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**DIRECT ENGAGEMENT WITH CITIZENS: A STRENGTHENING IMPERATIVE FOR THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?**

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**Introduction**

There is an increasingly clear need to promote the active involvement of European citizens in the evolving public debate on the future of the European Union. For the European Parliament, greater engagement with European citizens is a particular imperative. This has taken many forms over the years but has been greatly reinforced in recent times*,*

 The current paper looks briefly at some of the ways in which the European Parliament has been seeking to promote greater knowledge, interest and engagement of European citizens both in its own workings and on the wider evolution of the European Union. It seeks to examine what the European Parliament has been seeking to achieve through these different initiatives and developments and how they may be extended in the future.

**The EP interacting with European Citizens**

This paper, which is still a work in progress, looks at a variety of ways in which the European Parliament interacts with citizens, some of which overlap :

-The European Parliament as an “educator”: its increasing involvement in schools programmes, its rapidly expanding set of interactive visitor facilities, its promotion of the House of European History and the EP Network of Political Houses and Foundations of Great Europeans

-The European Parliament as a locus for visitors and as a tourist attraction in its own right

-The European Parliament as a forum for European debate both on specific issues (human rights, culture) and on the future of Europe as well as in promoting cross-border cooperation and understanding

-The European Parliament as a stimulus for a more participative European democracy, through enhancing the value of citizen-led initiatives such as Petitions and European Citizens Initiatives, and through innovations such as the direct citizen involvement in the Conference on the Future of Europe

**Scope of the Paper**

-Some prerequisites: greater openness and transparency of EP activities, sufficient resources for EP Communications, enhanced EP presence in social media

-Promotion of civic education on the European Union in European schools

-Awarding of European Prizes

- Increasing the engagement of younger Europeans in debates on Europe.

-The EP as a magnet for visitors (direct contact with MEPs, Parliamentarium and Europe Experience Facilities, etc)

-Increasing public knowledge not just on the history of European integration but on the key political personalities who have inspired and driven this process.(House of European History, EP Network of Houses and Foundations, etc)

-Improving the value-added for citizens who submit petitions or promote European Citizens Initiatives

-Promoting European participative democracy (notably in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe)

**Greater openness and transparency of EP activities**

A prerequisite for greater EP engagement with European citizens is that the work of the EP should be more open and transparent

Two key facets of this are open access to EP meetings and to EP documents

EP meetings were mainly opened up to the public after the 1979 direct elections, with very few exceptions and to a much greater extent than in most national parliaments. Security concerns and more recently Covid have made generalised public access more problematic, but EP committee meetings are now systematically web-streamed (research question: besides specialised lobbyists how many people actually follow these meetings?)

Open access to documents is also much greater than in the past, but a continuing problem concerns access to informal negotiating texts, notably in the context of first reading agreements on EU legislation

**Increased resources for EP Communications**

While often very critical of their national systems, citizens of individual Member States are much more familiar with their structures than they are with those of the European Union institutions. The European Parliament, therefore, has placed a big emphasis on neutral EU communications to complement the work done by the political groups and by individual MEPs and candidates.

The EP has around 650 posts in its Communications Directorate-General,

As the need for more resources and for better coordination between institutional and political messaging is particularly strong in the run up to EP elections additional resources (EUR 27,5 million) are to be allocated to DG COMM for  the communication strategy related to the 2024 elections to the European Parliament

**An enhanced EP Presence in social media**

In recent years there has been an increasingly strong EP institutional social media presence, both at the centre and in the external offices

This has led to a change in the working culture and methods of neutral EP civil servants who have had to engage much more directly with the public than in the past, and to tailor EP institutional messages in a way that resonates better with that public, and, in particular, with younger Europeans

This was reflected in the 2019 EP elections by a successful institutional campaign #thisTimeI vote.

**European Parliament engagement with schools**

Another facet of EP engagement with citizens has been promotion of civic education on the European Union in European schools

This can be difficult to organise (with very different structures and curricula in different EU countries) and often controversial (when is neutral information perceived as propaganda?)

Many European Schools have been involved in these programmes, which have facilitated direct contact between schoolchildren and MEPs and also visits to the EP, especially to Strasbourg : A number of people who have ended up with EU-related jobs have told me that their interest in the EU was first kindled on one of these student visits

Interesting research could be carried out on the effectiveness of these EP initiatives (also in comparison with other such programmes, such as those sponsored by the European Movement, such as the Blue Star Programme in Ireland for students in primary schools.)

