



DISCUSSION PAPER

11 January 2018

En Marche l'Europe?
A strategy to implement democratic conventions

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**EUROPEAN POLITICS
AND INSTITUTIONS PROGRAMME**

Table of Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	4
1. A new lease of life for European democracy	5
1.1 The search for democratic legitimacy	5
1.2 <i>Encore En Marche</i>	6
2. Marching towards EU reforms	6
2.1 Seizing the momentum	6
2.2 From Paris to Brussels	7
2.3 Further reflection required	8
3. The <i>RIBUST!</i> strategy for democratic conventions	10
3.1 Overview	10
3.2 Details of the <i>RIBUST!</i> strategy	12
4. Calculating risks and realising opportunities	18
4.1 Risk analysis and evaluation	18
4.2 Opportunity knocks	22
<i>Annex 1: Timeline RIBUST! strategy</i>	25
<i>Annex 2: Suggested topics and questions for democratic conventions</i>	26
<i>Annex 3: Template guidelines for Meeting Reports</i>	27

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The views expressed in this Discussion Paper are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Executive Summary

French President Emmanuel Macron wants to launch so-called ‘democratic conventions’ in all willing European Union member states, in order to identify the public’s priorities, concerns and proposals for the EU’s future and help address its unresolved issues of democratic legitimacy. If implemented effectively, this idea, inspired by the 2017 French elections in which Macron and his En Marche movement consulted the French electorate through local meetings, could succeed where previous European reform efforts have failed.

The Assemblée nationale recently produced a report describing how these democratic conventions could be implemented at a European level. However, many aspects of the strategy are still missing or inadequate, and the design and execution of the idea matter a great deal. What is more, the initial ambitions are at risk of being watered down following discussions with other EU leaders, as illustrated by the recent rebranding of the idea as ‘citizens’ consultations’. The French proposal for a top-down, limited exercise only heightens the need for a different approach that will ensure the idea achieves its full potential.

This Discussion Paper offers just such a model for implementing democratic conventions. It provides a framework upon which other stakeholders can build in the process of defining a fully-fledged strategy. Our design has the overall objective of providing a platform for interaction and exchange between European citizens and their political representatives that is both credible and sustainable.

By credible, we mean that our process offers the possibility for meaningful popular engagement in policymaking, in the spirit of transparency and inclusiveness, on the basis of specific policy proposals. The process we envision includes multiple checks and balances at the EU and national levels, a focus on substantial issues of reform, and a requirement for broad-based cooperation and coordination. Most importantly, it places responsibility squarely in the hands of public volunteers and civil society organisations, creating a genuinely bottom-up programme rather than an elite-driven political exercise. In so doing, it seeks to minimise political biases and increase popular awareness and ownership of the EU project.

By sustainable, we mean that we have developed a method of implementing democratic conventions that is coherent and specific enough to be repeated in the future. Although we envision it to feed into the 2019 European Parliament elections, we have not approached the idea of democratic conventions as a one-off experiment. Rather, this should be seen as a potential new mechanism for political leaders to engage with European citizens: one which can be scaled to include as many member states as are willing to take part, and repeated when desired. As such, we do not pin the success of the democratic conventions on the number of participating member states, especially in the first implementation; if the exercise is effective and well-handled, we are confident that it will draw more interest next time.

Our process is complex and bound to a tight timeline. Nevertheless, we argue that depriving the strategy of the features we describe, in particular its bottom-up character and the interaction and scrutiny between many actors and across many levels, would be the wrong way to go about implementing democratic conventions. If the final strategy neglects such features in favour of simplification, we advise against putting the idea into practice, as it could potentially exacerbate the public-elite divide. What governments and people choose to do, or not do, can make an enormous difference and, over time, will shape European history. At this time of crucial decisions on the future of the EU, will Europeans seize the opportunity to implement democratic conventions, and do so well?

1. A new lease of life for European democracy

1.1 The search for democratic legitimacy

The European Union (EU) continues to face unresolved issues of democratic legitimacy. Despite regular reform efforts, decision-making at the EU level is still perceived by the wider public as too complex, inaccessible and unaccountable. To this day, most European citizens still believe they have no real power to shape the Union's future.

Signs of popular dissatisfaction with the functioning of the EU first became tangible with the Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. They were then reinforced by the negative outcomes of other successive referendums on EU treaties and by a gradual rise in support for Eurosceptic and nationalistic political options. More recently, referendums have also been used as wrecking balls for European decisions in Greece, the Netherlands and Hungary, demonstrating the potential of domestic politics to undermine European integration. This culminated last year with a vote cast in the United Kingdom (UK) that set in motion the process of that country's withdrawal from the Union. Clearly, a lack of public enthusiasm for European politics is not a merely theoretical problem of democratic legitimacy: it has acute political consequences at all levels of governance.

The realisation that it is impossible to push forward with European integration in the absence of public consent has prompted various institutional reforms over the years, aimed at increasing the quality of democracy in the EU. The introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979, and the steady increase of its powers with every treaty change since then, have been the key elements of the search for greater EU legitimacy. The European Citizens' Initiative, whereby at least one million citizens from at least seven member states can bring legislative proposals before the European Commission, was among the innovations foreseen by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, seeking to narrow the gap between citizens and the EU.

But all these means have so far remained insufficient. Voter turnout in the EP elections has constantly dropped, falling to a new record low of 42.5% in 2014. Only four out of the 66 Citizens' Initiatives registered until now have been accepted, and none has resulted in legislative change. Referendums on European issues, organised at the national rather than European level, reduce democracy from a process to a binary yes-no decision and then lock countries into a choice about issues of enormous complexity and with massive ramifications, without actually increasing people's influence over EU policymaking.

If the public is to stop perceiving the EU as a distant, unaccountable apparatus and get on board with the European integration project, there is a need to develop new innovative methods that give them the possibility to express and exchange more nuanced opinions about Europe's policy priorities.

1.2 *Encore En Marche*

Inspiration in this regard could come from the national level: specifically, from the 2017 French elections, in which Emmanuel Macron and his *En Marche* movement unexpectedly won the presidency and secured an absolute majority at the *Assemblée nationale*. Beginning his campaign for the presidency without the support of a political party, Macron's road to the *Elysée* was to a large extent made possible by a grassroots movement that profiled the concerns, priorities and desires of the French electorate through a network of more than 3,000 local committees. Anyone interested in the movement was free to join or organise a meeting in their own community. The conclusions of the discussions held at these meetings were then forwarded to the *En Marche* leadership to be included in Macron's platform. While in the end it was not entirely clear to what extent the discussions influenced the resulting electoral programme, the bottom-up method of formulating political

positions brought legitimacy to the *En Marche* campaign and played well with Macron's non-partisan approach to politics. The long-term consequences of this strategy for France's traditional political parties and system, as well as the country's overall policy directions, are still unknown. However, the fact that it helped to defeat the French extreme radicals and expose people's thirst for unconventional engagement in politics is indisputable, and it is this potential that sustains its appeal.

European issues were debated prominently at these *En Marche* gatherings, and the idea of replicating the movement's method at the European level had already been included in Macron's presidential programme, which promised to "give the people a voice" in European affairs through "citizens' conventions".¹ His intention to launch democratic conventions "all over Europe" was then reiterated in a speech he made in early July before the French Parliament convened in Congress, by then in his new capacity of President of the Republic.²

After prevailing over far-right leader Marine Le Pen's brand of anti-European populism, and imparting a new dynamic to French politics, could the *En Marche* model be exported all over Europe? Would a similar bottom-up strategy work at the EU level? Could the EU better engage with citizens through local meetings where the people themselves deliberate on reform priorities? And if this is a credible strategy, how exactly could it be designed and implemented in practice?

2. Marching towards EU reforms

2.1 Seizing the momentum

Macron certainly thinks this is feasible. In speeches given in Athens and Paris in September 2017, he formulated his ambition to "rediscover the path of democracy" by drawing on some of *En Marche's* techniques at the European level: "democratic conventions" should be organised over a period of six months in 2018, in all member states willing to participate, and should serve to identify European citizens' "priorities, concerns and ideas" for the EU's future.³ He suggested that these conventions should be steered according to a roadmap adopted by the participating governments, which would set out the major principles of the approach and define its objectives.

