

**RELAY thematic workshop:**

**Giving EU democracy ‘a new push’ in times of crisis**

***Backdrop and remit of the workshop***

On 30 September 2022, a workshop about giving ‘EU democracy a push in times of crisis’ took place at the Brussels Campus of Maastricht University. This event was organised in the framework of RELAY, an EU a Jean Monnet project carried out with the support of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. RELAY aims at discussing the European Commission’s political priorities with a diverse array of stakeholders. It is coordinated by [Maastricht University Campus Brussels](https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/other-offices/campus-brussels) and includes several academic and non-academic partners. This was the 5th of 6 thematic workshops.

[Prof. Dr. Christine Neuhold](https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/c.neuhold) ([Maastricht University](http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl)) kicked off the workshop by putting it into political context: the European Commission announced already in 2019 that it wants to go ‘further than ever before to involve Europeans in EU decision-making’. This was further elaborated in Commission’s 2019-24 political priority ‘[A new push for European democracy](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy_en)’. One way for citizens to have their say in EU affairs was the creation of a Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference kicked off in April 2021 and officially ended on 9 May 2022 – Europe Day. The Conference is only one step, however, in the quest of pushing EU democracy forward.

The goal of giving EU democracy a new push was set in the context of a ‘polycrisis’ that, due to its long-lasting nature, is also [considered by some experts as a ‘permacrisis](https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Europe-in-the-age-of-permacrisis~3c8a0c)’. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war are but the latest among a series of crises that have confronted the EU almost relentlessly over the past two decades. Crises represent serious threats to the fundamental values of a political system. In such circumstances, it is unsurprising that goverments may try to prioritise policy outcomes and quick decisions to the detriment of the input of citizens, stakeholder consultation, and parliamentary involvement.

Against this backdrop, the broad aim of this workshop was to take stock of the state of affairs of EU democracy in times of crisis. More concretely, two ‘main channels’ of EU democracy were explored:

* parliamentary democracy, with both national parliaments and the European Parliament being in the ‘spotlight’;
* and civil society/citizen involvement.

Both channels have been strengthened by way of reforming European Union treaties, ever since the Maastricht Treaty was signed just over three decades ago. However, have recent crises impacted the way in which governments consider parliamentary and civil society input? What role do both “arenas” currently play in EU policy-making?

What about the role of the Conference on the Future of Europe? Is this a step forward in bridging the (alleged) gap between the EU and its citizens? How does such a forum relate to other channels of ‘civil society involvement’ and participatory democracy?

These questions were explored during interactive discussions that brought together academics, policy-makers, and civil society.