**Some specific EP initiatives concerning schools**

These have been attempted in all EU countries

This even included the UK, when it was a member: The UK Office of the European Parliament produced an educational resource pack *'The European Parliament: What's that.  A European Union teaching resource for 11-16 year olds'. I*t could not proactively market it but was restricted to responding to requests from schools for teaching materials on the EP/EU.

In other countries more proactive approaches can be taken, with schools being actively recruited to take part in such programmes, although it helps when they fit in easily with national curricula.

One of the longest-running such programmes has been the Euroscola Programme Students aged 16 to 18 from all 27 EU member States from schools chosen by national competitions become an MEP for a day at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. They debate, negotiate, amend, vote and adopt resolutions on real European issues and work together with students from other EU countries

While the programme is primarily aimed at older students two of the Euroscola sessions every year are for. 14-16 years old and attempts are also made to involve students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Attendance at Euroscola has been encouraged by means of a subsidy from the European Parliament, although there are still some financial and time difficulties from students from some of the more peripheral areas of the EU. In spite of thi,s Euroscola has generally been very successful in stimulating students’ interest in the EU.

A more recent initiative has been the EU Ambassador School Programme

This a programme for secondary and vocational schools around the whole of the European Union aimed at” *raising awareness of European parliamentary democracy and European citizenship values. By taking part in the programme, students will learn about the role of the European Parliament and will get the opportunity to actively engage with their MEPs.  They will learn about European values, their rights as EU citizens and will be encouraged to actively participate in EU democratic processes.”* (from the EP Ireland website)

Participating schools are provided with a teacher’s manual and student workbook containing 6 learning modules (History of the EU, How the EU affects your life, Decision-making, Europe without borders, European values and Your voice in Europe).    A teacher is designated as a Senior Ambassador with responsibility for organising the lessons on European parliamentary democracy. One of the students is then chosen as a Junior Ambassador with responsibility for the implementation of the programme along with the teacher. The school has to have a designated EU Info Point (with information on the EU and on the EP and MEPs) and there also has to be a special Europe Day event on 9 May, such as an EU debating competition, an EU quiz, music or food tasting day.

Schools are evaluated prior to their designation as European Parliament Ambassador Schools and are then awarded a plaque for display at the school premises which are presented at an annual Awards Ceremony. Alternatively an MEP may be invited to the school to make the presentation at which the Junior Ambassador is also given a special certificate. All other students who complete the programme are given a certificate of participation

There is also an E Twinning platform to link up EP Ambassador Schools in different EU countries, notably to carry out cross-border projects.

The Programme has grown rapidly and there are now 1100 such schools around the European Union

**Other EP means of promoting greater civic involvement by younger Europeans**

Charlemagne Youth Prize : This was established in 2008 and awarded to young people between the ages of 16 and 30 involved in promoting understanding between people from different EU countries. The three winning projects are chosen from 27 projects nominated by national juries in each EU country. The projects can focus on the organisation of various youth events, such as, but not limited to, youth exchanges, simulation games, youth political festivals, exhibitions or online projects

The EP 2019 elections initiative, This Time I ‘m Voting**.** The ground game run via "together.eu“ was aimed not just to communicate with citizens, but to actively mobilize them to help spread Parliament's messages.

together.eu has since continued as a non-partisan policy community aimed especially at young people interested in EU democracy.

*“taking action on issues you care about inspires participation in democracy in Europe.” “It only takes a little time to make a big difference. ”*”*Now is the time to be hopeful and ambitious. Now is the time to act”* “*Meet and connect with people who share your enthusiasm for Europe!”*

European Youth Event (EYE**)** : This was first held in 2014 and regularly since, with several thousand young people meeting in Strasbourg in the late spring in a mixture of street party and debating forum on European issues: the most recent version held on 8-9 October 2021 included voting on youth proposals for the Conference on the Future of Europe

**The awarding of other EP Prizes**

Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought( awarded since 1988 to individuals or organisations in field of human rights)

Apart from providing a substantial financial reward for the winner the annual Prize helps to draw attention to particular human rights situations in particular countries, perhaps of particular importance when it has been awarded to less well known nominees.

