

Draft proposal

Center for European Citizens' Democracy Fond, Denmark

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Timing

It is not incidental that the Center for European Citizens Democracy (CECD) is proposed before Denmark will be responsible for the presidency of the European Council.

President Ursula Von der Leyen insists in the guidelines for her new presidential period that under the current geopolitical context it is a moral, political and geostrategic imperative to further complete our Union - in line with the promise EU gave in the Treaties. It makes EU more secure, and it can help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe.

Accession to the EU will always be a merit-based process – and each candidate will be assessed on its own progress towards meeting all criteria. EU will step up support to prepare candidate countries.

The rule of law and fundamental values as equality and inclusion will continue to be the cornerstones of the EU's enlargement policy, Von der Leyen insists, and they will provide a clear political signal of partnership in a more contested and unstable world.

This more focused approach to enlargement should also come with a more focused approach to our wider neighbourhood, Von der Leyen says.

Serious challenges for democracy in important non-member countries currently tend to threaten existing democracies and even among member states there are several examples of rule of law challenges and violation of media and journalistic freedoms. One of the central tenets of the rule of law is media freedom. In a world of ever-faster media, and ever more disinformation, EU must do everything possible to support a free media across the union.

New Priorities

The needs and challenges for strengthening democracy are significant. However, they are followed by the European Commission's new priorities for engagement with citizens and civil society organisations as well as support to independent media and journalism.

President Ursula Von der Leyen states in her guidelines for the current period that the Conference on the Future of Europe – and the success of the European Citizens' Panels – have been big steps towards a more deliberative democracy and engaging people beyond elections or politics.

Every year, the Commission will choose policy areas and proposals where recommendations from a European Citizens' Panel would have the greatest value. Citizens' participation and particularly with youth must be embedded across the EU.

In the same spirit, the European Commission will also step up its engagement with civil society organisations that have expertise and an important role to play in defending specific societal issues and upholding human rights. EU must ensure civil society is better protected in its work.

The European Commission already in the end of 2023 published a pretty detailed COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION on promoting the engagement and effective participation of citizens and civil society organisations in public policy-making processes.

The European Commission further plans to implement the European Media Freedom Act and increase its support for and protection of independent media and journalists.

Priorities, recommendations, legislation and programmes with relevant funding form a solid framework for the work to promote participatory democracy among member states, candidate and neighbourhood countries.

The gap to be filled by CECD?

At EU-level the European Commission is well placed to carry out representative and deliberative panels that cover participants from all member states and essentially build on the methodologies that have been used in the Conference on the Future of Europe and in a few subsequent thematic panels.

The Commission finds that the participation and listening to representatively selected citizens and youth has significantly influenced the political priorities and improved the quality of its concrete policies and legislation.

The obvious challenge remains the EU-citizens' significant lack of trust and low involvement in national and European democracies consistently documented by Eurobarometer for more than a decade. In December 2023, Eurobarometer shows that on average half of the EU-citizens are not satisfied with the way democracy works in their member state with a range from 20 to 75 %. This disenchantment is even more widespread in the candidate countries where very low electoral participation makes governments vulnerable.

The European Commission with member states and European Parliament has the power to ensure that candidate countries must comply with the formal criteria for rule of law, media freedoms and human rights with respect to legislation and capacity before joining the EU.

However, new member states may backslide on these criteria after accession. For this reason, it is essential to actively involve citizens in the pre-accession phase to systematically and detailed define and recommend the reforms that should be implemented and in the post-accession phase together with civil society organisations and media to control that the reforms are adequately implemented.

Center for European Citizens Democracy Foundation - CECD

The independent Center for European Citizens' Democracy Fund assists and supports building sustainable democracies in the EU's candidate countries and possibly in its neighbouring countries.

CECD collaborates with parliaments in candidate countries and in interested member states to define shared goals with respect to complying with the Copenhagen Criteria and how to increase the involvement of citizens and civil society organisations to achieve a sustainable democratic culture. Besides its own experts, CECD partners with committed civil society and media partners from the candidate countries and member states in this process and clear agreements are made one by one and jointly.

A defined baseline for the entire pre-accession and accession process will allow to measure ratings for participatory democracy on a systematic and scientific basis as agreed by the relevant stakeholders from participating countries.

CITIZENS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORMS

Crucial data feeding into the baseline are the detailed recommendations for necessary democratic reforms at all levels of society that will be formulated by citizens in the individual candidate country. The citizens' recommendations will provide the outline for the collaboration among partners in process facilitated by CECD to help develop rule of law, media freedoms, human rights and inclusion as well as adhere to the Copenhagen Criteria.