Macron wants to use the impetus stemming from his election and the current momentum at the European level to tackle the EU's profound challenges. The return to economic growth, the easing of the migration crisis and the unifying effects of Brexit and of Donald Trump's election on the EU are increasingly seen as stimuli for reform of the Union. The issues that have intensified the crisis of confidence in the Union's democratic legitimacy have not gone away. For example, member states are still brazenly flouting the values upon which the Union is built, while populist politicians sow divisions and steadily increase their electoral support. A resurgent Russia asserts itself in the Eastern Neighbourhood and in cyberspace, instability in the Middle East and North Africa continues to put pressure on Europe's external borders, and the United States under President Trump is slowly retreating to a more isolationist position, leaving Europe to fend for itself. Such factors not only provide an opportunity to improve European integration: they render it an imperative.

¹ Presidential programme of Emmanuel Macron, available at:

<https://storage.googleapis.com/en-marche-fr/COMMUNICATION/Programme-Emmanuel-Macron.pdf>.

² Speech by Emmanuel Macron before the French Parliament convened in Congress, 03/07/2017, available at:

<http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-devant-le-parlement-reuni-en-congres>.

³ Speech by Emmanuel Macron from the Pnyx, Athens, 7/09/2017, available at: <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-la-pnyx-athenes-le-jeudi-7-septembre-2017>; "Initiative pour l'Europe", Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne, Paris, 26/09/2017, available at: <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique/>.

In this context, a sense that Europe stands at a crossroads has taken hold. Macron's speech at the Sorbonne reflects an increasing sentiment among parts of Europe's political leadership that the appropriate time for the next step in EU reform has arrived, and that, in the words of President Juncker's State of the Union address, we must "catch the wind in our sails".⁴ Experts have already come forward with concrete package deals to use this new impetus, after years of crisis, to achieve tangible progress and re-energise the EU.⁵ Recent polling data suggests that a growing proportion of the European electorate feels the same way.⁶ In this potential reform process, there is a need to involve the public more closely, both to shore up a more reliable basis of public support and to seize the opportunity presented by the current junction. Democratic conventions, if properly implemented, could help to do just that.

2.2 From Paris to Brussels

For Macron and his advisors, the purpose of launching democratic conventions all over Europe is manifold. They should help to increase public awareness about the EU and its functioning, get people to debate European issues domestically, and make citizens feel that their leaders listen to them. But other ambitions are also arising, including the possibility that the findings of these democratic conventions could inform the debate for the 2019 EP elections, as well as the agenda of the next European Commission.

Macron's idea has won explicit support from the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, who considers it to echo the Commission's commitment to enhancing dialogue with the EU's citizens. Moreover, according to Macron and his minister for European affairs, several member states, including Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Ireland, and Greece, have already expressed interest in organising democratic conventions in their countries.

But so far, France remains the main driving force of this initiative. The *Assemblée nationale* has established a "Working Group for Democratic Conventions to 'refund' Europe".⁷ The task of the Working Group is to hold discussions with various actors about their vision of a "new Europe", brainstorm a way to improve the EU's democratic legitimacy, and raise citizens' awareness of and interest in the EU.

Five months after its foundation, the Working Group published a detailed 'information report' on democratic conventions in December 2017.⁸ The report outlines some basic objectives, such as the greater involvement of as many citizens as possible in the European project, but it also makes some proposals on how to go about implementing the democratic conventions. According to the report, the process should start with the signing of an "inter-state charter"⁹ by the participating member states. This document should essentially amount to a "moral commitment"¹⁰ on the part of those countries joining in the initiative, and should set out certain common principles (that is, representativeness,

⁴ State of the Union Address 2017 by Jean-Claude Juncker, 13/09/2017, available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm.

⁵ See for example New Pact for Europe (2017), *Re-energising Europe: A package deal for the EU27*, (rapporteur: Janis Emmanouilidis), Third report, available at: "https://www.newpactforeurope.eu/news/2017/npe_3rd_report.php.

⁶ See for example: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/EZ_flashlight_europe_02_2016_EN.pdf; figure 7 in New Pact for Europe (2017).

⁷ See presentation and composition of the group on the *Assemblée nationale*'s website:

[http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/autres-commissions/commission-des-affaires-europeennes/\(block\)/43281](http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/autres-commissions/commission-des-affaires-europeennes/(block)/43281).

⁸ The full report ("Rapport d'information, déposé par la Commission des Affaires européennes, sur les conventions démocratiques de refondation de l'Europe", n°482, Assemblée nationale) was published on 8 December 2017 and is available at: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/15/pdf/europe/rap-info/i0482.pdf>.

⁹ Rapport d'information... *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Rapport d'information... *op. cit.*, p. 50.

objectivity, transparency, and interoperability), as well as four open EU-related questions¹¹ to be posed to citizens in all member states concerned. These questions, complemented by two to three additional others – the latter at the discretion of each member state – would be used for a nationwide online consultation process. At the same time, “physical conventions” would run for six months, starting on 9 May, either in the form of general or sectoral discussions, focused on specific topics.¹² The subsequent two-month period would then serve to translate the results of the conventions into actual proposals. Apart from the physical conventions and online consultations, various types of events (such as festivals, concerts, student exchanges, and sports events) could also be “labelled” as democratic conventions, so that “from an emotional point of view, [they could] help to fuel the notion of European citizenship”.¹³

This *Assemblée nationale* report foresees that the whole process would be piloted by “national steering committees” composed of members of parliaments and some unspecified additional actors renowned for their European engagement. The role of these committees would be to ensure the charter is respected, to provide operational support and financial resources for the democratic conventions, and to transform the priorities expressed by the online consultation and the physical conventions into “coherent legal proposals”¹⁴. The meetings themselves could be organised by a wide variety of actors (such as mayors, members of parliament, trade unions, universities, and NGOs), which would be responsible for delivering a synthesis of each meeting.

The activities at the national level would then be followed by an EU synthesis carried out by a European “Committee of Wise Persons”.¹⁵ This would be made up of representatives of the “national committees” and EU officials because – according to the authors of the report – these institutions have “experience and objectivity”.¹⁶

In parallel to the *Assemblée nationale* report, an association named *L’Europe En Marche*, affiliated with Macron’s party, was created to, among other things, support the process of democratic conventions.¹⁷ One of its ambitions is to help launch a “European Great March” which would underpin these meetings with a popular dynamic. However, it remains unclear which role this party-affiliated association would play for the democratic conventions, and to what extent its presence would colour the process politically.

2.3 Further reflection required

The aforementioned *Assemblée nationale* report is a welcome first contribution to help start the discussion about democratic conventions, but it falls short on details, does not sufficiently explain some of the choices made, and fails to clarify potential challenges. As it stands, the strategy it puts forward risks reproducing already tried-and-tested processes and approaches (like public and expert consultations or EU-promotional events such as the Citizens’ Dialogues¹⁸ or the European Citizens’ Consultations¹⁹ that took place between 2006 and 2009), which have already proven inefficient in

¹¹ The authors of the report propose the following questions: “What Europe do you want?” or “How do we reinvent Europe?”, “What do you believe are Europe’s values?”, “What do you expect from Europe in your day-to-day life?”, “In your opinion, in which areas should the EU change?”

¹² Rapport d’information... *op. cit.*, p. 11-12.

¹³ Rapport d’information... *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rapport d’information... *op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁷ The list of its official tasks are listed here:

http://www.journal-officiel.gouv.fr/publications/assoc/pdf/2017/0026/JOAFE_PDF_Unitaire_20170026_01167.pdf.

¹⁸ See the presentation and list of events on the European Commission’s Website:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/events/citizens-dialogues_en.

¹⁹ See the archived website here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070810090357/http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/>.

resolving Europe's issues of democratic legitimacy. The change of name from 'democratic conventions' to 'citizens' consultations' introduced by French officials following the December 2017 European Council further heightens this risk, as it implies that initial ambitions are being watered down. Such liabilities should be avoided at any costs if the initiative is to have a real chance of making a difference.