The EP has also set up a Network of Sakharov Prize Winners to promoter wider public debate and attention to human rights. In some EU countries the EP has sought to involve university and other students in debates on who should win the Sakharov Prize, with the EP long-list of nominees being circulated to students for their consideration.

Lux Prize(established in 2007)

This is aimed at encouraging the production and distribution of independent European productions but also has the important function of promoting public debate on sensitive issues, such as migration or racism which are often covered in the films and which are typically shown in national film festivals.

European Citizens Prize(established in 2008 to recognize exceptional work by citizens groups in promoting human rights, and cross-border cooperation and understanding :all the national winners are invited to a ceremony in Brussels and an overall EU winner is chosen)

**The EP and its visitors**

The EP has traditionally had a very large number of direct visitors, especially in Brussels and in Strasbourg but also in its external offices as well. MEPs have been given allowances to promote these visits from their countries, regions and specific constituencies, and other groups (farmers, religious groups, etc) are also invited by the EP administration

In 2010 there were over 300,000 such visitors to Brussels and Strasbourg alone( over 220,000 and 80,000 respectively).

Numbers have fluctuated, however, and were essentially brought to a halt during the Covid crisis when an expanded online visitor’s programme was developed to compensate for the lack of in-person visits. A *“Citizens' virtual tour”* was also initiated.

**Dedicated facilities to communicate to its visitors on the role and function of the European Parliament,**

The Danish Folketing had been a pioneer in developing interactive visitors facilities, where students and other visitors could not only learn about the Danish Parliament but take part in simulated legislative and other activities. Another inspiration was the US Congress visitor centre.

The European Parliament later built on this idea. Its “Parliamentarium was officially opened in October 2011 in Brussels, and is now the second largest parliamentary visitors’ centre in the world, after that of the US Congress.

Among the features of the Parliamentarium in Brussels are a simulated European Parliament hemicycle and an Interactive Wish Wall in which visitors can type (in any language) their aspirations for the future of the EU. Students who book in advance can also play a role-play game on the adoption of legislation by the Parliament, negotiating compromises and voting on texts in fields such as environment and civil liberties

A similar Parliamentarium was later developed in Strasbourg as well.

**New interactive visitor facilities in EP offices around the European Union**

Versions of the Brussels Parliamentarium have been developed not just in Strasbourg but also in Berlin and in a number of other Member States, where they are now known as “Europe Experience**”** facilities*.*

Parliament’s leadership has now supported the establishment of Europe Experiences by 2024 in all EU Member States since it considers that they allow all citizens to have a better understanding of the functioning of the EP and of the EU in general

As a result of all these developments, as well as the creation of the House of European History (see below) ! the EP is now also a tourist attraction in its own right, with visitors centres and even two EP run museums

**Another unusual role for the European Parliament :: promoting citizens’ awareness of the history of European integration as well as of its leading personalities and places of memory**

The House of European Historyin Brussels: This seeks to portray the historical context for the European integration process from an EU-wide rather than national perspective. This was a difficult and controversial task as Europe-“neutral” history will always conflict with certain national sensitivities(and the EP had earlier experienced this in preparing the historical section of the Brussels Parliamentarium). In spite of this the museum has been very popular with visitors since it opened in 2017. In 2019, just before lockdown, it had 200,000 visitors

The European Parliament also has direct ownership and use of the former Jean Monnet House in Bazoches : This is used for EP training, and informal EP meetings (for example between MEPs and Ukrainian parliamentarians) but is also aimed at visitors, with a historical exhibition on Monnet and showing the room where he worked on the Schuman Declaration, etc. The curators of the house also point out two Jean Monnet walks, one in the village and one in the nearby forest, where he went every day and where he claimed that he developed many of his ideas on Europe.

The European Parliament Network of the Political Houses and Foundations of Great Europeans: This is an EP-sponsored network and meets twice a year, once in the Jean Monnet House and once at the EP offices in Brussels. It started as a cooperative project between the houses of the four founding fathers of the EU (Monnet, Schuman, Adenauer and De Gasperi) but has since been greatly extended to houses and foundations linked with many other important European figures. Aimed at bringing the story of EU integration to a wider public it now has 18 members in 7 EU Member States plus the UK and Switzerland.

