This document presents a series of recommendations put forward by the 50 Belgian citizens part of the citizens' panels held in Brussels from October till December 2021. These panels were organised under the auspices of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs, Ms Sophie Wilmès, as the contribution of the Belgian federal government to the Conference on the Future of Europe. The topic of this panel was 'How to closer involve citizens in European democracy'.

To reflect the entirety of the citizens' input, this report puts forward all recommendations, including those that did not gain a simple majority during the concluding voting session on all recommendations. They are clearly recognizable thanks to the mention of the percentage in **red and bold**. While some recommendations contradict each other, with citizens remaining inconclusive about them, these recommendations are always in *italics.* For one single recommendation, the divide was so clear that the vote ended in an *ex aequo*. This is shown in **orange and bold** . The citizens' intention is to share the fact that opinions on these recommendations were divided. They therefore propose that the CoFE bodies and the EU institutions be vigilant in the implementation of these specific recommendations, as there is a form of divide based on the vote.

1. Communication

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. Communication on the EU is not satisfactory.	1.1 We propose that lessons on the European Union be integrated into the school curriculum from the third cycle of primary school. The aim is to reach all citizens and to improve knowledge of the European Union.	88.4%
	1.2 The European Union, and especially the Commission, should provide educational material on the functioning of Europe to the Ministries of Education of the member states. In addition to explaining the functioning, composition and powers of the institutions, this training should also include a brief overview of the history of European integration. Particular attention should be paid to the use of clear, understandable and accessible language, as well as to educational tools such as documentaries, clips or school TV programmes, in all 24 languages.	95.0%

	2.1 We propose that the European institutions ensure that their communication better explains what is within the EU's competences, but also what is not within its competences.	97.6%
	2.2 The European Union should incorporate familiar examples from the daily lives of Europeans into its communication. These explanations should be spread within the Member States through agreements between the European institutions and national public television channels so as to reach a wide audience.	80.5%
	2.3 In addition, nationals of all Member States should be regularly informed about the role of the European Union in the other Member States – through video clips, for example. The advantages and disadvantages of Europe would thereby be better put into perspective in the debates on the future of Europe.	85.7%
2. The European project remains alien to citizens.	2.4 In order to strengthen European identity, we propose that information be made available and regularly communicated on what Europeans' life would be like without the EU and its concrete achievements.	92.7%
	2.5 We also propose that Europe Day (9 May) be made a European public holiday for all EU citizens.	81.4%
	2.6 We recommend that the European institutions pay even more attention to the simplification, comprehensibility, and accessibility of information on priority topics dealt with at European level.	97.6%
	2.7 We recommend that the European Union provide a dashboard showing the resources allocated by the EU per country and priority topic. All this information should be available on the EU websites.	93.0%
	2.8 We recommend that the EU provide a clear presentation of legislative work in progress. All this information should be available on the EU websites.	90.7%

	2.9 We want the European institutions to be more accessible to Europeans. Their participation in debates during sessions of the European Parliament should be facilitated.	79.0%
	2.10 We recommend that participation in the Erasmus programme be extended to all students regardless of their educational background (vocational and technical training, work-study). Everybody should be able to participate in European exchanges.	79.5%
	2.11 We recommend that the working population should be able to benefit from European exchange programmes, regardless of sector of activity, also for local businesses. Everybody should be able to participate in European exchanges.	83.7%
	2.12 We recommend creating European citizenship courses for all European citizens.	83.7%