In particular, we consider the report's suggested questions (see footnote 11 above) to be too broad, and thus unlikely to produce clear policy choices. We also disagree with the report's insistence on including country-specific questions: the value of holding democratic conventions at the EU level is precisely to consult European citizens about European issues and on the basis of an agenda that is common and fixed for all participating member states so that the answers can be easily compared across countries at the end of the process.

Moreover, the leading role for policymakers foreseen by the report risks introducing political biases and perpetuating rather than diminishing popular mistrust, without necessarily helping to foster and improve citizens' political engagement and input in EU affairs. *En Marche* already faced criticism for its lack of transparency regarding the extent to which the outcomes of discussions were included in their electoral programme; the risk of the same thing happening on an EU-wide scale is arguably even greater, not least since European politics already suffers from low public engagement.

This is why we argue that it is essential that the process is well thought-through and effectively organised, in a bottom-up rather than top-down manner. Otherwise, the idea of democratic conventions – for all its good intentions and excellent potential – could end up fuelling rather than quelling public distrust and frustration with (European) politics. It would be better to leave the idea unimplemented than to risk making matters worse.

Furthermore, the catch-all format of the strategy proposed in the *Assemblée nationale* report, whereby policy discussions, expert-led sectoral meetings, and festival-style events are all included under the banner of 'democratic conventions', is likely to dilute the concept and work against the objective of reinforcing the link between citizens and their leaders' policymaking. If anything from concerts to union meetings can fall under the umbrella of 'democratic conventions', the term ceases to be meaningful. We believe that the strength of democratic conventions should lie instead in their genuinely popular, grassroots character, as well as in an exclusive focus on discussing key issues related to the European reform agenda.

The report suggests that democratic conventions should run for a period of six months. This may be a tight timeframe, though we believe that it is plausible and may even help to spur participants into action. However, we consider that the main advantage of such a tight timeframe is that it allows the process to lead into the EP election campaign. The report acknowledges the possibility that the democratic conventions could help mobilise citizens for the EP elections, but declares that the conventions should not be affected by the stakes of the European vote and that the process should therefore not continue after November or December 2018.²⁰ We believe, on the contrary, that these elections represent an opportunity to extend the debates at political level. Consequently, we think that the process should only end in March 2019, with the specific intention that the results of the democratic conventions feed into the EP election campaign.

Apart from the *Assemblée nationale* report, there has so far been no precise strategy specifying how the conventions should look or be organised in practice. In this paper, intended not as a counterproposal but as a complementary reflection to that of the *Assemblée nationale*, we present a more detailed model for implementing democratic conventions, identify some of the risks involved, and explore the idea's implications, without claiming to cover all relevant aspects.

²⁰ Rapport d'information... *op. cit.*, p. 87.

We acknowledge that our process is complex and bound to a tight timeline. However, we argue that depriving the strategy of the features we describe, in particular its bottom-up character and the interaction and scrutiny between many actors and across many levels, would be the wrong way to go about implementing democratic conventions. If the final strategy neglects such features in favour of simplification and shortcuts, we advise against putting the idea in practice.

3. The *RIBUST*²¹ strategy for democratic conventions

3.1 Overview

A carefully-planned implementation of national democratic conventions will greatly determine the success of the overall initiative. Simply copying the *En Marche* strategy is not sufficient: the *En Marche* mobilisation and meetings took place during a high-stakes presidential election campaign, discussing national-level policy with the aim of fuelling the political programme of a clearly-identified candidate. This was a very different experience compared to the idea of democratic conventions on a European level, which would seek to inform and collect input on priorities and reform proposals that are part of the EU's policy agenda now and for the immediate future. This calls for an original strategy to be laid out, reflecting the particularities of the endeavour on the European tier.

In this Discussion Paper, we present a basic framework upon which other stakeholders can build in order to, at the end of the day, achieve a fully-fledged strategy for the implementation of democratic conventions. The framework we have designed has the overall objective of providing a *credible* and *sustainable* platform for interaction and exchange between European citizens and their political representatives at a time of crucial decisions for the future of the EU, and in preparation for the 2019 European Parliament elections.

By credible, we mean that our process offers the possibility for meaningful popular engagement in policymaking, in the spirit of transparency and inclusiveness, on the basis of specific policy proposals. We cannot guarantee the extent to which the 'voice' of the people, as it emerges from the process, will be reflected in the decisions adopted in the end by EU and national politicians; however, our strategy spares no effort to ensure that these conventions, as a process, are democratic (that is, of, for and by the people themselves), allow for an open debate and the expression of individual opinions and preferences, and deal with the current reform agenda. The process we envision includes multiple checks and balances at the EU and national levels, a focus on substantial issues of reform, and a requirement for broad-based cooperation and coordination. In so doing, our strategy seeks to minimise political biases and increase popular awareness and ownership of the EU project. The comparative perspective we cultivate in our approach should then help to identify how and to what extent different member states diverge or converge in their positions on Europe, as well as to underscore the notion of common interest and the value of European collaboration.

By sustainable, we mean that we have planned for a method of implementing democratic conventions that is coherent and specific enough to be repeated in the future. We have not approached the idea of democratic conventions as a one-off experiment, but as a potential new mechanism of engaging with European citizens: one which can be scaled to include as many member states as are willing to take part, and repeated when desired. As such, we demur from the claim in the *Assemblée nationale* report that: "The process concerning democratic conventions can only have a real meaning if it is shared by a sufficient number of member states at the same time."²² We do not pin the success of the

²¹ The name of the strategy is composed of the first two letters of the authors' surnames (Rittelmeyer, BUTcher and STRatulat). Its pronunciation calls to mind the word 're-boost', which we believe fits well with the overall goal of the democratic conventions: re-boost European and national democracy, as well as the EU project.

²² Rapport d'information... *op. cit.*, p. 11.

democratic conventions on the number of participating member states, especially in the first implementation; if the exercise is perceived as credible, we are confident that it will draw more interest next time. Our main preoccupation is to lay out an inspiring, appealing and effective course of action to achieve the goals of the initiative, for people and politicians alike. Putting the idea of democratic conventions idea into practice must be done well or not at all.

The strategy outline that we put forward would operate across both national and European levels. After a period of public awareness-raising carried out by national governments, civil-society-led ‘National Secretariats’ should be formed in each participating member state with the purpose of coordinating the organisation of democratic conventions and the reporting of these meetings in the respective domestic context, in a spirit of independence, political neutrality and openness. The role of the National Secretariats will be explained in more detail below.

In addition, given the European focus of the exercise and the comparative perspective adopted by this strategy, we argue that there must be oversight at the EU level to coordinate the implementation of democratic conventions *across* the Union and impart a genuinely transnational character to the initiative: an EU-level Secretariat is foreseen for this purpose, roughly analogous to the “Committee of Wise Persons” in the *Assemblée nationale* report, though constituted differently (see below).

The EU-level Secretariat should be active throughout the democratic conventions, monitoring, coordinating, and assisting the National Secretariats, while preparing activities and outputs for outreach and dissemination at the end of the process. It should also act as facilitator should conflicts or difficulties arise in the participating countries, providing staff to handle national complaints, technical, financial, and other issues. The composition of the EU-level Secretariat should be decided by the participating national governments at the very beginning of the process: the *Assemblée nationale* report proposes an inter-state ‘charter’, possibly to be adopted at the margins of the European Council meeting in March. We agree with this idea and propose the March European Council as the official beginning of the process: however, we consider it inappropriate for the EU-level Secretariat to be composed of national and European officials (see section 4 for an analysis of the risks). Ideally, it would consist of one or more independent, non-profit organisation(s) with experience in setting up, supporting and coordinating similar projects on a transnational scale. Its staff should include analysts and experts, who will draft the EU-level Report while reflecting the content of National Reports, but also liaise and set appointments with EU and national politicians for the purpose of communicating with them about the process and its outcomes.

The National Secretariats shall provide a platform for volunteers to organise democratic conventions, mobilisers to spread awareness, and participants to register their interest in joining discussions. Volunteers shall hold democratic conventions in their local communities on the basis of pre-defined rules and a standardised agenda (such as that outlined in *Annex 2*), and will be responsible for submitting a report to the National Secretariat after each such meeting. These Meeting Reports will be published on the National Secretariat’s website and used to produce a single National Report in each participating member state, which will in turn be forwarded to the EU-level Secretariat. This will allow the EU-level Secretariat to create an EU-level Report and inform the European institutions and national leaders of the conclusions reached by conventions all over Europe. In addition, in order to transnationalise the debate, selected volunteers from each member state will meet in Brussels to discuss the overall findings and adopt a final declaration including conclusions and recommendations.