 **Stimulating a more participative European Democracy**

The EP has sought to do this at both the micro and macro level. In the former context there are two particularly important instruments for more direct EP engagement with citizens, Petitions and European Citizens Initiatives.Petitions to the EP have been around for a long time whereas European Citizens initiatives are much more recent. Both instruments, however, have been underused and need to be further developed

A big risk, however, is that citizens are encouraged to use these instruments, but that there is inadequate follow-up. There is a clear need, therefore, for an enhanced EP response to the concerns of European citizens as expressed in both instruments

**Petitions**

*“Points out that the right to petition is the oldest instrument involving the direct participation of citizens at EU level and that it is the easiest and most direct way for citizens to contact the EU institutions, express their views on the legislation adopted and the policy choices made at EU level, as well as lodge complaints about loopholes and poor implementation” (* From EPresolution of 9 March 2022 on engaging with citizens…)

 The EP has the most open and transparent petition process in Europe, allowing petitioners to participate in its activities;

The EP Petitions Committee is the only committee that communicates directly with citizens (and has inspired the creation of national such committees, such as that in the Irish Parliament, which invited the secretary of the EP Committee to Dublin to explain how the committee worked)

In 2020, the Committee on Petitions held 13 committee meetings, at which 116 petitions were discussed with 110 petitioners present, with 78 petitioners actively participating by taking the floor**;** (from 2021 Petitions Committee report)

A huge range of subjects are covered by these petitions : In 2020 the main subjects included fundamental rights, LGBTQ rights, health, environment, access to justice, cross-border cases of child abduction and custody rights, employment, education, Brexit related issues and Covid which accounted for13.23 % of the petitions received)

Citizens interact with the committee both in Brussels and in their home country. An example of the former came in 2020: when the head of foreign lecturers at Italian universities, David Petrie, addressed the Committee on Italy’s unilateral refusal to uphold its Treaty obligations to end decades of discrimination against non-Italian lecturers.

In another case there was interaction over several years between an Irish farmer and the EP Petitions Committee ( the following are extracts from an article on 23 January 2010 in the Irish Times)

“*A Kilkenny farmer who claims that pollution is poisoning cattle and vegetation on his land has been invited to return to Brussels next week to appear before the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament on Wednesday next.*

*Dan Brennan, who farms 170 acres near the north Co Kilkenny town of Castlecomer, claims that his dairy herd has suffered from stunted growth, low milk yields and high calf mortality over suspected cadmium discharges. After years of extensive investigations by State agencies costing an estimated €500,000, a new report by veterinary experts for the Department of Agriculture failed to establish the cause.*

*In 2007, he successfully petitioned the European Parliament to investigate the matter. A delegation of MEPs visited the farm and concluded that the cattle had been affected by “toxic emissions from the local brick factory”.*

The Petitions process is clearly a very valuable one, even if outcomes are very variable. It does, however, also have some significant weaknesses.

On average around 1200 petitions are tabled to the EP every year (1573, however, in 2020), but the numbers tabled have been very variable between Member States and languages, have generally been falling since 2013 and the instrument is insufficiently well-known to European citizens

Above all there is a need for greater follow-up to Petitions, both within the EP’s own legislative work and by the European Commission

“*Suggests that petitions that reveal systemic problems at the EU level should be discussed in Plenary, in order to give greater visibility to the petitions and petitioners”* ( from EP resolution of 9 March 2022, op. cit);

**European Citizens Initiatives : Good in theory but in practice?**

The TFEU provides that every citizen has the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union through a European citizens’ initiative (ECI);

*“Emphasises that the ECI is a unique instrument of participatory democracy and a fundamental tool; stresses that the ECI represents an exceptional opportunity for the citizens of the Union to identify and to put the issues or matters that they are concerned by onto the European political agenda, to articulate their aspirations and to call for the EU to act and legislate, and that its use must be encouraged and supported by all available means;* “ (EP resolution of 9 March 2022, op. cit)

Since its inception, however, there have only been a small number of successful ECIs (6 So far) and the EP has continually called for the ECI ground-rules to be modified and for ECIs to be facilitated

There is also a need for reinforced European Parliament back-up for European Citizens Initiatives.

