CITIZENS' EUROPE e-PAPER

in the context of the "eUnited: Citizens' Forums for United Europe" project implemented within the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme
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List of acronyms

CoR - European Committee of the Regions

EU - European Union

IT - Information Technology

R&D- Research and Innovation

UK - United Kingdom

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Summary

The European Union (EU) throughout its history has faced many crises and, in order to manage them, it has developed mechanisms of cross-border cooperation and solidarity to strengthen its resilience. The ever-evolving trend of societies is emerging with many advantages, challenges and opportunities in various fields such as digital transformation, environment, migration and security and globalization. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, crises are becoming increasingly complex, and Member States will need to cooperate and the protection mechanism to evolve in order to be able to deal with multifaceted or hybrid threats. Citizens play a key role in turning proposals into European reforms. An important role in strengthening the resilience of the EU is also played by the European programmes, through which the exchange of know-how, experience and good practices is achieved. The project entitled "Citizens' Forum for United Europe" is implemented within the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme by 6 European countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Germany, Spain, Italy). Through international events and forums of the most crucial challenges by young people aged 18-30, the recognition of the opportunities and weaknesses of each country was sought and through the exchange of good practices and policies, the aim is to develop a Citizens' Europe e-Paper for a better EU future. The overall assessment of all the events held in the 6 countries has indicated that young people have an increased sense of citizenship and awareness of the challenges that Europe is facing, with a strong desire to turn them into opportunities. However, challenges continue to exist and there is a need for coordinated EU action and the creation of security mechanisms and cross-border cooperation between States, which is still at a low level. Furthermore, higher investments in Research and Innovation (R&D), more effective information mechanisms and further encouragement of citizen's participation in voluntary and civil protection initiatives are also suggested.

1. Introduction

Europe, as one of the largest key players in international trade, has been facing daily and various challenges and numerous crises throughout its history. One of the most recent unforeseen challenges is the Coronavirus pandemic, that has been occurring since 2019 and continues today. Thus, the EU Member States decided to cooperate in order to strengthen the national health care systems and limit the corresponding spread of the virus. At the same time, the EU and its Member States are taking action to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and support recovery (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022a). The second and latest challenge is the war in Ukraine, for which some Member States of the EU has shown unity by providing Ukraine with humanitarian, political, and financial support (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022b). Globalization, digital transformation, the development R&D and the commitment to zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 are considered issues that may create many benefits and opportunities, but also challenges for the EU, such as the impact of new technologies on society and jobs, the climate change, the migration and security concerns and the rise of populism. To meet the challenges, the EU has gradually implemented policy and institutional changes to enhance its ability to deal with future emergencies (European Council, Council of the European Union, 2022c). However, it will need to improve cross-sectoral and cross-border crisis management if it wants to increase its resilience to upcoming difficulties. Furthermore, it will need to strengthen information campaigns and enhance crisis communication. Regarding the management of the challenges, the awareness of the citizens plays a very significant role. Specifically, according to the News of the European Parliament (2022d), 90% of Europeans agree that the voices of EU citizens should be taken into consideration more seriously in decisions concerning the future of Europe. Furthermore, European programmes that focus on citizens' views are also very important. They give the opportunity to both citizens and experts, through forums, debates, and solidarity acts, to get to know the European countries and the main challenges they face, to understand what is happening in each country separately and in Europe as a whole and, based on extroversion, to exchange good practices and acquire active citizenship.

1.1. Mission and main purpose of the project

The project entitled "Citizens' Forum for United Europe" implemented within the framework of the Europe for Citizens programme aims to enhance EU efforts over the next five years in response to a more effective adaptation to the challenges of transformation and to turn barriers into opportunities. Involving six European countries, the project aims to identify challenges, treating a specific topic in each partner country. Specifically, the thematic topics for the participating countries are (Europe for Citizens, 2019):

- Poland - 'Competitive Europe'
- Greece - 'Immigration and Security'
- Spain - 'Democracy and Society'
- Italy - 'European Communication'
- Germany - 'Digitization'
- Bulgaria – 'Climate change and the Environment'

Through this process, it is intended to provide a real contribution to EU citizens to a deeper understanding of its values, history and diversity. It also seeks to reflect, exchange opinions and experiences on the identity of European citizenship through the participation in EU initiatives of people from different EU countries and regions. This may help citizens to better understand the Union's policy-making process and promote opportunities for social and intercultural engagement and volunteering at Union level.

2. Methodology

In order to collect the research findings from the events that took place in each partner's country, each of them was asked to send a short e-paper, based on an overall assessment of each debate in relation to the special topic discussed. Regarding the template, the main issues they had to be analyzed were the overall situation and the challenges, barriers, opportunities, and policy recommendations related to each thematic topic in Europe, with reference also to the situation that prevails in each partner's country separately.