In what follows, we shall explain each of these steps in greater detail before considering the potential pitfalls of the process, the rationale behind our decisions, and the prospects for the idea to be successfully implemented.

3.2 Details of the RIBUST! strategy

We link the timeframe of our strategy to the EU calendar, and in particular to the start of the campaign for the EP elections in spring 2019. Events at the national level, such as national elections, could interfere with this timeframe, but we believe it will be possible to work around them. For example, if a new German government has not been inaugurated by March 2018, it should be possible for a caretaker government to follow through the relatively uncontroversial work of signing the charter and launching such a process of open and public debates domestically.

While adjustments to the time allocated to each phase might prove necessary when deciding on the final strategy, so as to ensure that the tasks foreseen at each stage can be successfully realised in practice, we opt to present here what we consider an optimal time sequence for the implementation of the democratic conventions beginning in 2018. Changes to this timeline should reflect not only considerations related to the feasibility of delivering tasks, but also the extent to which the democratic conventions process and its results can be used to feed into, for example, the EP elections campaign and the mandates of the next EP and European Commission. The greater the number of participating countries, the more complex the process will be, so the exact details cannot all be predicted in advance.

The phases of the strategy that we propose for putting the idea of democratic conventions into practice is described in full below, and a pictorial representation is provided in *Annex 1*. It covers a period of 12 months, starting, as foreseen in the *Assemblée nationale* report, at the European Council meeting in March with the signing of an inter-state ‘charter’ by the national governments of the member states that wish to participate in this exercise.

This charter would agree upon the final strategy to be followed and commit the governments to seeing the process through. It would reflect the results of any discussions and negotiations taking place between interested parties in the January-March period, with the aim of declaring a set of guidelines and principles common to all participating member states. Most importantly, it would mark the official foundation of the EU Secretariat, the composition of which would have been agreed beforehand. The informal European Council meeting foreseen on 23 February 2018, when institutional issues such as transnational lists for the EP elections will be discussed, could provide an opportunity to talk about the early stages of the democratic conventions strategy.

As the EU Secretariat plays an important role throughout the whole process, it is vital that it is set up in a timely and effective manner. It may be that EU institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions or the European Economic and Social Committee, could provide advice as observers to the process of negotiating its establishment, but the EU Secretariat derives its legitimacy from the member states who sign the charter, and is ultimately answerable to them.

3.2.1 Phase 1 (1 month): The awareness-raising campaign and the role of national governments

The first phase would see national governments in charge of launching the process of organising these national conventions in their own domestic contexts. This first phase, which should run for the first month of the initiative, should include (1) information about the rationale, scope and implementation process of the democratic conventions, but also (2) a call for civil society organisations, foundations, private companies, and other relevant actors in that country to organise themselves into a National Secretariat and take over the initiative in order to lead it to completion domestically. After the foundation of a National Secretariat, the national government should bow out and allow the rest of the process to be completed without political involvement. The reasons for this limited role for

national governments shall be explained in section 4.1 below. The National Secretariats must be up and running by the end of Phase 1.

The content of this kick-off campaign, in terms of its core message, principles and guidelines, should be harmonised across all member states in order to minimise national divergences in how the idea is communicated and realised in practice, thus also ensuring greater comparability of the end results between countries.

The core message of this campaign should convey the objectives of the exercise and the exact process through which democratic conventions will be realised. This message should be the same for all countries and should be translated domestically into the national language. In addition, the campaign should lay out the principles and rules by which all National Secretariats must abide when choosing their members and in handling the organisation of the democratic conventions. The principles should invoke concepts such as transparency, openness, diversity, and political independence. The rules should spell out the functions of the National Secretariat, but should also clarify the guidelines that would need to be followed in organising the democratic conventions at the local level and in drafting the Meeting and National Reports. All these details would have been decided upon by the participating member states as part of the charter.

For the period of one month, participating governments would finance a campaign for democratic conventions as widely as possible: on their websites and those of their ministries, on radio and television channels, and in any other available social media and mass communication outlets. The expectation is that once the government launches the idea domestically, national and local media, as well as the civil society sector, will consider it a story of interest and a process that should be closely and vigilantly monitored throughout. This would allow media, civil society and other stakeholders to hold their national governments and National Secretariats accountable during the course of the democratic conventions, thus helping to safeguard the process's conformity with the established rules and principles.

According to our suggested timeline, this phase would run from the European Council meeting on 22-23 March 2018 until the end of April.

3.2.2 Phase 2 (2 months): The stepping stones to the democratic conventions and the role of the National Secretariat

When it comes to the actual implementation of the idea, the National Secretariat plays a key role. The composition of the National Secretariat should be decided domestically among those actors who express their readiness to engage in the process and steer it to completion. These actors may include civil society organisations, foundations, private companies, and similar stakeholders. Even if they may be individually affiliated to particular political views or interests, together and as part of the National Secretariat they should act as an independent consortium, politically non-attached and focused on delivering the tasks specified for them in the process, in line with the prescribed rules and principles.

Once up and running, the National Secretariat will have two immediate tasks: (1) to set up a website for the initiative, and (2) to contract a data analytics firm²³ with experience in large-scale data collection, which will produce a summary of the reports from the local democratic conventions that will then allow a group of experts to write the National Report (see section 3.2.3).

²³ For example, *En Marche* commissioned a company called Proxem to do a "semantic and sentiment analysis of textual data" to produce their diagnostic on the state of France. More information can be found in this article: Rémi Noyon, "Comment Emmanuel Macron a fait son 'diagnostic'", *L'Obs*, 16/11/2016, available at: <https://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-politique/20161116.RUE3756/comment-emmanuel-macron-a-fait-son-diagnostic.html>.

The National Secretariat will obviously need financial resources in order to be able to fulfil these two responsibilities, which we suggest should come exclusively from donations in order to reduce the risk of private influence in its operations (see section 4.1.4 for more details). Financial contributions should be publicly declared in accordance with national laws (source and amount) and displayed on the website set up by the National Secretariat in the respective member state. The money, however, will go into a common EU pot administered by the EU-level Secretariat, and every National Secretariat will have to request and justify funds from this budget. This is deemed important not only as a means of sparing the National Secretariats from managing finances, but also in order to be able to redistribute money to member states that do not have a culture of donations or fail – for whatever reason – to collect sufficient funds in due time to achieve the specified tasks. Budgetary principles will need to be observed throughout, such as the diversity of funding sources, the transparency of budget revenues and expenses, and a condition that donations are apolitical and unconditional (for example, if a business contributes, it does not get specific promotion in return). Donations may be accepted throughout the entire process. If additional funds are needed in the early period, for example for the purpose of contracting the website designers or data analytics firm, foundations supporting the National Secretariat should contribute to its budget.

For the sake of consistency, the same website layout should be used across the member states in line with what the EU-level Secretariat specifies. It should include a description of the initiative in terms of the ‘what’ (goal(s)), the ‘why’ (rationale), the ‘how’ (process, timeframe, rules and principles, budget), and the ‘who’ (countries involved, National and EU- Secretariats, data analysis, volunteers, and supporters). In addition, details about the National Secretariat should be made available (members, staff and responsibilities) with an explanation of its role (revealing donations and budget expenses, setting up the website, contracting the data analysis company, providing and collecting information related to the process, registering and liaising with volunteers, mobilisers and participants, collecting local Meeting Reports, and forwarding the National Report to the EU-level Secretariat). Via the website, it should also be possible for citizens in the different member states to send complaints directly to the EU-level Secretariat, as well as to register as volunteers, mobilisers or participants. All documents related to the initiative should be uploaded on the website, such as the local Meeting and National Reports, official forms for volunteers to fill in, guidelines for local democratic conventions, rules of procedure, a calendar of local meetings, and basic EU info such as links to the institutions’ websites and learning resources.²⁴

The National Secretariat will also be in charge of collecting all the Meeting Reports from the local democratic conventions and sending them to the data analytics company, which will have one month to produce a summary reflecting the overall findings of these meetings, as well as statistics (such as the number of democratic conventions, number of participants, geographic spread) and any other remarks about, for example, how the process unfolded in practice (such as stumbling blocks or motivating factors). The National Secretariat will also be responsible for contracting a group of up to ten national experts with knowledge of EU affairs and experience in the fields relevant to the agenda, who would interpret and contextualise the summary produced by the data analytics company in order to issue the overall National Report. The exact composition of the team of experts can be decided by the National Secretariat closer to the time.