The EP has also called for much greater interaction between its own work and ECIs. In its resolution of 9 March 2022(op cit), for example, it recommended , inter alia, that “*Parliament could decide to follow up on the ECI with a legislative own-initiative report (INL)”* and urged” *the Commission to commit to submitting a legislative proposal following Parliament’s adoption of any such INL”*

*….“Highlights the need to establish a proper follow-up mechanism for unsuccessful ECIs in order to assess citizens’ input seriously and effectively, including redirecting citizens to the Committee on Petitions, as the lack of impact could lead to disengagement”*

In theannual petitions report on the deliberations of the Committee on Petitions in 2020 (2021/2019(INI)) the Committee *: underlines that the public hearing is a key opportunity for the organisers to publicly present their initiative to the EU institutions and experts enabling the Commission and the Parliament to obtain a thorough understanding of the desired ECI outcomes;*

The EP has thus emphasised the importance of Petitions, European Citizens Initiatives and citizens’ references to the EU Ombudsman as complementary instruments by which EU citizens can have a more direct influence on the EU’s political agenda

In its resolution of 9 March 2022 (op cit) the EP thus called “ *for the establishment and promotion of a large-scale, one-stop, accessible interinstitutional EU citizens’ website (and application, which should be easy to use) to provide information on all the rights and democratic instruments that enable the public to participate directly in and influence decision-making at EU level;”*

**Promoting greater involvement of European citizens in debates on the future of Europe**

The process of European integration was initiated by some inspiring leaders but tended to be a top-down process involving very few people. Over the years this has become increasingly unacceptable but developing much broader-based EU decision-making has often proved to be very difficult.

Many such efforts have been made by the European Parliament, on its own or in conjunction with governments or NGOs, but extending involvement beyond the “usual suspects” and those with a direct interest in the European Union has been very challenging.

A very early attempt was made by the late Danish MEP Jens-Peter Bonde when he made a direct appeal to citizens to provide direct input into a report that he was drafting in an EP Committee into openness and transparency

Since then more systematic approaches have been attempted . Some early efforts at EP promotion of more direct democracy have been its Citizens Forums and Agoras.

 The first of these was a decentralized initiative: Following a decision of the European Parliament's Conference of Presidents to hold a series of Citizens' Forumsin the Member States, EP Information Offices in the countries concerned organised a large number of such forums. The object was to enable MEPs to encourage debate among young people and to listen to their views about Europe, especially those of people who were not already particularly well informed about or engaged in European affairs.

:The AgoraPlatform was instead intended as an EU-wide initiative, set up by the European Parliament in the wake of the "No" votes on the Constitution in France and the Netherlands in mid-2005 and named after the word for “A place of Assembly” in ancient Greek direct democracy. It was an attempt to get people directly involved in discussions over the future direction of Europe. At the first meeting in November 2007 400 representatives from across Europe ( from associations, organisations and trade unions) took part in a series of workshops and debates at the European Parliament. There have been subsequent Agoras on Crises and Poverties and on Climate Change.

**The Irish example of participative democracy**

Since these earlier EP attempts there have been a number of more far-reaching attempts at participative democracy. A particularly influential example has been that of the Citizens Assemblies in Ireland, randomly chosen groups of 100 Irish citizens who have been asked to look at a wide range of issues, including the difficult subjects of Marriage Equality and of Divorce, which later led to successful Constitutional Referendums. In both cases the citizens were prepared to go further in their recommendations than the politicians had believed was possible..

This example has been followed by many others around Europe (for example Citizens Assembly on future of Scotland, French and Luxembourg Citizens Assemblies on Climate, Belgian German Community Citizen Assembly sounding board, etc)

 These initiatives have covered a wide range of structures and issues and have taken place in very different national contexts. It is thus difficult to generalize from these experiences. Certain aspects of the Irish success stories in the Marriage Equality and Divorce cases are, however, worth emphasising. There should be clearly defined and limited subject matter, the issues covered should be directly political and not technocratic (the Irish Citizen Assembly consideration of the Irish electoral system was, for example, less satisfactory) and there should detailed briefings for citizens from experts (but which experts and which balance between them?), Perhaps most important of all is the nature of the interaction between the Citizens Assemblies and the elected politicians, and the balance between participative and representative democracy. In the Irish cases of Marriage Equality and Divorce there was a three stage process: the citizens’ recommendations were examined and reworded by politicians in special committees and then put back to the people in referendums.

