Future of Europe
Sibiu Summit 2019
Citizen consultations in Europe
#EurMove
On 9th May 2019, EU leaders gather in Sibiu, Romania, to put forward a roadmap for a more united, stronger and more democratic Union. As an organisation seeking to encourage and improve the active participation of citizens in the development of European solutions to our common challenges, the European Movement International believes there is a need for more innovative and effective formats to engage Europeans in the decisions that affect them.

With citizens across Europe currently taking their concerns about issues such as climate protection, social security or the rule of law to the streets and protesting for change, it is undeniable that Europeans want to have a bigger say in the future and political direction of Europe. Nearly half of EU citizens currently claim they are unsatisfied with the way democracy works in the EU and few feel they can make a real difference in national let alone European decision-making processes. However, there is a growing demand in Europe for democratic participation beyond elections. An ambitious strategy is needed to give citizens across Europe a meaningful say in shaping future EU policies that directly affect their lives.

EU-wide citizens’ assemblies, dialogues and consultations, where citizens can deliberate on European issues on a regular basis and where the results feed into the political decision-making process, can serve as a participatory and constructive tool within European democracy. Above all, they are a fundamental requirement for a stable and sustainable development of the European Union in the interest of all citizens.

Across the European Movement network and beyond, citizens’ dialogues and consultations have been taking place for years, in an attempt to bridge the gap between decision-makers, citizens and stakeholders across all sectors. When taking place at the EU level, they must be organised in a transparent and consistent manner, in order to produce comparable results that can feed into the policy-making process.

Citizens want to feel and see the effects of their contributions to the debate on the future of Europe. European leaders need to therefore refrain from relying on ad hoc and stand-alone consultation exercises that serve no bigger purpose than political communication. Alongside a consistent, transparent and bottom-up implementation of the consultations, an ambitious follow-up strategy is crucial.

While the EU and Member States must find better ways to communicate the goals and results of the consultations, thus legitimising the process in people’s eyes, policy-makers should commit themselves to seriously dealing with the contents and results of the dialogues. Consultations must go hand in
hand with accessible and attractive communication about the EU, in order to help citizens to make an informed choice. National governments should ensure that the consultations are advertised widely, including national as well as European media and striving for media coverage that is of transnational nature.

At the same time, diversity and inclusiveness are key. The consultations must gather a diverse and balanced group of European citizens from all Member States. While taking place in different regions, they should also be oriented towards the everyday-life of citizens and accessible to all. While cross-border dialogues in border regions can further strengthen the EU-dimension of the dialogues, the discussions must focus on EU-wide issues where national remedies alone cannot provide the answers, so the consultations don't turn into debates about national or regional questions.

Democratic and representative organisations and associations can be of help in this process and should be involved from the start. Additional facilitators can help ensure a consistent coordination as well as a thorough follow-up of the outcomes, while making sure the dialogue reflects the true opinions of a group, rather than existing policy. In addition to pre-selected topics of the dialogues, which may give citizens the chance to reflect on current issues of importance to the EU, citizens must also be given the opportunity to come up with their own topics for consultations.

Further recommendations can be found here.

Looking ahead, European leaders must take citizens’ concerns and fears about the future seriously. More effective and transparent procedures are needed, in order to give citizens the opportunity to voice their opinions on EU policies and contribute to change as part of a bottom-up process. Any form of future European citizens consultations or dialogues need to be active listening exercises and result in a real dialogue, avoiding formats such as panel debates and speeches.

There is no doubt that the results from these exercises should be used to define the broad orientations of EU policies in the years to come and to improve specific EU policies. At the same time, the different dialogue formats and their common criteria should serve to develop new and innovative formats and boost citizens’ participation.

We therefore call on European leaders gathered in Sibiu this week to commit to the implementation of a transparent and representative consultation tool, that is linked to the political debates in the EU and that takes citizens’ opinions into account on a more regular basis.

Too see this and other European Movement International policies, please take a look at our website: www.europeanmovement.eu/policies