We foresee this phase running from the start of May until the end of June.

²⁴ In November 2017, Macron’s party launched an online training programme about the EU, which also presents the president’s ideas. Stripped of its partisan content, this could form the basis for online information for participants in democratic conventions. See: <https://microlearning.en-marche.fr/module?module=europe>.

3.2.3 Phase 3 (6 months): The democratic conventions and the role of volunteers

As a grassroots initiative intended to mobilise and empower European citizens, the organisation of the democratic conventions at the local level should rely on volunteers. Citizens who volunteer to put together democratic conventions in their own communities will need to register on the website set up by the National Secretariat. Subsequently, they will receive access (such as a username and password) that will allow them to upload logistical information about the planned event (such as the date and venue) and all required forms and documents, all of which will, of course, be public. Moreover, they will have to download and fill in templates for the Meeting Reports, as well as instructions for the fixed agenda that must guide all democratic conventions in every member state. In *Annex 2*, we provide a possible outline of what this agenda might look like, and in *Annex 3* we present some guidelines for the Meeting Report template.

The volunteers will have to organise the democratic conventions within a six-month period, as foreseen by the *Assemblée nationale* report. No restrictions should be set on the number of democratic conventions that any one volunteer can arrange, but funds – if they are necessary, for example for the purpose of booking a venue – should be available for a maximum of three events, via a common application procedure. After each meeting, the volunteer must produce a report based on a template provided online by the National Secretariat: this Meeting Report will briefly summarise responses given to the agenda questions and note any incidents, problems or other relevant information (for more detailed guidelines for the Meeting Reports, see *Annex 3*). Volunteers must produce one Meeting Report for each meeting that takes place: it is not enough to submit a single report summarising all the democratic conventions they organise. If necessary, the volunteer may appoint a rapporteur to fill in the report template for any given democratic convention, but only the volunteer will be able to upload the document on the initiative's website and will have to take responsibility for the contents of the Meeting Report.

The volunteers should be free to decide on the outreach method(s) (for example, newspaper/radio ads, social media platforms, flyers or invitations to groups/associations/networks) to raise awareness and mobilise people to participate in the democratic conventions. It should also be possible for volunteers to consult the registry of mobilisers and participants registered on the initiative's website to identify people located in the same community and contact them to inquire about their willingness and availability to help with various aspects of the organisation process. Only the number of registrations should be public; participants' contact information (name, email address or phone number) should be accessible by volunteers only. We anticipate, however, that most volunteers will be activists who already have experience in political and civic mobilisation, as well as networks and contacts they can rally for the purpose of democratic conventions.

The format and agenda of the democratic conventions will also be standardised by the EU-level Secretariat for all member states, described in more detail below. We consider that – contrary to the proposal made by the *Assemblée nationale* report – allowing national policymakers to decide on specific questions to be discussed only in their own country would create asymmetries and could easily introduce politically-driven biases: therefore it is preferable to maintain a common agenda, set at the European level (see *Annex 2*). Each democratic convention should be no longer than three hours and should count on a minimum of eight and maximum 100 participants, so that the format can be conducive to effective and meaningful discussions. Everyone attending should be asked upon entry to provide their name and email (if available), in order to establish the number of attendees and, if necessary, prove that these meetings actually took place. These lists should be attached to the Meeting Reports but need not be publicised on the National Secretariat's website, in order to protect the identity of the participants. Volunteers should respect the common agenda (see *Annex 2*), not least in order to be able to fill in the mandatory Meeting Report template that follows the agenda.

The report should be submitted within one week following the event. They should also ensure that the discussion is always interactive, allowing participants an appropriate amount of speaking time depending on the size of the meeting. The exact amount of time allocated to each issue on the agenda should be up to the volunteer organising the event, or to the designated moderator of the debate if the volunteer does not wish to assume that role. However, all events should go through the entire agenda. A donation drive may be organised at the very end of the meeting to encourage people to donate to the common EU pot, but only via the initiative's website: no money should be handed over in person.

Annex 2 outlines the draft agenda we propose. According to our strategy, the discussion at these meetings should be based on a combination of open and closed questions posed to the participants, covering five main policy areas: (1) security and defence, (2) migration and foreign policy, (3) the economy, (4) the social pillar, and (5) EU institutional reform. The open questions are meant to allow participants to elaborate on their opinions and preferences, as well as to possibly contribute new insights and ideas to the different topics, beyond merely saying whether or not they support a certain potential reform proposal. The issues and questions on the draft agenda we put forward are based on various reform items and priorities that are presently being debated and will be decided upon at the EU-level by national politicians and European officials within the next few months. All of the questions included in our proposed agenda are based on actual suggestions recently made by various leaders and decision-makers, reflecting the ideas driving the current EU reform momentum.²⁵

Our draft agenda differs from the *Assemblée nationale's* idea of putting forward to the people broad questions, because we believe that discussions on very specific topics will be more useful than general principles, allowing the democratic conventions to actually shape EU policy. The agenda in *Annex 2* should not be taken as a final document, however, but rather as a proposal based on those issues we have deemed most important: the final agenda should be drafted by the EU-level Secretariat prior to the conventions, based on the principles agreed in the charter, and should take account of further developments in these (or other) fields.

The volunteers' Meeting Reports, once received by the National Secretariat, should be forwarded to a data analytics company to produce a summary of the opinions expressed in that country's democratic conventions. A maximum of ten experts per participating member state should work with the data analytics company to transform this summary into a National Report detailing the shape of public opinion in that country. That is, the national experts will turn the data analytics company's quantitative analysis (summary) into a qualitative Report, suitable for the wider public and properly contextualised, helping readers make sense of figures, medians or outliers.

The work of the data analytics company and of the national experts should be scrutinised by the National Secretariat, which will ultimately be responsible for the publication of the report. As the National Secretariat is formed by a bottom-up process providing a degree of impartiality and freedom from political interference, it is well-placed to ensure that the experts also work within this spirit. In addition, the transparency of the process and the online publication of all documents will allow constant public scrutiny.

Phase 3 should run until the end of 2018.

²⁵ For example, the Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap, The Rome Declaration, the European Commission Reflection Papers on the Future of Europe, the White Paper on the Future of Europe – Reflections and Scenarios, Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017, Donald Tusk's Leaders' agenda, Emmanuel Macron's speech at the Sorbonne, and many others.

3.2.4 Phase 4 (2 months): The transnationalisation of the initiative and the role of the EU-level Secretariat

The National Secretariats will send the National Report from each member state to the EU-level Secretariat, which will use the National Reports to produce an EU-level Report with the help of a team of EU experts. Like their national counterparts, these EU experts will be contracted by the EU-level Secretariat, and will include recognised experts in the fields relevant to the policy areas covered by the reports. This group of EU experts will summarise the findings of the National Reports, draw broader inferences, and make policy proposals that reflect EU-wide popular sentiment. The EU-level Report will have to be approved by the EU-level secretariat, and should then be published on the website and distributed to interested parties, including European and national political leaders.

In order to help bring the domestic discussion to a European level, there should be a ‘Brussels convention’ at the end of the process, where volunteers and political leaders will meet and discuss in person. According to the timeline we suggest (*Annex 1*), this would take place in February 2019, in order to lay the groundwork for the subsequent EP election campaign.

National Secretariats should provide a list of selected volunteers from among those who organised the democratic conventions in the member states. The chosen volunteers should consist of the most enthusiastic and engaged volunteers from each country, with the National Secretariats deciding how this should be defined. These volunteers will then form the national delegation that will represent the respective country in the Brussels convention, where they will meet EU officials and delegations from the other participating member states. The exact size of each delegation will depend on the finances available and the scale of the democratic conventions project, but we would suggest ten volunteers from each country. In addition, one national expert per member state will form part of the national delegation that will travel to Brussels.