The list of citizens' recommendations will be determined through a comprehensive process combining locally managed socio-economically representative citizens' panels, a diverse deliberative discussion in media and civil society organisations at national level, and endorsement by national parliaments.

THE WORK

The process towards participatory societies requires building partnerships at national and cross-national levels as well as facilitating the cooperation of local civil society organisations, media and national parliaments including the European Parliament.

The CECD's role is to facilitate and guide the process by involving relevant experts and partners to work with legislative bodies, media, and civil society organisations. It will enhance national and cross-border partnerships, advise, and build organisational and national capacity to involve citizens in democratic processes in and between elections.

In this collaborative process, the CECD builds the capacity of parliaments, civil society, and media, enabling them to better serve the public democratic dialogue and implement citizens' deliberative dialogues. Ultimately, the process will provide the foundation for a genuine and sustainable change of the pre-accession countries.

To have the desired impact CECD's work will need to be designed and carried out in a strategic framework. Smaller ad hoc activities will have limited real impact on the ground.

For a number of years, CECD has through the Europe's People's Forum cooperated closely with the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), especially the EPP, the Renew, the Socialists and Democrats, the Greens and the Left. It is particularly encouraging if the European Parliament offers to help implement some of its innovative participatory methods with its partners in the candidate countries.

Partnering between national parliaments in candidate countries and in interested member states will contribute to develop new standards for participatory democracy and more engagement of citizens in the future policy making.

European Broadcasting Union has earlier expressed its commitment in a Horizon research and innovation project to develop editorial modalities for developing public service media's social media platforms to reach all groups of society in guided democratic dialogues.

EESC with its Civil Society Organisations Group similarly welcomes collaborating with CECD to strengthen the independence and democratic engagement of civil society organisations in the candidate countries.

CECD's systematic work with civil society organisations and media with their social media platforms for citizens will significantly boost the agenda and capacity on human rights, rule of law and good governance in the pre-accession countries.

Based on the defined criteria for participatory democracy, the CECD will holistically work to inspire, enhance and exchange best approaches to combine the efforts of parliaments, civil

society organisations, professional and social media to achieve high participatory democratic standards.

The non-profit Center for European Citizens' Democracy (CECD) is an initiative taken by Europe's People's Forum to provide specialised assistance and partnership to European civil societies, parliaments, media and local civil society partners. As such, it constitutes a neutral entity capable of offering non-biased support to national processes, drawing on the experience of partner organisations dedicated to enhancing deliberative processes and capacity building.

And yet – a Strategic Council whose members are appointed by the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council and the member states as well as the CoR, EESC and others will advise on future challenges, needs and opportunities for CECD. This will ensure a minimum of coherence with the European institutions.

Objectives

Overall objective:

- To strengthen sustainable and participatory democracy in the European Union, its candidate and neighborhood countries by accentuating the active role of all citizens.

Specific objectives are to offer:

1. Systematic and scientifically based ratings for participatory democracy as agreed between the relevant stakeholders from participating countries.
2. Facilitation of joint processes on how to empower citizens and involve them in policy and decision making before and during representative elections at local, national and European level.
3. Innovative models, methodologies and support to parliaments, civil society organisations, professional and social media to effectively incorporate dialogue with all parts of the population into the decision and policy making process at all levels.
4. State-of-the-art technology-based platforms as part of deliberative processes to reach, involve and collect inputs from all groups of citizens, including vulnerable and marginalized persons irrespective of their preferred communication tools or educational and social background
5. Latest useful and hands-on research results and evaluations within participatory, deliberative and representative democracy, to successfully help all stakeholders to strengthen the citizens' engagement in democracy.
6. Effective alliances for democracy through liaison with the European and national Parliaments, the EC Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, the Council of the EU, EC-, EP- and national representations in member states and candidate countries, Committee of Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, Council of Europe, as well as umbrella and national civil society organizations like the New European Peoples Forum, EPD, EBU and many others.

Infrastructure:

The CECD will potentially work in many countries across Europe and its neighbourhood and will benefit from the most modern work routines by having most internal brainstorming and

decision-making processes take place through online communication. This will not only speed up the work procedures and the possible results in the partner countries but will definitely also become much more cost effective.

When assisting and exchanging between parliaments, civil society organisations, media and social media it is essential to be able to work with the best qualified international experts when helping local key partners to design and implement their steps forward towards participatory democracy.