3. European legislation is not applied in the same way across Member States.	3.1 We recommend that the European Union make more frequent use of legislation that is directly applicable in the member states. This would reduce national differences in the implementation of European legislation, which undermines the European project. In this way, the EU will be better able to safeguard and promote the integrity of the achievements such as the internal market, the euro and the Schengen area.	81.4%
4. European democracy is threatened.	4.1 We recommend that communication from the EU on European democracy constantly and unambiguously recall what Europe means for Europeans.	78.0%
	4.2 The values and principles of the EU-Treaties, to which the Member States subscribed on accession, are irreversible. Their protection must continue to be ensured.	81.0%
	4.3 The protection of the values and principles of the Treaties is ensured by the European Court and cannot be called into questions by the Member States.	81.0%
5. Information on the EU is not easily accessible and understandable.	5.1 We recommend strengthening fact-checking on European issues. This information, disseminated and verified by the institutions, should be easily accessible to the European public and to the national media in each member state.	83.3%
6. National media often conveys a negative image of the EU.	6.1 The EU must also be more present in the everyday lives of Europeans by communicating more proactively. (For example, by sponsoring events, particularly cultural events, which bring citizens together and make them proud to be EU citizens. The production of reports and teasers would also allow Europeans to have access to contextualised information on the EU).	85.7%

7. Citizens do not know the people who represent them in the European Parliament.	7.1 We recommend MEPs make themselves better known in their home countries, especially outside of election periods. They must be more accessible. The motivations for their votes in the European Parliament should be made more easily accessible to European citizens on the European Parliament's website.	92.7%
	7.2 We recommend that national political parties ensure that younger candidates are also put on their lists for the elections of the European Parliament. Such a mandate should not be seen as a reward for good and loyal service in national politics.	74.4%
8. Communication from the EU is too uniform; it does not take into account the diversity of the population	8.1 To address a sufficiently broad and varied audience, we recommend that the EU take into account the educational level of the target group and any disabilities they may have, by means of inclusive communication, from the design stage. Furthermore, we also recommend that people and organisations (street educators, neighbourhood agents, social workers, civil society) are involved in the transmission of this communication.	73.2%
	8.2 To reach the working population, we recommend investing more in the use of existing communication channels to regularly provide appropriate information about the EU, for example through explanatory programmes. Furthermore, we recommend relying on ambassadors (both individuals and organisations) who promote the EU project.	83.7%
	8.3 To reach young people and students, we recommend that, in addition to existing channels such as education and relevant youth movements, ambassadors should be used, in particular to target influencers who can reach young people through social media. Another recommendation would be to organise a pan-European competition to create a cartoon character that appeals to young people and brings European messages to them.	69.8%

	8.4 For <u>seniors</u>, we recommend using the same channels as those proposed for the working- population. In addition, we recommend finding the right balance between digital and non-digital communication (print, radio, face-to-face events) to meet the needs of everyone, including those who are less comfortable in a digital environment as well as those who are less mobile in society.	85.7%
	8.5 We recommend that through the integration courses that already exist in many member states, the EU should commit itself to including "<u>new Europeans</u>" (people who through one or another legal immigration procedure reside in the EU) and should make them aware of the other traditional channels through which the EU communicates. Finally, we also recommend that a role be given to local associations.	76.7%
	8.6 Furthermore, we recommend taking the EU to the streets with inclusive communication. For example, (digital) billboards could be used, as well as traditional and new means of communication like QR codes.	62.8%
	8.7 Other recommendations would be to make the EU more visual (through short films or infographics), the creation of a European sports movement to create a bond/sense of belonging, and to make the European anthem better known.	68.2%

2. Disinformation

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. The risk of disinformation is increasingly present in the media.	1.1 We recommend a review of the media funding model, including mandatory publication of revenue sources, in a clear and accessible way. The funding model of the media leads it to sensationalise information, taking it out of context and transforming it into disinformation.	73.8%
	1.2 We recommend that media outlets be obliged to cite their sources and provide links to verify them. Otherwise, information should be labelled as unverified.	90.2%
	1.3 We recommend that the European regulator in charge of the fight against disinformation (see point 2) should also be in charge of accrediting fact-checking organisations.	85.4%
	1.4 We recommend the establishment of an independent authority in each member state to monitor media neutrality. This authority should be financed and controlled by the European Union.	75.6%
	1.5 We recommend disseminating information about the URLs of the official websites of the EU to reassure citizens about the origin of the information.	90.2%