This Brussels convention will allow national representatives to exchange best practices about their experience with democratic conventions, as well as opinions about findings and policy issues discussed in the reports. Likewise, they will be able to confront decision-makers, such as MEPs, Commissioners or national political representatives, about various reform proposals and advocate for their national positions in line with the conclusions of their National Report. Last but not least, they will have the chance to discuss the EU-level Report and compare it with the findings of their own National Reports.

As part of the Brussels convention, the EU-level Secretariat should organise meetings and workshops on various topics, lasting for a few days. One goal of this experience should be to allow for feedback from the national volunteer delegations on the EU-level Report. Given that this EU-level Report will be distributed to EU leaders and national politicians in Brussels, we think it is important to create the opportunity for national leaders to discuss the report with its authors and the volunteers who made it possible. The EU-level Report should therefore be the focus of a high-level public debate organised by the EU-level Secretariat, at which some volunteers from national delegations, as well as the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2019 EP elections, could even be included on the panel as speakers. Another aim of this visit should therefore be to facilitate and encourage European dialogue and exchange, not only among citizens from different EU countries, but also between the people and their political leaders and representatives.

In addition to meetings with EU and national officials, set up in advance by the EU-level Secretariat, the national delegations’ meeting in Brussels should also include visits to the EU institutions and workshops on EU affairs, in an effort to increase awareness among citizens about the functioning of the Union and its decision-making.

To organise the Brussels convention, the EU-level Secretariat can use money from the EU pot that includes the national donations made by the individual member states, but it can also further fundraise on its own for this purpose. As in the case of the National Secretariats, budgetary contributions and expenses will have to be openly declared and detailed on the website.

As an outcome of the Brussels convention, the discussions should result in a final declaration of conclusions and recommendations to provide input into the decision-making processes and possibly the campaign for the 2019 EP elections. These recommendations will take stock of the entire experience and consider the feedback received from the national delegations in order to redraft, reiterate or add to the EU-level Report. They should include both opinions and ideas on policy issues, as well as suggestions for how to improve on the process of democratic conventions in the future. The expectation is that these findings and proposals would inform upcoming decisions taken by leaders as well as those competing in the elections for the European Parliament, either as *Spitzenkandidaten* or as would-be MEPs. If the timeline we have laid out in this paper is followed, the process should be completed by March 2019, allowing sufficient time for the results to factor into the EP election campaign.

4. Calculating risks and realising opportunities

4.1 Risk analysis and evaluation

The strategy we have laid out here is merely an initial outline. We have focused on those details on which we feel competent to comment. Some parts of our plan, particularly the financial and legal aspects, will need to be further developed and adjusted, but we trust that this paper will provide an appropriate basis – more concrete and detailed than anything else yet expressed on the topic – on which others can expand to construct a fully-fledged strategy. In particular, a number of decisions still need to be taken regarding, for example, the type of information collected from citizens, technical specifications for the websites, the exact details of the fundraising procedure, the budget allocation, the level of transparency required, and the precise timeline. In each case, these and other particulars can be defined at a later stage in cooperation with competent authorities and experts.

We are confident that leaving these elements out of this first proposal does not detract from the strategy's potential to ensure that the democratic conventions deliver on their objectives. In this regard, a number of choices we have made in our strategy may warrant further explanation to clarify the risk analysis that led us to design it in this way.

4.1.1 Limiting the role of national governments

In contrast to the suggestion of the *Assemblée nationale* report that elected EU or national officials should lead democratic conventions in different countries, our strategy deliberately deprives political leaders of this responsibility. We strongly oppose a top-down approach to democratic conventions and think it would be better not to implement the process at all than to do it in such a way. Instead, we insist that national governments should only be in charge of kick-starting the process, after which they will bow out and allow civil society and private actors to manage the initiative. We believe that this decision makes sense on a number of counts.

First, we argue that, by stepping aside once the initiative has been launched, national governments will help to reduce the possibility of the process becoming politically tainted or hijacked by specific interests. While it may never be possible to fully 'proof' the execution of the idea against political biases and influences, we maintain that the risks of malpractice can be lessened by removing its actual implementation from the hands of national governments. This will provide better opportunities for civil society and the general public to check and monitor the conduct of the process, with reference

to specific criteria and standards, as well as to report potential irregularities or concerns via domestic media or the EU-level Secretariat.

Second, as some investment in terms of funds and (human) resources will be necessary in order to carry out the democratic conventions, the fact that this commitment will be assumed at grassroots level by the National Secretariat and volunteers (rather than by the national government) could help to increase the legitimacy of the process in the eyes of the citizens. This would help incentivise popular involvement, especially among those who would otherwise be less inclined to participate on account of their distrust of government initiatives.

Third, the limited role of national governments and the direct involvement of civil society essentially confers a bottom-up character to the process, encouraging European citizens to become politically active by non-traditional means. This is important given the widespread popular disengagement from traditional forms of politics, particularly at a time when highly consequential decisions for the future of the EU and its citizens are being taken.

At the same time, we believe that allowing national governments to take the first step by offering a clear explanation of the intention behind the initiative would signal their willingness to do something about the growing popular disenchantment with political leaders and their performance in office. This will indicate that elites are making an effort to listen to and consider people's opinions and preferences on important upcoming decisions (in this case, issues linked to European affairs and the future of the EU).

In the same spirit, we trust that national governments showing initiative and being present right at the start of the process will help to engage its two key players, that is, political elites and citizens. This would highlight the fact that the exercise concerns both sides equally, reinforcing the goals of the initiative and lending them further credibility.

4.1.2 Encouraging a cooperative attitude

It is undeniable that our strategy relies on the ability of civil society and private actors to agree on the establishment of a single National Secretariat in each country. It is quite possible that the initiative will draw widespread interest from a variety of organisations, foundations, and companies, potentially leading to several consortiums capable of taking on the role of National Secretariat. Since only one National Secretariat is allowed per member state, these groups will have to compromise and cooperate in order to produce a single body within the two-month timeframe allocated to this phase.

Should the different actors struggle to agree on one National Secretariat, national governments and the EU-level Secretariat could try to facilitate dialogue and use diplomatic means to encourage a coordination of efforts. In the end, however, it is up to each country to pull together and meet this condition of the process. After all, the initiative is designed with the very intention of fostering national mobilisation and cooperation, so we consider it perfectly reasonable to expect those who wish to take part to set the tone and live up to these principles. If a participating country fails to agree on one National Secretariat by the deadline, it will drop out of the process.

The originality and high stakes of the initiative should serve to concentrate minds and realise the idea in practice. In feeding into the EU reform process and re-connecting people and their leaders, the democratic conventions will serve a bold purpose; at the same time, each participating country will feel indirect pressure to fulfil their commitments and actually deliver. In other words, we think it is unlikely that the democratic conventions process will fail to get off the ground in those countries where campaigns have been launched.

4.1.3 Aggregating multiple national debates

Our strategy also intentionally opts for holding democratic conventions in as many member states as are willing and able. We considered the possibility of centralising the process at the EU-level, holding one or more democratic conventions that bring together participants from different member states, and this method remains an option. However, we believe that our strategy has a number of advantages that clearly outweigh potential drawbacks, making it the preferred course of action.

While a single large-scale or a series of smaller events at the EU-level may be a more straightforward and genuinely transnational effort, we believe that our strategy for implementing the idea on the national and local levels can assume a similar character and deliver much more. In particular, we are confident that elements of our proposal, such as the common agenda for the meetings and the coming together of the national delegations in Brussels at the end of the process, will ensure that the initiative preserves a European and transnational dimension. Moreover, in order to reconnect citizens with their political leaders and the European project, it is important to make the democratic conventions a nation-wide effort, mobilising stakeholders all over the country rather than merely a necessarily limited selection of participants. Finally, we consider that having different national perspectives on the same European reform agenda is not so much a problem as it is an opportunity: this will allow us to compare popular national viewpoints both with their national leaders' stances and with other member states' positions on the same issues. This would offer a useful method to identify gaps and divergences, but also possible ways to build bridges within and across countries, resulting in a stronger European consensus.

