



- **Transnational online workshop series with FES partners from all over Europe**
- **Moderated and structured debate on the Future of the European Union**
- **Each online workshop with 30 participants from 3 countries on 3 sub-topics**
- **Thematic closing conferences in Brussels with EU stakeholders**
- **Main topic 2020: Future of Democracy in Europe**

Since the beginning of the global financial crisis, the European Union is in a constant state of crisis affecting citizens' everyday lives in policy areas including economic, financial, foreign, health, migration, security, and social policy. Emergency measures were adopted and reforms were started, but not always concluded. Under severe time pressure, late-night negotiations between governments sacrificed the democratic quality of decisions for the need of quick results. At the same time, the state of crisis acts as a catalyst for populists and autocrats. If European citizens do not withstand nationalistic temptations, as seen in the early days of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the crises will aggravate and might put the project of European integration and its successes in jeopardy.

The “Conference on the Future of Europe” is the opportunity to turn the page and shape the future for Europe. It is the forum to address the reform challenges in order to make the EU crisis-proof and concentrate on policies strengthening the value of European integration. That may not happen without involving citizens, civil society and organised interest groups in the debate about the reforms and future priorities of the EU. Citizens and organised civil society need to give a stronger input to the debate at the EU level and propose priorities for shaping the future of Europe.

For this reason, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is planning to stimulate the debate on the future of Europe during the next two years. In each of the four semesters, a series of **online workshops** will address one specific topic, **bringing together FES partners** from civil society, academia, media, politics, think tanks and trade unions **from different European countries to discuss intensively their expectations and wishes towards the European Union and its future.**

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Main Topic 2020: Democracy in Europe

As strengthening European democracy is key to give citizens a stronger say in European politics, the first semester will be dedicated to the topic of Democracy in Europe. It will address how to:

- 1. Make European Parliament elections more meaningful;**
- 2. Take decisions more bottom-up and make participative democracy work;**
- 3. Fight back autocratic tendencies and illiberalism in Europe.**

Starting in autumn 2020, participants of several half-day long online workshops shall engage in moderated debates on one of the three topics with FES partners from different countries in English, contribute their personal views on the challenges ahead and work on common political demands. These demands will be documented and representatives from all workshops will be invited to work on a common resolution on “The Future of Democracy in Europe” based on the results of the online workshops. During a conference in Brussels in early 2021, they will have the opportunity to present the final resolution to politicians and decision-makers and discuss it with them.

Please find detailed information on these topics below.



1. Make European Parliament Elections More Meaningful

Elections remain the backbone of democracies: They are the most accessible way for citizens to engage in political decision-making. However, decreasing levels of turnout have triggered criticisms that parliamentary systems lose legitimacy. As turnout among social groups differs considerably and better-educated citizens are more likely to vote, representation becomes biased. Among the reasons to explain this steady decrease in turnout, one main argument is the perceived lack of distinctiveness between major parties. ***Are established parties not competing any more but sharing power? Why do citizens have the impression that elections do not make a change?***

At the EU level, this is reinforced by the institutional setup of the European Union. The European peace project is reluctant to majoritarian decision-making where minorities can easily be outvoted. Bringing together citizens from 27 different member states, the EU seeks compromises. As a consequence, the Council of the EU remains the more powerful legislative chamber, national governments have a decisive say on who becomes member of the European Commission, and member states even have veto power in some policy areas. Currently, finding compromises between member states is increasingly challenging, bringing Europe regularly at the brink of deadlock. ***Can we still afford national governments quarrelling over package deals while citizens expect urgent problems to be solved? How can EU-level democracy become more meaningful and more efficient?***

For decades, the European Parliament has fought to extend its powers vis-à-vis governments and give citizens more influence on EU policy via European elections. Its direct elections since 1979, the establishment of the ordinary legislative procedure (where Parliament and Council are equally powerful), and the election of the President of the Commission are its most obvious successes. However, to achieve these reforms the European Parliament got used to acting as a cohesive body. While in most parliaments majority parties and opposition present clear alternatives, the major parties in the European Parliament tend to cooperate as an informal coalition, further blurring the distinctiveness of parties: Whatever citizens vote for in European elections, the winner is the grand coalition. Transforming the EU into a full parliamentary democracy is one idea to make EU politics more competitive. ***Does it make sense to let the European Parliament elect the Commission? Should the Commission rely on an own majority in the European Parliament? Should European elections transform to a winner-takes-all system?***

European elections are different from national ones. Even though the EU Treaties are calling for a common electoral system, European elections still take place as 27 different elections. Members of the European Parliament represent all citizens of the union, but each member is elected in one state only. Therefore, campaigns are organised by national parties at the national level, featuring national candidates and topics. While they probed the idea of EU-wide lead candidates in the two previous European elections, all other elements of the electoral campaigns remain national. European party families so far remain umbrella organisations of national parties and their electoral platforms often represent compromises on the smallest common denominator. ***If EU citizens get a more decisive say via European elections, should European parties campaign for alternative policy options? How can EU party families gain more visibility across Europe and become more distinguishable from each other? Are pan-European electoral lists the way to go?***

2. Take Decisions More Bottom-up and Make Participative Democracy Work

As fewer citizens are party members and turnout in elections is decreasing, the debate about new forms of political participation is gaining speed. Supporters of direct democracy promote it as an alternative to representative democracy. Eurosceptics pit citizens and politicians against each other, hoping that direct democracy will put an end to European integration. The Commission has long been seeking to involve stakeholders, interest groups and civil society to gain more legitimacy for its policies. Due to these very different motivations of the supporters of direct and participative democracy, debates on new forms of political participation are ridden by deep ideological conflicts.