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| ***Panel 1: How do parliaments contribute to making the EU ‘more democratic’ in times of crisis?***The first panel focused on the question of how ‘crises’ affect parliamentary control (or not). One of the first insights came from Member of the European Parliament [Daniel Freund](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/106936/DANIEL_FREUND/home), who kicked off the debate by stating that lawmakers ‘cannot be on red alert’ all the time. Crisis mode has become ‘business as usual’, showing that the European Parliament (EP) has adapted its role to times of crisis. Academics often argue that crises empower the executive branch because decisions have to be taken under time pressure, behind closed doors, and secluded from the public eye. This is somewhat more complex when talking about EU decision-making. In the EU it is not so much the executive branch (i.e. the European Commission) that has been empowered by the polycrisis. Instead, it is the European Council, which has no executive power at EU level, that has gained center stage by regularly taking far-ranging political decisions to steer the EU’s direction. In some cases, this has been to the detriment of the European Parliament, which for example has no formal role in the response to the energy crisis. The European Parliament is however seen as a very (pro)active parliament. Though it has continued its active role during this polycrisis, it is walking the tightrope between controlling the executive and not blocking the (policy) process at a time when urgent decisions are needed. An example is the appointment of the European Commission President after the 2019 European Parliament elections. The European Parliament was unhappy with the [European Council’s nomination of a Commission president that ignored the *Spitzenkandidat* system](https://www.politico.eu/article/meps-lash-out-at-eu-leaders-over-top-jobs-package-ursula-von-der-leyen-european-commission-president/). In principle, the Parliament could have put forward a motion of censure against the proposed Commission President but did not want to use this tool as it has destructive rather than constructive effects. This shows that the EP does not want to pull the ‘emergency break’ except when it is strictly necessary. The EP is however not (yet) a “normal” parliament as it misses important functions, such as the right of initiative. Daniel Freund argues that, at the same time, given that (shifting) policy coalitions need to be formed within the EP, this dynamism makes it ‘cool’ to be an MEP as it allows them engage with their colleagues’ arguments rather than follow strict ideological lines. Different MEPs interpret their role and how to they relate to their constituencies differently. Some make social media videos to reach the public about their work in the Parliament, whereas others try to have an impact on EU policy by reacting to what ‘their’ constituents ‘want’ in a more direct manner. [Dr Nathalie Brack](https://ulb.academia.edu/NathalieBrack/CurriculumVitae) ([Université Libre de Bruxelles](https://www.ulb.be/)), who has studied why people ‘say no’ to Europe, stressed the fact that parliaments fulfil different functions. It seems that in times of crisis the European Parliament focuses on its deliberative/linkage functions, through which members of the European parliament express opinions on different issues. Traditionally, these roles have been largely led via the critical views expressed by Eurosceptic parties. In times of crisis however it becomes apparent that it is more paramount than ever that policy issues are debated from different angles. The EP has to come back to its role as a political forum where issues are discussed from different political perspectives, so that both Members of the European Parliament and, ultimately, voters, can make up their mind.[Dr Ian Cooper](https://dcubrexitinstitute.eu/people/ian-cooper/) ([Brexit Institute at Dublin City University](https://dcubrexitinstitute.eu/)) shed light on different parliamentary assemblies where parliaments that not (or no longer) belong to an EU member State meet with EU stakeholders. In this context, Brexit can be seen to have exacerbated the EU’s so-called democratic deficit as 48% of UK citizens wanted to remain within the EU but no longer have a say on EU policy-making. This is particularly relevant considering that, although the UK is no longer part of the EU, European law is still part of the UK’s legislation but the UK parliament can no longer exercise control. EU accession countries that may attend parliamentary fora such as [COSAC](http://www.cosac.eu/en/) also are in a marginal position as they cannot take the floor to voice their opinion on matters that affect them. Looking at parliamentary involvement in the EU, one can also see that some of the ‘tools’ that parliaments have at their disposal to control EU affairs – by way of [the Lisbon Treaty (2009)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/5/the-treaty-of-lisbon) – are not very effective. So far national parliaments have issued three so-called ‘yellow cards’, through which they can ask the Commission to withdraw or amend a proposal. The Commission can, however, also maintain its proposal and did so twice. The Commission only withdrew its proposal in the case of the first yellow card, which was on the right to strike. The Commission stated at the time that its withdrawal was not because of the “opposition” of national parliaments but because it would not have gained the necessary majorities in the EU institutions.[Dr Alvaro Oleart](https://studioeuropamaastricht.nl/team_member/dr-alvaro-oleart/) ([Studio Europa Maastricht](https://studioeuropamaastricht.nl)) commented on the points raised by Daniel Freund, Nathalie Brack and Ian Cooper. He stressed that national parliamentarians are not elected to represent citizens on European issues, as opposed to the European Parliament. It is thus no wonder that members of national parliaments cannot take ‘good’ care of European issues. Their plate is too full and often they also do not have the relevant expertise and insights on EU matters. The Conference of the Future of Europe was an attempt to get different stakeholders that can and want to feed into European affairs ‘around one table’: among others: citizens, parliamentarians (both national and European), and the European Commission. The Conference is of course not the ‘end of the road’ and not the only way for citizens to be heard. Importantly, as European Parliament elections exhibit low turnouts, more citizens have to realise that by way of voting, they can change the people who have the power. While it is true that crises have overshadowed EU policy making for decades now, Alvaro Oleart argued that, first of all, one has to differentiate between the different crises; the so called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 was first and foremost a crisis for those who had to flee their country. It then showed that the capacities and also the willingness to take in refugees of some Member States were limited. Crises feed into and reinforce each other. We should also not forget that crises can also be ‘abused’ strategically, framing certain matters as urgent in order to deviate attention from important policy issues at stake; we should be careful when we hear that ‘we cannot focus on this right now, as we need to resolve the crisis at hand…’. |
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***Panel 2: The Conference on the Future of Europe: what is at stake and what is the relationship with other channels of ‘EU participatory democracy’?***