4.1.4 Keeping radicals and special interests at bay

In designing our strategy, we have made a conscious effort to lower the risk that the initiative may be hijacked by specific political or private interests. This could happen (1) if such actors were to be in a position to steer the process according to their own agenda, but also (2) if they fail to secure control of the process and so attempt to sabotage it, with the aim of discrediting the idea, the process and its outputs. The former scenario could take place, for example, if the composition of the National Secretariat was politically or otherwise biased, or if the meetings themselves became an instrument of public manipulation, used to advocate against the EU or to promote particular ideas or interests. However, we trust that our strategy can minimise these risks in the following ways.

The impartiality of the National Secretariat cannot be externally and formally enforced, at least not according to our proposal, but we argue that it can be largely realised. First, we expect that the effort required to put together the group of organisations and actors that will comprise the National Secretariat will encourage those joining not to accept (additional) members if they are seen to be a liability for the consortium's overall balance of political and other interests. As the government's call is likely to draw in organisations and actors with many different backgrounds, areas of expertise, experiences, political inclinations, resources and so on, and given that it would only be possible to have one National Secretariat per member state, it should be possible to prevent the resulting group from being biased one way or another.

Second, we expect that the wider public, media and civil society organisations will closely monitor how the entire process unfolds, calling out any biases and irregularities. This will be possible because our strategy insists on transparency and the full disclosure of all information pertaining to: the initiative, its design, rules and principles; who is involved; what resources (such as infrastructure and money) are used, how and by whom; the progress made and plans envisioned at each stage; and the ensuing results (including access to all Meeting Reports from democratic conventions and the final National Report). Failure on the part of the National Secretariat to release these data and documents

is likely to result in the condemnation of those involved and the discrediting of the initiative, discouraging people's involvement and participation. The strategy also foresees the possibility for national watchdogs to report problems directly to the EU-level Secretariat, thus further spreading the news about potential national malpractices to an audience beyond the domestic borders. We hold that the opening-up of the democratic conventions to public scrutiny will incentivise those in the National Secretariat to respect the given rules and principles.

As regards the conventions themselves, we hold that the range of areas covered by the questions in the fixed agenda (see Annex 2) and the space allowed to participants for presenting and explaining their opinions will help to prevent the exercise from being hijacked by specific interests, such as radical populist actors, who are normally only outspoken about narrow identity issues and tend to have considerably fewer arguments when it comes to other policy fields. The possibility that some conventions will be organised by volunteers whose views might be at odds with European principles, values and cooperation, and which will bring together a public that shares those attitudes, cannot be fully ruled out. However, the reporting template for each democratic convention will have to include full and detailed responses to very specific and diverse questions on reform policy, which will be difficult to answer without going beyond an antagonistic, xenophobic or Eurosceptic perspective.

The second scenario – that the whole process will be subject to discrediting efforts by radical opponents – is to a certain extent always going to be a possibility. The only way in which such destructive efforts can be deterred is to engage in a public debate with those responsible for spreading unfounded rumours or accusations. The National Secretariats should be able to publicly confront anyone who raises concerns or doubts about the process and its outcomes, using the data collected for the purposes of transparency to defend its integrity on the basis of solid evidence.

4.1.5 Minding the expectations trap

Perhaps the most serious risk that the initiative runs is that those directly involved in the campaign and its implementation (including, national governments, the National Secretariats and volunteers) shall inflate people's expectations about what the process can achieve in practice. Given that national and European policymakers will ultimately be free to decide on the reform proposals under discussion, and that the end result might not reflect the popular view expressed in the democratic conventions (at least not entirely or in all the member states), European citizens must have a realistic perspective on the extent to which their personal opinions and preferences will be reflected in the EU's legislative process and outcomes. If the exercise is to avoid fostering even more frustration with politics and the EU, it is therefore essential to clearly specify not only the potentials of democratic conventions, but also their limits.

For this reason, our strategy proposes that the core message used by national governments in the initial awareness-raising campaign should be the same for all participating member states. It should be drafted by independent experts contracted by the EU-level Secretariat. This should help to ensure that the message neither overstates nor undersells the initiative, but rather sticks to the facts and makes sensible claims about the project and its purpose. In addition, our strategy foresees that the websites of the National and EU-level Secretariats should include links and basic information about the EU and the compromise-based nature of its decision-making process. Citizens could thereby become (more) aware of the competences, functioning, principles, and limits of the EU and its institutions.

In addition, we hope that the different reports and documents that emerge in the course of the democratic conventions will feed into the campaign for the 2019 EP elections, including the campaign of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. While the *Assemblée nationale* report considers that the democratic conventions should serve only to increase citizens' interest and investment in the EU, we believe that

they should also fuel the campaign with policy proposals. This could signal to the European citizenry that politicians are at least willing to hold discussions on the basis of popular opinions and preferences (whether at national level or EU-wide), even if they ultimately decide otherwise. This could not only help to increase the sense that the people's involvement in European politics matters, but also raise the stakes of the EP elections, potentially leading to a rise in turnout for the first time. Clearly, it is advisable that the agenda of the next European Parliament and European Commission should echo – at least in part – the results of the democratic conventions, if the instrument is to be seen as credible and worthwhile.

4.2 Opportunity knocks

We have identified four objectives for the democratic conventions, namely that they should seek to:

1. increase popular awareness about the EU in general, specific reform proposals currently under discussion, and others' opinions within or across member states;
2. reconnect European citizens with their political elites;
3. help to shape an inclusive direction for the Union's reform; and
4. raise public support for the EU project.

Our strategy has the potential to enable the democratic conventions to meet these objectives. The fixed agenda to be discussed at the meetings, which consists of reform items currently on the table of national and European policymakers; the debate format of the democratic conventions, which encourages exchange of knowledge and opinions among participants; the information related to the EU and its functioning provided on all the initiative's websites; the guaranteed public access to the National Reports of other participating member states and to the European-level Report; the transnational meeting planned at the end of the process for the national delegations of volunteers: all these can help to make people more aware about the European project, EU decision-making, ongoing reform initiatives in Europe, and other actors' policy preferences (objective 1).

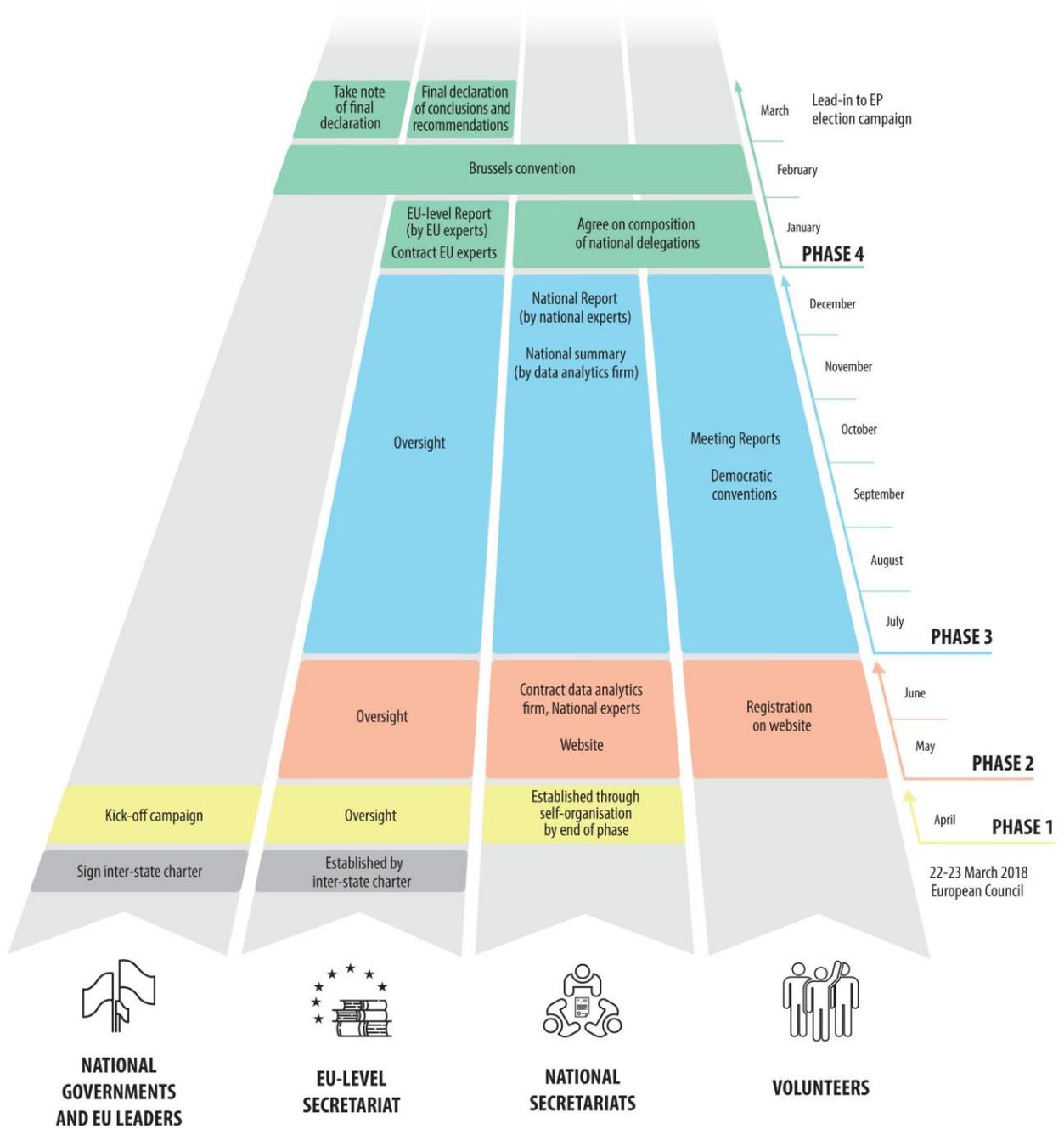
Moreover, all these elements of our strategy can also contribute to improving the popular perception that the voice of the people counts, which in turn should help re-join the broken link between citizens and their leaders (objective 2). Our strategy lays out a method for aggregating public input which could result in a reformed EU representing an inclusive vision of the Union: one that brings their multiple visions closer together, while also bringing that of their political leaders closer to them (objective 3). Should objectives 1-3 be realised, popular backing for the EU will automatically follow (objective 4).