**Building on some of the above examples : The European Parliament and the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFE)**

The EP, along with President Macron, was one of the leading advocates of such a Conference in the face of greater caution by the Commission and hesitation bordering on hostility by some of the EU Member States

The EP helped to shape its structure and was particularly keen on direct involvement of citizens

The Conference is only now finishing its work and my paper will not seek to assess it as a whole but only at the narrower theme of the EP’s views on the involvement of European citizens and its interaction with those citizens.

There have been several core elements of participative democracy in the Conference Structure :

1. Four randomly chosen and Europe-wide Citizens Panels, each of 200 citizens, and each holding three plenary meetings, one in person in Strasbourg, one on line and one in person in 4 Member States (including in Dublin Castle in Ireland). Each panel voted on a series of recommendations to the COFE Plenary and were represented at these plenaries by Citizen Ambassadors
2. An Interactive Digital Platform on which any EU citizen or groups of citizens could post their ideas or proposals
3. National input from each Member State, with national citizens panels or consultative fora

The author was able to follow the proceedings of the Citizens Forum at Dublin Castle on 25-27 February 2022. The subjects covered by this Citizens Panel were immense, the economy, social justice and jobs, education, culture, youth and sport, and digital transformation. Initial ideas had been put forward by the citizen panelists. at their first meeting in Brussels and then refined at their subsequent on-line meeting. The various proposals were then put up on boards round the main conference meeting room and the panellists then expressed their preferences as to which of these should be carried forward (by placing coloured stickers on their favourite proposals). These were then worked on and amended in small working groups over the next day and a half and were then finally voted upon by the plenary of the Citizens Panel on the last morning.

The finally adopted recommendations of this panel, as those of the other three panels, were then examined by the full Conference Plenary which included 20 Citizens Ambassadors chosen from the 200 Citizens in each panel (80 Citizen Ambassadors in all) as well as Members of the European Parliament, national government and parliamentary representatives, EU Commissioners and other plenary members from EU institutions, regional and local authorities, social partners and civil society.

 The COFE Plenary met on several occasions in March and April. At its final meeting, on 29-30 April 2022 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, the Conference Plenary   adopted  49 proposals and 300 implementing measures, based on 178 recommendations from the  input from the National Panels and events, and 43 734 contributions on 16 274 ideas  recorded on the multilingual digital platform

The European Parliament has thus been involved in this process at many levels, calling for COFE and helping to set it up, providing its co-President (first the late Davide Sassoli and now Roberta Metsola) as well one part of the common COFE Secretariat (along with Commission and Council staff). There has also been constant interaction with the citizens panels, both informally at the Panel meetings and more informally in the Conference plenaries. Leading MEP (and former Belgian Prime Minister) Guy Verhofstadt, took a leading role in the process and was present for much of the deliberation of the Citizen Panels. As we shall see a number of the Citizens recommendations correspond quite closely with many of the EOP’s own demands.

**The COFE proposals dealing directly with the subject matter of this paper.**

Proposals 36 and 37 dealt with Citizens information, participation and youth and Proposal 38 with democracy and elections. If ever implemented many of the points made under these three proposals would reinforce the EP activities as described in this paper

COFE Proposal 36 (civic participation)

The objective of this proposal is described as follows :”*increase citizens’ participation and youth involvement in the democracy at the  European Union level to develop a ‘full civic experience’ for Europeans, ensure that their voice  is heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective***.”**

The proposal calls, inter alia, for an integrated official website, a user-friendly digital platform, holding Citizens’ Assemblies periodically (again with randomly chosen participants) and developing an EU Charter for the involvement of citizens in EU affairs

COFE Proposal 37 (civic education)

This contained a number of proposals very close to what the EP is already trying to do, and that have been described elsewhere in this paper.

Among these were the following:

-Guaranteeing a minimum level of education  on the EU and especially its democratic  processes, including the history of European  integration and European citizenship

-Ensuring the development of specific programmes  and educational material for children and  schools;

-Bringing Europe closer to citizens by  improvingcontact points and dedicated  hubs, or “Houses of Europe”, at local level to  provide resources, information and advice to  citizens on EU matters, as well as listen to  their concerns and engage in debates with  associations to help spread citizens’ views  at European level

COFE Proposal 38 on democracy and elections

This proposal, on the other hand, contains many recommendations on matters that are not currently provided for, but that coincide closely with the EP’s own current institutional demands.

