

Brussels, 6 March 2024

**To the Members of the European Commission, the European Parliament,  
the European Council, and the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU,**

**Dear excellencies,**

We are forty-one organisations that work on democratic innovation across Europe. With this letter, we appeal to you to prioritise, promote and stimulate democratic innovation and citizen engagement, both during the remaining period of the Belgian presidency and in the next European legislature.

Democracy lies at the heart of our European values, embodying our shared principles such as freedom, equality and justice. However, we are arriving at a crucial moment for our democracies. Antidemocratic forces have been gaining momentum, both at the borders of the EU and within several Member States. We see increasing disillusionment and disengagement, reflecting a widening gap between citizens and their representatives, but also between citizens and democracy itself.

This trend underscores the need for bold measures to strengthen our democratic institutions and processes. As such, we welcome the initiatives the European Commission has taken to guarantee fair elections and prevent covert influence, as formulated in the recently published Defence of Democracy Package. But merely preserving the status quo is not enough to counter the threats to democratic values and stability.

As we navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century, it is imperative that our democratic institutions and political culture evolve as well, to better reflect and represent the needs and values of our diverse citizenry. As organisations that support democratic innovation, we believe this can be done by more actively engaging citizens in policy-making processes.

A proven way to strengthen citizen engagement is to use deliberative democratic methods in order to make policy-making processes more inclusive. These processes involve randomly selected participants who are afforded sufficient information and time to deliberate, so they have the opportunity to make informed recommendations that offer a real added value to policies.

In the past few years, we have seen remarkable advancements in deliberative democracy, with Citizens' Assemblies taking place in almost all EU Member States, increasing the legitimacy and quality of our democratic processes. By providing a space for dialogue between people with very different backgrounds and views, Citizens' Assemblies depolarise debates around key societal issues. Recently, we have even seen the potential of deliberative democracy to create greater cross-European dialogue on issues that the Union is facing, with the Conference for the Future of Europe and several other Citizens' Assemblies on topical issues.

Yet much work remains to be done. Many deliberative processes are ad hoc, one-off experiments that are insufficiently connected to existing policy-making processes and governance structures, making it difficult for the results of Assemblies to be incorporated into policy. Moreover, not all of these processes meet the essential quality standards that are required for honest, transparent and legitimate citizen participation (as formulated by the OECD), which increases the risk that citizen deliberation can be used for ‘citizen washing’.

It is crucial to the future of European democracy that we act urgently and ambitiously. To take steps to strengthen European democracies, we urge you to consider the following recommendations:

**First, we urge EU Institutions to formulate a clear vision for the use of citizen deliberation processes:**

- Set clear objectives for integrating citizen deliberation in European policy processes in the **EU’s Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029**, which is currently in preparation.
- Such objectives should include **high quality standards and clear evaluation criteria**, to prevent deliberative processes from being hijacked for citizen washing purposes.
- The quality criteria composed by the Council of Europe and the OECD can serve as a source of inspiration.

**Second, we encourage EU institutions to structurally integrate deliberative Citizens’ Assemblies, with a clear mandate, in their political processes:**

- The organisation of the COFEU and the following Citizens’ Assemblies organised by the Commission were an important step, but we encourage the EU to be courageous and **invite citizens to deliberate on highly contentious issues** such as migration, agriculture, and foreign policies. Citizens’ Assemblies in Ireland and France have demonstrated that Citizens’ Assemblies can be a crucial element to help governments prepare tough decisions, so the EU could benefit from this as well. Furthermore, we encourage the EU to institutionalise deliberative processes. This could be done by establishing a **permanent Citizens’ Assembly**, with a clear mandate, in order to structurally integrate deliberative processes in the European policy cycles.
- To further stimulate integration, the Commission should **create a horizontal DG or unit that is tasked to coordinate** the citizen participation and deliberation work of the Commission.
- MEPs should **challenge Commissioners designate** on their vision of citizen engagement.

**Third, we ask European Institutions to create the necessary conditions for inclusive and rigorous deliberation processes in all Member States:**

- Institutions should invest in initiatives to **build deliberative capacity for civil servants, politicians, project managers, etc.**, at the EU-wide and Member State levels.

- The EU should **allocate dedicated financial resources** that can be used by communities that otherwise would not have the opportunity to organise deliberative processes – in analogy with what the European Parliament and the Commission have done for several projects in the Balkan region during this legislature.
- **The EU should consider a continent-wide European Democracy Fund** to avoid evolving at two speeds, where only wealthier communities have the means to tackle democratic challenges and poorer ones are left behind.

By embracing deliberative democratic methods, we can not only enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of decision-making but also nurture a sense of ownership and solidarity among citizens. We believe the next few months are a critical period in which to champion democratic innovation and citizen participation as central pillars of the European project.

We hope the Belgian presidency can generate momentum toward a stronger, more inclusive European democracy. For if we succeed in strengthening European democracies, we can lay the foundation for a brighter future for all Europeans.

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter and stand ready to support your efforts in any way possible.

Yours sincerely,

**The initiators, G1000, Bureau Burgerberaad, DemNet Hungary, DemocracyNext, Federation for Innovation in Democracy (FIDE), Mehr Demokratie, Shipyard Foundation**

The European Democracy Organisations, Arantzazulab, Association for the ECI e.V. - The ECI Campaign, Center for the Study of Democracy, Coglobal, Danish Board of Technology, DD Center for Democracy, Deliberativa, Democracy International, Democratic Society, Démocratie Ouverte, Dreamocracy, Europe's People's Forum, European Citizen Action Service, European Environmental Bureau, Fórum dos Cidadãos, GLASSROOTS, GTAC - Assembleias de Cidadãos Portugal, IPP/CSIC, Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), Marea Deliberativa, Missions Publiques, nexus Institute for Cooperation Management, Particitiz, Pez Estudio, Platoniq Creativity & Democracy, Prossima Democrazia, Smarter Together, Sortition Foundation, Stichting G1000.nu The Netherlands, The Democratic Odyssey, The Field of Dialogue Foundation, The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra, TMeLab (Telesforo Monzon euskal herrigintza laborategia), We Do Democracy.



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