2. Many citizens doubt the neutrality of the media.	2.1 We recommend that a European regulator in charge of fighting disinformation be created. This regulator's mission would be to set the criteria for a 'neutrality label' and to establish, if necessary, a system of sanctions or incentives linked to compliance with neutrality standards. Alternatively, adherence to an ethical charter could be considered. The label would be granted by the independent national authority and would take into account the measures applied by the media to combat disinformation.	87.5%
	2.2 We recommend the installation of a European 'hotline' allowing citizens to report any disinformation concerning European political and economic competences.	82.1%
3. Citizens are not aware of the risks of disinformation to which they are exposed.	3.1 We recommend that platforms be required to publish clear and understandable information about the risks of disinformation to which their users are exposed. This information should be automatically communicated when an account is opened.	85.7%
	3.2 We recommend mandatory media literacy training, starting at an early age and adapted to the different levels of the education system.	74.4%
	3.3 We recommend that the European Union launch repeated campaigns on disinformation. These campaigns could be identified by a logo or a mascot. The EU could oblige social networks to relay them by broadcasting advertisements.	87.5%

4. The means to fight disinformation are insufficient.	4.1 We recommend that clear and easy-to understand information be published about the algorithms organising the messages received by users of social media platforms.	83.3%
	4.2 We recommend that users have a simple way to disable algorithms that reinforce behavioural biases. The obligation to provide users with access to other sources that present different views on the same topic could also be considered.	80.0%
	4.3 We recommend that the European Union support the creation of a social media platform that meets its own standards of neutrality and tackles disinformation. Alternatively, new functionalities could be added to the multilingual digital platform created to support the Conference on the Future of Europe.	56.4%

3. Citizens' panels

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. The difficulty of ensuring the representativeness of a citizens' panel. In the end, only a small part of the population is involved.	1.1 We recommend following what the most recent scientific work on deliberative democracy suggests in terms of sampling, design and scientific validation of the selection method to ensure the best possible representativeness.	89.7%
	1.2 We recommend that there be enough people around the table to ensure a diversity of opinions and profiles, including – but not limited to – people who are directly concerned with the topic.	90.2%
	1.3 We recommend adding the criterion of parenthood (i.e. does the person have children or not?) to the governmental sampling criteria, in addition to more traditional criteria such as gender, age, place of residence or level of education.	**33.3%**
	1.4 We recommend establishing quotas by geographical area, i.e. specifying that a European citizens' panel must be made up of x people per European geographical area (to be determined) in order for this panel to be truly qualified as European and to deliberate legitimately.	73.2%
	1.5 We recommend using population registries (or their equivalent, depending on the country) as the main database for sortition to give everyone an equal opportunity to be selected, and to generate interest in a topic among the population.	70.0%
	1.6 We recommend that participants be compensated to recognise the value of their investment and to attract people who would not participate if they were not compensated.	87.5%

	1.7 We recommend informing participants in advance through presentations by experts - in a relatively minimal way without too much information or too much complicated information - to ensure that even those without prior knowledge feel comfortable participating in the discussions.	82.9%
	1.7.2. We recommend that the theme of the citizens' panel be communicated in advance so that people know what topic they will be discussing.	78.6%
	1.8 We recommend that citizens not be obliged to participate.	97.6%
2. The difficulty of organising panels at the European level.	2.1 We recommend that the European citizens' panel meetings be held in a hybrid format (face-to-face/virtual). This would allow people who cannot physically travel to participate.	70.0%
	2.2 We recommend that the EU, for greater ease of access and organisation, delegate the organisation of citizens' panels on European issues to the national level.	69.0%
	2.3 We recommend that a single topic be chosen for each panel organised at the European level. This way, all participants can discuss the same topic, no matter where they come from in Europe.	80.5%
3. Preventing the citizens' panel from being used for purposes other than those declared.	3.1 We recommend that any citizen should be able to submit a topic for discussion, and therefore that this right should not be reserved for politicians or lobbyists.	82.1%
	3.2 We recommend that the right of initiative belong to the European Parliament, so that it defines the topic to be discussed and subsequently adopts the necessary texts to follow up on the recommendations that emerge from deliberations.	63.4%

