adequately follow up (this could be monitored by the Citizens' Assembly). Citizen empowerment is stronger here, as the follow-up is not anymore entirely in the hands of the institutions, and the wider public may have a role in the process.

Our third, preferred, option would be **an obligatory referendum with regard to the citizens' recommendations**. Citizen empowerment is strongest here, as the wider public is always included in the decision-making on follow-up.

Figure 1 – Maximising citizen empowerment