*“Conceiving a EU wide referendum, to be triggered by the European Parliament, in exceptional cases on matters particularly important to all European citizens; “*

*“Some of the Members of the European Parliament should be elected through a European Union-wide list, the rest being elected within the Members’ States;”*

*“European citizens should have a greater say on who is elected as President of the Commission. This could be achieved either by the direct election of the Commission President or a lead candidate system;”*

*“The European Parliament should have the right of legislative initiative, in order to propose the topics to be discussed and, subsequently, adopt the necessary texts to follow up on the recommendations that emerge from deliberations;”*

*“European Parliament should decide on the budget of the EU as it is the right of parliaments at the national level;”*

**Evaluating the participative elements of the Conference**

It is clearly far too early to evaluate this in any detail, and proper research will be required (not least in interviewing not just the citizen participants but also the involved MEPs and other politicians, the staff of the common secretariat as well as the outside observers who have been following the process). Only a few very preliminary observations can be attempted.

National forums have been very variable in terms of levels of interest and participation. In some countries they were very active and the governments and civic society were very involved, whereas in others there was much less activity.

The Interactive Digital Platform has been an interesting experiment but is also very variable in output and more of a popularity contest for issues than anything else.

The Four Citizens Panels , each with 200 randomly chosen citizens, has been an innovative feature of the Conference and the citizens themselves appear to have greatly enjoyed the process. On the other hand 800 citizens are only a tiny cross-section of the European population and they were looking not at one or two clearly defined issues, as in Ireland, but at a huge array of matters. Moreover, the key question is whether there will be any follow-up to their recommendations and the extent to which they will be taken up and modified by politicians. The most likely to do so are the MEPs, who are the most likely to see the concerned citizens as potential allies for the future.

**Some concluding remarks**

In proposal 36 from The Conference on the Future of Europe it is stated that “*The EU is founded on  representative democracy: with European  elections, citizens give a clear mandate to  their representatives and indirectly express  themselves on EU policies”.*

In the same proposal it is also stated that *“Participation  and prior involvement of citizens and  civil society is an important basis for  political decisions to be taken by elected  representatives”*

The European Parliament activities that have been described in this paper represent its efforts to respond to this need

The EP is like other Parliaments in some respects but very distinct in others

It is better- resourced than many Parliaments but besides its traditional legislative, budgetary and oversight powers (and its rarer powers on EU nominations) it also has to devote more efforts than others to “selling the product” (both the EP itself and the European Union as a whole) to European citizens. Combined with this is an increasing need to involve European citizens more in EU decision-making, to have a less top-down approach and to combine emerging forms of participative democracy with more traditional representational democracy.

These needs are reflected in the complementary roles that have been described in this paper, those of the EP as an educator, the EP as a tourist attraction and museum curator, and the EP not only as a sounding-board for European citizens but also as an enabler ( some critics would say manipulator) of citizens’ wishes.

In its first role the EP has devoted considerable resources to stimulating interest in the EU in Europe’s schools, in particular through its long-standing Euroscola and more recent Ambassador Schools Programme. It will be interesting to assess the extent to which they fit in to the very different national educational curricula and what impacts these have had.

In its second role the EP has sought to respond to the needs of an already large number of visitors to its facilities and to further stimulate those numbers in the future Again the educational function has been given priority, with the exhibits in the House of European History and the expanding network of interactive Europe Experience facilities.

The EP has also been devoting considerable attention to promoting active citizenship, through its engagement with young people, its attempts to promote cooperative projects between citizens in different EU countries, through its awarding of EP Prizes, and its increasing social media profile as well as through other instruments, such as debating competitions and simulation games on EU legislation.

Finally the EP has always seen itself as a forum for debate on European policy issues and priorities and has used a variety of techniques to achieve this. A problem that it has encountered is that its main interlocutors have tended to be the “usual suspects” of the organised EU interest groups and NGOs. A big challenge for the future, therefore, is to how to get other EU citizens more interested in European issues, both by encouraging their level of knowledge of EU institutions and policies and by stimulating their involvement in decision-making at both the micro (petitions on local issues, etc) and macro level (debates on the future of Europe).

The idea of participative democracy has come to seem more attractive in recent years, as randomly chosen citizens without extensive prior knowledge of issues have shown that they can become more motivated in playing a role in decision-making. The EP has seen, therefore, that a mix of participative and representative democracy could enhance its own role in the future but the Conference on the Future of Europe has shown both the potential of and possible pitfalls in such an approach.