However, reaching all these objectives depends on more than just an appropriate strategy for the implementation of democratic conventions. A factor of equal if not greater importance will be politicians' responses to the ideas, recommendations and findings that emerge in the process. The idea's credibility and success will largely be determined by whether the policies and reforms carried out in the EU reflect the popular input from the democratic conventions. If citizens end up feeling that their participation in democratic conventions was clearly irrelevant to the decisions eventually taken in the EU, their perception that politicians are unresponsive and unrepresentative, and that the EU is distant and develops beyond their control, is likely to be reinforced, and their support for European integration is likely to drop further. How national and European politicians respond to the results of the democratic conventions will therefore matter a great deal.

In the long-run, the ability of the democratic conventions to meet the aforementioned objectives and ensure their sustainability also hinges on whether the initiative proves to be a one-off experiment or is repeated. Subsequent rounds of democratic conventions could take place in more member states, applying the lessons learned in the first round. To aid in this, a report analysing the actual impact of

the democratic conventions on issues such as policy, debates and public opinion, and putting forward recommendations for the future, could be issued by the EU-level Secretariat team at the mid-term of the next EP and Commission mandates. If deemed successful – both in terms of process and effect – democratic conventions could become a fixture of decision-making in Europe, permanently increasing the EU’s democratic legitimacy. In this way, the current momentum can be used to meet not only today’s reform challenges, but tomorrow’s as well.

Annex 1: Timeline *RIBUST!* Strategy



Annex 2: Suggested topics and questions for democratic conventions

The following should be considered as example topics and questions only, with the final agenda to be agreed by the participating member states in the inter-state charter as described in section 3.2. Issues and questions such as those listed below should form a fixed part of the agenda to be followed at all democratic conventions.

The questions we envision for the democratic conventions should be designed to encourage detailed discussion, beyond simple 'agree/disagree' responses. Participants should expand upon their answers, give reasoning, and suggest proposals or alternatives. Minutes should be taken, so that a Meeting Report for each democratic convention can be written according to the available template (see *Annex 3* for proposed template guidelines).

Our suggestion is that the agenda for the democratic conventions covers, for example, the following policy topics and related questions:

1. SECURITY AND DEFENCE

- Should we deal with strategic security threats: at the EU-level? Through NATO? Through cooperation with third countries like the US? Or are national security and defence capacities sufficient? Why / why not?
- Proposals have been made to share military intelligence and police data, or to establish a military exchange programme, much like the Erasmus student exchange programme. Do you think such ideas are going in the right direction? Why / why not?
- Are there any other aspects of security and defence that concern you? Do you have any other proposals for how to respond to current security threats?

2. MIGRATION AND REFUGEES

- In March 2016, the EU made a deal with Turkey to reduce the number of migrants and refugees arriving in Europe. Do you support such deals?
- Should the EU organise the relocation of refugees? Similarly, should the EU set up asylum processing centres in third countries, so that people can apply for asylum at home and be resettled directly to Europe if successful? Why / why not?
- Do you have any ideas about how refugees could be effectively integrated into their host societies?

3. ECONOMIC AND TRADE ISSUES

- How can we ensure that EU trade agreements with third countries, like the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the US benefit the Union and its citizens? What should be included in these trade deals, and what should be excluded?
- Should the countries that use the euro coordinate their tax and spending rates?

4. SOCIAL ISSUES

- Should the EU be allowed to set minimum social rights in member states, such as a minimum wage? Why / why not?
- How can the EU help people adapt to the transformation of the labour market (industrial changes, digitisation)? Is there anything else the EU needs to do to ensure that the impact of economic developments is shared more evenly between and within countries?

5. EU INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

- What should the EU do if its values, such as the rule of law, are violated in one of its member states?
- There is currently one European Commissioner for each member state. Should this number be reduced? How many Commissioners should there be, and how should they be chosen?

Annex 3: Template guidelines for Meeting Reports

Each democratic convention should be followed by a Meeting Report, drafted according to a set template, which will be available to download from the National Secretariat's website. The reports should be produced by the volunteers who organise the democratic conventions. It is important that all reports drafted in a single country are based on the same template, so that they are easily comparable and the meetings' conclusions can be summarised in a single National Report. See section 3.2.3 for more details on this phase of the strategy.

All answers should be concise and as simple as possible, in order to facilitate compiling the data, but without losing details that could be useful for the National Report. The following should be considered as guidelines only, with the final template to be produced by each National Secretariat.

First of all, there should be a summary of the turnout and demographics of the meeting. For example:

- How many participants were there? Names and email addresses (if available) should be taken at the door for the purposes of accurately recording this information.
- How was the group constituted, in terms of age, gender, class, profession, educational level, etc.? This should be estimated if it is not possible to say for sure. Was the group heavily skewed towards one or more demographics?
- In addition, any apparent demographic patterns in responses could be recorded. Was opinion frequently split along lines such as age, gender, or class? Were there participants who opposed all proposals, or backed them all?

At the core of each Meeting Report should be summarised answers to the questions posed in the agenda (*Annex 2*). These answers should seek to capture the gist of the participants' response to each question. For example:

- Were participants generally favourable, unfavourable, or indifferent to the proposal? Did the question evoke interest and discussion?
- Was the question contentious, or were responses mostly in agreement with one another? Were many different views expressed, or were participants split into definable 'camps'?
- Was a clear consensus reached, or was there no simple conclusion?

The report template must also include space to describe other aspects of the general mood in the room, for example:

- Were participants enthusiastic, or did the exercise in general fail to excite?
- Were detailed responses given, and did participants feel they were suitably informed to give answers?
- Were responses balanced, or did they tend towards one or more political viewpoints?
- If there were any incidents, such as disruptions, filibustering or other attempts to hijack discussions, these should be detailed.

In addition to reporting on what happened at each meeting, a secondary purpose of the report is to provide advice and lessons learned for future conventions, documenting which practical organisational aspects went well and what was deficient. For this purpose, the rapporteur should be given space to remark on the general experience of organising the meeting, including whether any problems were encountered and how the experience could have been made easier.

MISSION STATEMENT

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