4. The difficulty in deciding how best to organise the process to best represent citizens.	*4.1.1 We recommend setting up one or more permanent European citizens' panel(s), which would take on specific tasks alongside Parliament. The panel(s) would be renewed regularly. This would make it possible to bring citizens together over the long term and to take the time necessary for such debates to take place. This time allows for nuanced debates and consensus-building. Alongside this permanent panel, ad hoc citizens' panels would debate topics chosen by the permanent panel. We propose following the model of the German-speaking community of Belgium.*	*54.8%*
	4.1.2 We recommend setting up one or more non-permanent European citizens' panel(s), which would only meet to discuss a specific topic for a set period of time.	*58.5%*
	4.2 We recommend not organising European citizens' panels for urgent issues, as sufficient time is needed to ensure the quality of debates.	63.4%
5. Too often, citizens who participate in participatory democracy initiatives such as citizens' panels do not receive feedback on the follow-up given to their work, in the short or the long term.	5.1 We recommend giving feedback to citizens on the follow-up given (or not given) to the recommendations issued after European citizens' panels. If the recommendations are not followed up, the relevant European institutions should give reasons for their decision (e.g. lack of competences). To this end, we recommend that regular summaries be drafted throughout the process following a panel.	97.5%
	6.1 We recommend organising citizens' panels also with children from a young age (e.g. 10 to 16 years old) to raise their awareness of participation and debate. This can be organised in schools.	59.5%

4. Referenda

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
	0.1 We recommend that it should be possible to organise referenda at European level on European issues.	73.3%
1. Referendum culture varies strongly from one Member State to another.	1.1 We recommend commissioning research on how to create a common referendum culture in Europe.	70.7%
	1.2 We recommend that an independent panel examine whether it is appropriate to hold a European referendum on a specific issue.	77.5%
2. The wording of the question asked in a referendum can have a negative impact, as can the fact that the answer is only 'yes' or 'no', which often polarises debates and societies. The choice of subject is also sensitive.	2.1 We recommend the creation of a scientific committee that would be in charge of determining how to ask the questions that would be the subject of a European referendum in the most neutral way possible.	87.2%
	2.2 We recommend asking multiple choice questions, going beyond the simple alternative of 'yes' or 'no' to provide nuance, even attaching conditions to both 'yes' and 'no' (i.e. 'yes if…', 'no if…').	65.0%
	2.3 We recommend that blank votes not be included in the calculation of any majority, whether a simple or absolute majority. There must nonetheless be enough votes (the quorum must be respected).	75.0%
	2.4.1 We recommend that a question asked in a European referendum can be on any subject within the competences of the European Union.	87.5%
	2.4.2 We recommend excluding subjects that could be a source of conflict between member states.	**39.0%**

	2.5 We recommend that technical and difficult questions can also be asked, worded clearly, because people have the capacity to be sufficiently informed.	77.5%
3. Referenda are not a democratic tool if only the political sphere can decide to organise one.	3.1 We recommend that the European Parliament have the right of initiative to organise European referenda, and that it should then be able to implement the results (the European Commission and the Council should follow, without the possibility of blocking it).	67.5%
	3.2 We recommend that the initiative to organise a referendum can also come from the citizens themselves (following, for example, similar rules as the European Citizens' Initiative).	77.5%
	3.3 We recommend that the practical organisation of a European referendum be the responsibility of a neutral body.	75.0%
4. The binding or non-binding nature of a referendum must be clearly defined.	4.1.1 We recommend that the result of a European referendum should only be binding if certain conditions are fulfilled in terms of rate of participation.	92.7%
	4.1.2 We recommend that the results of a referendum should only be binding if certain majorities are reached (51/49, 70/30). These conditions should be determined before each referendum.	72.5%
	4.2 We recommend that the result of a European referendum should be binding if the initiative to organise it was taken by citizens (who would have managed to collect a certain number of signatures for this purpose) but non-binding if the initiative was taken by a political institution.	**47.5%**
	4.3 We recommend that the result of a European referendum be binding only for certain issues, but not for those where the consequences of the vote could be very serious.	**40.0%**