3. Overall evaluation of each of 6 topics

3.1. Citizens' Forums on European Demography and Society

The international event entitled "Citizens' Forum on European Demography and Society" was held in Spain on 3 September 2021 from the European Integration and Training Centre ALPHA project's partner. Regarding the current situation, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed Europe and the world within the blink of an eye. It is expected to leave a lasting impact on the way we live and work together, and it came at a time when Europe had already been going through a period of profound demographic and societal change. According to the 2021 Ageing report from the European Commission (2021), by 2070, 30.3% of the population will be aged 65 years or older (compared to 20.3% in 2019) and 13.2% will be aged 80 years or older (compared to 5.8% in 2019). This trend is having a significant impact on people's everyday lives and on our societies. In the whole EU, the composition of our households is changing – households composed of two parents with children are being joined by households consisting of people living alone, single parents or couples without children. The EU, Member States and regions have a shared interest in responding to demographic change for the benefit of all Europeans. Demographic change will affect everybody and must be transformed to a factor that helps steer Europe's recovery from the crisis and provide citizens with insights as they build a more resilient, sustainable, and fair Union.

Five are the main challenges that are identified, based on each thematic topic. As for the first one, Europe's working-age population is shrinking, and European citizens need to find ways to sustain economic growth by bringing more people into jobs and increasing productivity. To deal with Europe's ageing society, the EU's health and care systems will have to adapt further, and the EU's policy makers have to consider how to fund higher age-related public spending. Demographic challenges often vary significantly between different parts of the same country. With some regions likely to experience rapid population change, this will lead to new opportunities and challenges, from investment to infrastructure and accessibility to access to services. Finding new solutions to support people through change will be essential. Demographic change may also impact Europe's position in the world. Its share of global population and GDP is expected to become comparatively smaller. This makes the need for Europe to be united, stronger, and more

strategic at the same time. The fifth and final challenge identified is that demographic change and the twin green and digital transitions often affect, support, or accelerate each other. Therefore, a strategic foresight may operate as an essential tool to predict and prepare policies to address these issues.

Competences for dealing with the effects of ageing are largely in the hands of Member States and the EU is well placed to identify key issues and trends and support action on ageing at national, regional and local level. It can help Member States and regions develop their own, tailor-made policy responses to ageing. In 2018 5.4% of women, and 2.2% of men aged 18-64, reduced their working time, or took employment breaks of more than a month to care for ill and/or older relatives with disabilities. The employment rate among older workers in the EU remains lower than for younger ones. 59.1% of those aged 55-64 were employed in 2019, in comparison to 80.6% of those aged 25-54 (for 2019). The number of people potentially in need of long-term care is expected to increase from 19.5 million in 2016 to 23.6 million in 2030 and 30.5 million in 2050 in the EU. Pensions are the main source of income for most retirees. In 2019 women's pensions in the EU were on average of 27.9% lower than men. Women tend to earn less, have shorter, less linear careers, work part-time, and take on more unpaid care responsibilities. The first 3 of the 5 major opportunities that arise are the healthy and active ageing and lifelong learning, the improvement of labour market performance and the modernization of social protection systems and fighting old-age poverty. A crucial point is also to improve the resilience of EU's health and care systems and to foster intergenerational solidarity and responsibility.

The EU institutions should work to increase and guarantee social protection. Participants, as members of the civil society, should strive to support the process leading to awareness about the need for a mandatory European-level social protection system (for example, European unemployment subsidies). As European citizens, participants believe it is essential to feel a part of a system that primarily deals with the social protection. The concept of "social housing" must be considered as service of public interest and as service to support vulnerable people. EU could also activate funding dedicated to accessing affordable social housing in the presence of public co-financing by Member States and regions. Integration of migrants should be also perceived as vital for social cohesion and economic development. Learning the language, receiving basic training in order to be employed, knowing how to react in a community and practicing civil and human rights and duties, are considered as a key factor of migrants' integration. There is a sharp need of developing an inclusive education in the host communities and countries that may lead

to full social inclusion. Moreover, there is still a gap between the development of the regions and the national level as well as reaching the European set of targets and goals in the different policy fields. There are enormous differences of levels of growth between cities, towns and villages. Urban areas score higher levels of economic activity and growth than their rural counterparts. Regions ranked very poorly, should be specially targeted by the EU policies (trans-border, cohesion, etc).

3.2. Citizens' Forums for Better EU Communication

The event entitled "Citizens' Forums Better EU Communication" was held in October 2021, by the NGO Mine Vaganti, which is one of the 6 partners of the project. The location of the project was Sassari, an Italian city located in the northwest region of Sardinia. More precisely, they aimed at providing a real contribution to citizens' deeper understanding of EU values, its history and diversity. The event's scope was the impression of the European citizenship identity through the engagement of people from different EU countries and regions in EU initiatives. This might help the citizens to better comprehend the Union's policy making process and promote opportunities for societal and intercultural engagement and volunteering at Union level.