It is equally important through a Matrix organisation to ensure a modern project-oriented organisation that is flexible and adapted to take on new projects and engage new experts ready to contribute to partners in relevant local, national and regional contexts.

An office linking up to the European institutions at a regular basis will be in Brussels.

It is further foreseen that a close collaboration between CECD and the Economic Forum in Poland will be beneficial for both parties. Larger meetings for the Strategic Council, or large meetings with European partners could take place at the Economic Forum, or in stand-alone meeting facilities across Europe.

Scope

CECD will be shaped to combine large regional and national projects that take a holistic approach to the democracy measures that are used.

Through a matrix project organisation, the CECD will effectively combine partnership and exchanges between parliaments, specialised civil society organisations and professional media and new social media platforms linked to such media, it is our belief that a synergy will create a stronger move towards enhanced and improved participation.

By combining design and facilitation of representative, deliberative processes with much broader popular engagement through media, civil society and online platforms the emotional sense of being heard and belonging will be strengthened. And the useful visions for democratic reforms in society towards everyday participation will multiply.

A regional approach to CECD's work in candidate countries will give additional options for conflict sensitive approaches to the foreseen participatory processes when defining target groups, questions to discuss and by bringing partners together across boundaries.

CECD will be created to answer the needs for ambitious projects for change. An example is the Pilot Project 73 proposed in 2024 by the AFCO Committee in the European Parliament - *Citizen's Mechanism for democratic reforms in candidate countries*, designed with advice from EPF. All activities described in the Pilot Project for a separate Pilot Project budget line in EU's budget could however be covered by 2 existing sources ^{1, 2}.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA III).

² Regulation (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009, published in OJ L 209, 14.6.2021, p. 1–78.

In other words, there are several possibilities for funding of large programmes and projects proposed by the European Parliament and other institutions.

The European Union has further set aside significant budgets for programmes supporting democracy in member states, candidate and neighbourhood countries and CECD would be qualified to take part in calls for such programmes as well as for calls within the Horizon research and innovation programmes.

Collaboration with member state programmes for democracy support as well as their access to near-taiey funding can be important for needs analyses and local partners' commitment to larger programmes initiated by the European institutions.

The success and impact of CECD will entirely depend on the high quality of concepts and implementation as well as the trust of all local partners in the recipient countries.

An annual grant of 1 million Euros in 5 years will cover basic costs of HQ and Brussels rentals, travel, meetings, key management and expert project managers. In a longer-term perspective, the grant will ensure that the approaches offered will match a high quality of the needs analyses.

GOVERNANCE

Strategic Council

The Strategic Council will evaluate CECD's strategic development and advise on future strategic challenges, needs and opportunities for CECD. The Strategic Council has no access to influence concrete projects or their funding and cannot influence the daily work.

The Strategic Council meets once a year and can give its advice with a shorter notice.

Members of the Strategic Council are appointed by the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council and the member states as well as the CoR and EESC, CoE and eventually others.

Board:

CECD should have a professional board of up to 13 members.

The qualifications of the individual board members should collectively reflect the professional, financial and management needs of the CECD. None of the board members should be active politicians.

A prominent European personality should be identified as chairperson of the board. She/he should be chosen, reflecting gender considerations, and with a background from a high-ranking position in the European Commission or in the European Parliament or another internationally well-known profile from former national leadership.

Together with the chairperson a board should be set up with 4 representatives from New European Peoples Forum, 1 from Pan European Movement International, 1 from Foundation Institute for Eastern Studies, 1 from European Citizens Initiative, 1 from the European Partnership for Democracy, and a few other representatives in their representative and professional capacity.

New European Peoples Forum as founding organisation has organised almost all key organisations involved in the European Union's deliberative participatory processes including the Conference on the Future of Europe. 25 member organisations are professional designers and implementers of such processes at national and European level, and 55 member organisations are civil society organisations mainly specialised in democratic dialogues and EU as well as rights-based issues.

The other members of the board will mainly represent organisations that work with citizens direct participation in decision making.

Citizens' Panel

A Citizen's Panel with randomly chosen citizens from all member states and candidate countries will discuss the CECD activities hitherto and will further point to local, national and European needs for new activities to support democracy.

The Citizens' Panel will meet once a year.

Functions of the CECD

HEADQUARTER

Management and Staff Functions

The Management is responsible for:

Employment and dismissal of staff, the coordination and management of all parts of CECD, the quality and methodology of CECD's work and is overall responsible for profit and loss.