5. The public is often poorly informed before being asked to vote in a referendum. At the same time, it is important to control the information provided to avoid negative influences (domestic or foreign) on the vote.	5.1 We recommend that before any European referendum, the population be clearly informed on the impact of the result of the vote on their daily lives through pamphlets, as is done in Switzerland, and/or through information sessions	97.5%
	5.2 We recommend that a scientific committee be created for each European referendum to guarantee the neutrality of the information provided.	87.2%
6. Although a referendum invites the whole population to directly participate (in contrast to a citizens' panel), there is always a certain proportion of people who do not vote.	*6.1.1 We recommend that voting in a European referendum be mandatory.*	***43.6%***
	6.1.2 We recommend that voting in a European referendum be voluntary.	*52.5%*
	6.2 To reduce the number of non-voting people, we recommend allowing electronic voting in addition to paper voting (or even in addition to other means of voting, such as postal voting). Electronic voting is particularly interesting for people going on holiday, and it also encourages people who are less interested in voting because the constraint of travelling to the voting location is removed.	90.0%
7. Too often, citizens who participate in participatory democracy initiatives such as referenda do not receive feedback on the follow-up given to their work, in the short or the long term.	7.1 We recommend giving feedback to citizens on the follow-up given (or not given) to the decision taken by citizens in a European referendum.	92.5%

5. Existing instruments

5.1 Elections

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. Different rules exist between the different member states.	*1.1 We propose that voting be compulsory for the elections of the European Parliament, but with sufficient information for citizens to understand the reasons.*	*50.0%*
	1.2 Our recommendation is to make the rules for elections of the European Parliament as uniform as possible in all countries, including the minimum age.	87.2%
2. There is no sufficient diversity of MEP's for criteria such as age, origin, gender.	2.1.1 We propose that MEPs should be of all ages and backgrounds	82.1%
	2.1.2 We propose that MEPs should deliberately choose a European career, and not just because they are at the end of their career.	82.5%
	2.1.3 We propose to strive for balanced gender distribution, for example by alternating genders on the electoral lists. The EU must establish these criteria and respect them in the composition according to the quota. If a candidate refuses their mandate, the following candidate by preference and with the same gender takes over the mandate.	82.5%
	2.1.4 We recommend that candidates on European lists exercise their mandate if elected.	89.2%

3. We vote for the European Parliament and have no say in the composition of the Commission	3.1 We propose that there should be a treaty change whereby the largest party group in the European Parliament can appoint the President of the European Commission.	**48.6%**
	3.2 We recommend that the composition of the European Commission be made more transparent, according to some basic rules, so that the composition reflects citizens' voice and citizens know how the selection was made.	88.9%
4. There is a lack of knowledge of the candidates for the European elections, nor of their program or the political group they'll be part of in the European Parliament	4.1 We propose that the European candidates should present themselves, their objectives and their programme in a more concrete way locally and through different channels of communication.	84.2%

5.2   European Ombudsman

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. The non-English webpage only contains information in English on the first two pages. This causes an obstacle to citizens who are not proficient in English.	1.1 We propose to put information on the homepage in all European languages and, if it translation is not possible, to post news in English elsewhere on the site.	89.2%
2. The Ombudsman is not involved in the sanction and possible damages for the complainant.	2.1 We propose that the Ombudsman should be part of the process of finding and implementing the solution, sanction or compensation, and should have a voice in the process.	71.1%
3. The delay to validate the subscription to the website can be very high. This can take up to 24 hours, discouraging the citizen who does not pursue further.	3.1 We propose installing a system for immediate validation.	**47.4%**
4. When a complaint is filed the question is asked whether all possible procedures have been tried. The citizen does not know all of them and cannot respond to the question.	4.1 We propose to include a link to a simple presentation or explanation of the other procedures.	89.5%
5. The website of the Ombudsman is well made but does not have a proper European 'image', what raises questions with the citizen (am I in the right place, is this website credible?).	5.1 We propose to revise the website's graphic design and to bring it more in line with that of the EU. A first tip would be to raise the European flag to the top of the page. It must be clear at the first "click" that the citizen is on the site of the Ombudsman.	78.4%