The second panel focused on the [Conference on the Future of Europe](https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en) and explored its role in relation to other channels/forms of participatory democracy in the EU. It started off with Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul ([European Commission](https://ec.europa.eu/info/index_en)), who was directly involved in organizing the Conference as representative of the European Commission on the Common Secretariat for the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference was an new ‘experiment’ of deliberative and participatory democracy at the EU level, described bythe Commission as an ‘[unprecedented pan-European exercise in deliberative democracy - the largest and broadest of its kind ever seen](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0404)’.

Ricard-Nihoul explained that, while citizen’s assemblies have been convening at the national level, it was the first time that such an endeavor took place within the EU arena and at transnational level. Randomly selected EU citizens took part in so-called citizen panels. These panels were a ‘mini-Conference of citizens’ within the larger environment/arena of the Conference. It was a ‘citizen-centered process’.

The Conference came up with a final report at the end of its deliberations. This report, which contains 49 proposals, was presented to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and Commission. The different proposals are structured around 9 themes reaching from climate change and the environment to European democracy. The three institutions are now examining how to follow up effectively on these proposals, each within their own spheres of competences and in accordance with the Treaties. In June the Commission drew up a [Communication](https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/communication-conference-future-europe_en) offering a "detailed assessment of what is needed to follow up" on the Conference’s proposals.​

It is noteworthy that the current Commission already announced that the European Citizens’ Panels will in the future be able to deliberate and make recommendations ahead of certain key proposals. The first one will deal with the (very topical) issue of food waste. There will also be a feedback event in the fall off 2022 to keep the citizens who have participated in the Conference informed, and to "keep up the momentum".

[Dr. Corina Stratulat](https://www.epc.eu/en/analysts/Corina-Stratulat~104fc8) ([European Policy Centre](https://epc.eu/en/)) shed light on the new deliberative formats that the Conference built on. These reach from the multilingual digital platform to the European Citizens’ Panels. The latter consisted of a total of some 800 randomly selected citizens, a third of which were young people. They met for three deliberative sessions each and made recommendations. The Conference was more successful than expected and it was a bold move to test ‘new tools’. Moreover, Stratulat stresses that it is incredible that this was pulled off during a world-wide pandemic.

Nevertheless, Stratulat also emphasised that the purpose of proposals seems to be an ambiguous and it will be important to see how this will now be followed up upon. Of the 49 proposals put forward by the Conference, 18 seem to require Treaty change. It is for sure that those part of the Conference (and not only those) will expect something to ‘come out of it’. One should not only follow-up by way of Treaty reform but also see what are the results of this process from a longer term perspective. One also has to look beyond the Conference as such and link this back to the national arena. Processes have to count in policy-making.

Flavia Sandu ([Young European Federalists](https://jef.eu/)) underlined that it was very exiting to see the Conference kick off and follow, also on the side of JEF, what was going on, for example on the multilingual digital platform. The conference is a step in the right direction in making the EU more democratic and supplementing democratic mechanisms such as parliamentary elections through more participatory fora. On the other hand, the Conference was extremely complex: one would have to draw a very large graph in order to illustrate how this all ties together and it is very difficult to relate this to those not within the ‘Brussels bubble’. It is also crucial that concrete follow-up measures ot the Conference will be seen a window-dressing exercise, damaging instead of contributing to EU democracy-building.

[Markus Spoerer](https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/de/office/staff) ([European Ombudsman](https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/home)) led the audience into the concluding discussion by bringing in the perspective of the European Ombudsman (and her office). In particular, Sporer explained that while the Ombudsman expected a high amount complaints about or in the realm of the Conference, this was actually not the case. This may show that citizens appreciated the constructive nature with which it was organised, despite its flaws. To make the EU more democratic – even in times of crisis – one needs to trust citizens, empower them, listen to what they have to say, and act accordingly.