Tensions are strongest when it comes to direct democracy – instruments that give citizens decision-making power. Both strong supporters of EU integration and proponents of representative democracy tend to oppose this idea. The former point to referenda that put brakes on EU reforms, fearing a deadlock in EU politics. The latter fear that direct democracy might generally overrule established checks and balances and thereby favour populists. On the other hand, supporters of direct democracy point to successful examples at the local and regional level and in a few states. ***Is direct democracy a means to bring distant “Brussels” closer to EU citizens? Would more citizens engage in European referenda than European elections? About what should citizens decide in referenda – legislation, treaty reforms, accession of new member states?***

Already established on the EU level, a number of instruments of participative democracy allow citizens, civil society and interest groups to engage in political debates at the EU level, but do not provide them with a decisive say. The Commission is a driver to establish instruments like online consultations, stakeholder hearings and conferences. It is keen on gathering information from experts and stakeholders engaged with different policy areas, like business lobbies. To get the broader picture, it is also reaching out to other interest groups, such as social or environmental groups, and civil society at large. However, the Commission is very sceptical about giving interest groups any decision-making rights or losing the control over the agenda of EU politics.

In addition to the lack of direct influence, the current EU-level participative democracy suffers from its limited outreach. While organisations with a Brussels office are well represented and the over-representation of business interests is decreasing, civil society and interest groups from the national level are hardly aware of these opportunities. Even fewer citizens know about the EU institutions’ willingness to listen to them; and among those who are engaging at the EU level, better educated and wealthier citizens are overrepresented.

The EU institutions’ willingness to respond to proposals and demands is another deficiency of EU participative democracy. While Commission and Parliament are willing to engage to a certain degree, the national governments fully shy away. ***Should all of them engage more intensively with EU citizens, civil society and interest groups? Is participative democracy a fix to compensate for decreasing turnout in elections? How can participation become more balanced? What kind of instruments would citizens help to engage more?***

In addition to the debate on reforming participative democracy, there are also a number of proposals for new ways of engaging citizens. Assemblies of randomly selected citizens who deliberate on policy priorities are trending. The Commission and some national governments have organised some thousand citizens’ dialogues, giving citizens the opportunity to discuss with politicians. However, very few of them were actually discursive citizens’ assemblies; most of them were just renamed panel discussions. ***Are such assemblies a new way for EU-level democracy? How can they contribute to strengthening EU-level democracy? Is democracy too important for making such experiments?***

3. Fight Back Autocratic Tendencies and Illiberalism in Europe

For long, the debate on democracy in Europe focussed on EU institutions. At the national level, the project of European integration helped to turn Germany and Italy into democracies shortly after the end of World War II. Supporting the newly founded democracies in Greece, Spain and Portugal by EU enlargement policy was the great success of EU democracy promotion in the 1980s. After the end of the Cold War, there were great hopes to replicate this success with the accession of the newly democratised Central and Eastern European states during the enlargement round from 2004. Despite concerns regarding Bulgaria and Rumania Eastern enlargement seemed to turn out another success story of EU democracy promotion.

Times have changed since then. Not just the legacy of insufficient state rule, especially corruption, in Bulgaria and Romania brought reforms to a halt. In Hungary and Poland, previous front-line supporters of the democratic revolution in Eastern Europe have turned into opponents of liberal democracy, European values and the rule of law. In Poland, the national-conservative Law and Justice Party is undermining the rule of law by subjugating the independent judiciary. In Hungary, the Fidesz party under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is shrinking the civic space, fighting against civil society, censoring independent media and research and bringing the judiciary under government control. Combined with anti-Semitic and anti-migrant populism, Orbán is promoting his autocratic rule as a new form of “illiberal democracy”.

The EU has to encounter these autocratic tendencies. However, it lacks the means to do so. Currently, there are mainly two instruments: The art. 7 procedure allows the Council of the EU to decide *unanimously* on the suspension of a member state’s rights enshrined in the EU Treaties in case of a serious and continuous breach of the European values. Therefore, the procedure is not effective as long as Poland and Hungary protect each other. Under the infringement procedure, the Commission can file a suit against a member state for violating its obligations under the EU Treaties. So far, the infringement procedures against Poland and Hungary were not efficient: both states complied with minor aspects of the Commission’s criticism, but then continued their anti-democratic reforms. ***How should the EU respond to the democratic backsliding in member states? Which instruments are adequate to enforce the EU Treaties without violating national sovereignty? Is the EU response adequate?***

In between these two instruments, the Commission is going to publish its first “Annual Rule of Law” report this autumn. In future, the Council shall discuss the overall situation of human rights in Europe and the country-specific evaluations on a regular basis. However, it is unlikely that the review and peer pressure alone will make much of a difference. As a more effective instrument, there is a rule of law mechanism under discussion. Member states convicted of the infringement of rule of law standards shall be subject to a reduction of EU funds. While the Commission and the European Parliament support the mechanism, it remains unclear whether member states will agree on it. ***Should the EU cut funding if the rule of law is not respected in member states? How could member states be fined if they violate European values?***

In addition to enforcing compliance with European values, democratic standards and the rule of law, the EU can also take measures to support those under pressure. While the way to sufficiently guaranteeing a framework for democracy in all member states, groups under pressure need urgent support. Most notably independent journalism as well as a functioning civil society are prerequisites of functioning democracies. ***How can the EU protect civil society groups and independent media? Should they receive direct financial support from EU funds?***