5.3 Public consultation

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. The consultation website has changed, and the citizen is sent in first instance to an outdated site. You have to undertake a search to find the URL of the new site.	1.1 We propose to delete the old site and reference the new site first.	81.6%
2. The roadmap (English) and advices (language of the 'citizen editor') of a consultation are not translated into the language of the citizen reading	2.1 We strongly recommend that the roadmap be translated into the language of the citizen. Having the roadmap only available in English blocks any citizen who does not speak English from participating.	81.6%
	2.2 We propose to put a tab or icon "Automatic translation" on each individual submission, which would link to an open-source translation engine such as Google Translate or DeepL.	65.8%
3. You have to subscribe to receive information on the follow-up of the process.	3.1 We propose to send the follow-up of the process automatically to every person who responds, with the possibility to unsubscribe.	89.5%
4. We don't know whether the number of opinions in one direction influences the commission, or if they are perceived as on point of view (weighted or not). If the number of opinions in one direction is being accumulated, we are worried that the weight of lobbyists/activists/big enterprises	4.1 We recommend providing clear information on the subject on the website.	81.6%
	4.2 If the number of opinions in one direction has an impact, we recommend that a system is put in place to filter out lobbyists, activists or big business so that they are not given undue weight.	60.5%

in the consultation and thus actions undertaken by the EU compared by the voice of citizens/NGO's.	4.3 We recommend the creation of artificial intelligence software that classifies the different opinions and counts the opposing or favourable opinions.	**47.4%**
	4.4 We propose to organise meetings between citizens and (activist) associations: places where citizens can express their opinions, in the form of "Europe Houses" that can help spread citizens' views at European level. These should exist at different locations and at the local level.	62.2%
5. The opinion form is unclear: there are both an open question and a questionnaire. What is the role of each document, what has to be completed?	5.1. This information should be clarified on the website.	81.6%
6. There are too many levels of competences for what concerns the instruments.	6.1 We propose the creation of a dispatching centre to direct requests to the appropriate level of authority.	78.9%

5.4   European Citizens' Initiative

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. Citizens without internet are harder to reach.	1.1 We suggest that local authorities or libraries, which are independent of government, could be involved in the dissemination of initiatives and collection of signatures, both electronically and on paper. The EU should draw up an inventory of this network per country and make it available to the citizens starting the ECI.	71.1%
2. The number of countries to participate is too low to create sufficient support.	2.1 We propose to raise the number of countries from which signatures are collected to 13 in order to have more support for the proposal. The number of signatures should be respected in proportion to the number of inhabitants.	64.9%
3. The cost and effort to gather the signatures is high.	3.1 We propose that there should be EU funding to support these initiatives.	71.1%
	3.2 We propose that a body be set up to facilitate coordination between countries.	75.7%
4. The procedure is complex for citizens.	4.1 We propose the creation of a helpdesk to assist citizens in completing the procedures.	83.8%
5. It is unclear what the result of a citizens' initiative is.	5.1 We propose that the European Commission should be obliged to discuss and work on the follow-up to the proposal, not simply respond and acknowledge receipt. If the Commission decides to not act on the proposal, it must justify this.	100.0%
	5.2 We propose to organise a citizens' consultation when a European Citizens' Initiative is received to ask for their opinion on it before the Commission follows it up. This would avoid having only extreme opinions or votes and include the opinion of people who did not sign the ECI. In addition, if all citizens give their opinion, the suggestion will have more weight at EU level and in its follow-up.	55.3%

5.5 Right to petition

Issues	Recommendations	Supported by (%)
1. The European Commission takes the final decision, no certainty on the outcome.	1.1 We propose that the European Parliament's recommendation be followed up by the Commission.	81.1%
2. There is a lack of transparency on the process and motivation for the decision	2.1 We propose that the person who submits the petition be kept informed about the progress and decisions at regular intervals. Reasons should also be given for the final conclusion.	94.4%
3. It is hard for citizens to address the need for new legislation.	3.1 Our recommendation is that a petition should also be used as a tool to demonstrate the need for new legislation.	78.4%