Overall contacts to funding sources, senior levels of European institutions, national authorities and partner organisations and institutions at national and European level.

Preparing, initiating, supervising and evaluating internal and external projects with the necessary methodological rigor. The management is further responsible for planning and implementation, budgeting and accounting of CECD's projects and daily work.

Communication at policy and strategic level and for servicing the Board of Directors, the Strategic Council and the Citizens' Panel.

Administration and HR Management

Administration and HR Management is responsible for:

Preparation and communication about project budgets and accounts, as well as contractual issues with national and international institutions, quarterly accounts including cash flow as well as annual accounts for CECD.

Judicial analyses related to project applications and all other principal matters for the Management and Board as well as minutes from board meetings

Search and employment processes of new leaders and staff, planning of interviewing processes, contracts, salary negotiations and daily issues related to HR management.

Communication and Technology

Communication and Technology is responsible for:

Setting up all IT-related and online production and communication systems for CECD staff and offices, including also archiving mechanisms.

Developing State-of-the-art technology-based platforms to reach, involve and collect inputs from all groups of citizens, including vulnerable and marginalized persons irrespective of their preferred communication tools or educational and social background.

Preparing communications strategy, measures and tools for CECD and at local level for its partners and projects being implemented.

Preparing all relevant staff to communicate towards the public at all levels except policy and strategy levels.

Research and Ratings

Research and Ratings is responsible for

Definition of scientifically based indicators for development and rating of participatory democracy. The indicators could be degrees of deliberative and representative citizens' processes, citizens' influence in civil society organisations, labour unions, public institutions, minority rights and consultation processes from national and local legislative and executive bodies, free access to information and media's role in democratic dialogues etc.

Collection and internal communication of the development of indicators for participatory democracy from CECD's local antennas.

Setting up internal monitoring processes for all projects.

Attracting interested researchers to engage CECD in joint research projects related to participatory democracy – through programmes like Horizon and others – with a view to building the capacity, quality and effectiveness of CECD's methodological approaches.

Presentation of its findings to national and European authorities.

Training, Exchange, Twinning and Partnership Administration

The Training, Exchange, Twinning and Partnership Administration is responsible for:

Identifying experts to prepare curricula for training, carry out training of specialised civil society organisations, media and parliamentary and government administrations as well as manage the administration of participants, their travel and accommodation.

Doing all the logistics and administration for exchanges, twinning and partnership between parliaments, media and civil society organisations.

Choosing and agreeing with locations for training, exchange, twinning and partnership processes in the relevant countries and with the relevant institutions and in accordance with the key project managers.

BRUSSELS:

Matrix of Expert Project Leaders

The Matrix of Expert Project Leaders is responsible for:

Identifying, designing, and supervising in the national, multinational and European projects in collaboration with the implementing partners among parliaments, media and civil society organisations in EU27, candidate and neighbourhood countries.

Facilitating processes, which let all participating partners discuss, agree and commit to project goals, multinational or European collaboration for participatory democracy.

Keeping close contact with the European Parliamentarians and with relevant parliamentarians and parliamentary administrations in beneficiary countries in order to build awareness and prepare and support implementation of citizens' participatory processes.

Keeping close contact with the European Broadcasting Union, the Circom Regional and the Public Service Media in the beneficiary countries in order to build awareness and prepare and support editorially independent content formats in their social media platforms or in audio or video that will engage as many citizens as possible in deliberative dialogues.

Keeping close contact with these civil society organisations in the beneficiary countries or at European level that work with issues like election monitoring, minority rights, media freedoms, or focus on citizens participation in democracy and seek to support their capacity and work.

Keeping close contact with civil society organisations in the beneficiary countries or at European level that advocate for issues like election monitoring, minority rights, media freedoms, or focus on citizens participation in democracy will seek to support their capacity and work.

Keeping close contact with civil society organisations, labour unions or other organisations that reach out to as many and as diverse, vulnerable and marginalised people as possible in order to support their local partners specialised in deliberative participatory processes by engaging larger parts of the population in policy dialogues.

When a project has been identified and discussed between the Expert project managers and the management, the most relevant project manager will be appointed and a work group drawing on primarily external experts is established with defined goals, timeline and budget. The respective work groups refer to the executive director, and project secretariat lies with the Head Quarter Office. Apart from the Expert project managers the CECD should as a core philosophy have all other experts or local support staff employed project by project.