An important organization is the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), which was established in 1994 in Brussels. According to the CoR's official website (European Committee of the Regions, The EU's Assembly of Regional and Local Representatives), its main principles are to bring European citizens closer to the EU. Precisely, by involving regional and local representatives who are in daily contact with their electorate's concerns, but also by inviting citizens to participate in various events and debates, the CoR contributes to reducing the gap between the Member States and its citizens. The CoR believes in coordinated action between the European, national, regional and local levels.

The main obstacle in relation to the thematic topic is citizens' Euroscepticism. The project aims to combat it by turning the criticism of the EU into a useful, constructive, and positive driver to European integration, bringing the EU closer to the citizens. One of the main purposes that arise in relation to the thematic topic, is the better treatment of Europe by the citizens. The tendency of citizens to vote for non-Eurosceptic national governments may be another emerging opportunity. Nevertheless, they start to lose their trust in national governments. According to Brack (2020), sixty-one percent of European citizens do not trust their national government while 77% do not trust political parties. Europe is

losing cooperation opportunities in various sectors, as in key investment areas of infrastructure and future technologies. Thus, it is needed to set the right policy framework that favours greater opportunities and significantly boosts innovation to revitalize the competitiveness, the cooperation, and the consideration of the region.

The need for effective communication has its legal basis in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (hereinafter 'the Charter'), which guarantees all citizens the right to be informed about EU matters. The institutions of the Union have developed various tools and services to inform the public. The European Citizens' Initiative, which was formally established in 2012, has enabled citizens to be more directly involved in the drafting of new legislation and in EU-related matters. The need for effective communication has its legal basis in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (hereinafter 'the Charter'), which guarantees the right of all citizens to be informed about EU matters. The institutions of the Union have developed various tools and services to keep in touch with and inform the public. Suggestions for better communication with citizens at EU level are to listen to citizens and take into account their opinions and concerns, to explain how EU policies affect citizens' daily lives and to establish contacts with the public at local level, addressing citizens in their national or local context and using their preferred means of communication.

3.3. Citizens 'Forum on European Digitalization

On December 3, 2021, the international event took place in Berlin, hosted by the BIDA e.V. Organization. Kultur und Bildung. The overall situation is that digital transformation should benefit everyone, put people first and offer new opportunities for the economy. Without digitalization, climate protection and ecological change remain mere wishful thinking. Given the increasing digitalization of society, economy, and administration, successfully shaping of the digital transformation will set the course for the future. Digitalization promises enormous economic and ecological potential and could thus further improve the quality of life of all people in Germany and Europe in general. Specifically, in many areas the German population acknowledges the added value of accelerated digitalization. In addition to the numerous opportunities however, the digital transformation also harbours risks. Depending on the industry, full digitalization may endanger jobs and sometimes threaten entire occupational groups. Furthermore, increasing digitalization requires an effective IT infrastructure and special attention to

cyber security. According to Allianz, cyber incidents were considered the biggest business risk in 2021. The reasons for the increase in cyber-attacks are manifold. Everyday life is increasingly shifting into the digital space, resulting in more opportunities for cyber criminals to commit crimes (https://de.statista.com).

In general, Member States are becoming more and more digital. Specifically in Germany, the latest data indicate that the number of internet users was over 65 million and almost 90 percent of households in Germany had broadband access. Recent studies show a great need for action. In an international comparison, Germany ranks at the bottom of various digital rankings. Among the seven most important industrial nations, Germany landed in second-to-last place for the second time in a row, well behind its European neighbours Italy and France. The digital transformation is fundamentally changing the way the people live, work and learn at a rapid pace. The focus of the most important challenges should be on the benefits that digitization brings to citizens and how they preserve and strengthen the values of their free democratic basic order in the digital age. The goal is to further increase the quality of life for all people, to develop the economic and ecological potential and to secure social cohesion.

Regarding the digital economy and society in 2021, a primary position is occupied by the Scandinavian countries Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. The European Commission publishes the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) annually, which tracks member states' progress in five key areas: connectivity, digital skills, internet use by individuals, integration of digital technology by businesses and digital public services. The economists examine how strongly countries rely on digital technologies. This could be an important indicator of how well countries come through the COVID-19 pandemic as the experts explain. According to Christos Kabolis (2020), "the flexibility and adaptability of both individuals and the private sector can also be a big piece of the puzzle for countries trying to rebuild their economies after the blows of COVID-19".

One of the challenges that arise in relation to the thematic topic, is the potential development of the digital competences for all. Specifically, all people should be able to use the opportunities of digitalization and to shape the digital transformation in a self-determined way and deal responsibly with the risks. Also, digital networks can create opportunities for everyone, even those who live in remote areas. To ensure sustainable prosperity and social cohesion in Germany, Europe, and the whole world in the long term,

innovation and digital transformation are required. Furthermore, bringing more people into the labour market, enabling them to work for longer and improving productivity, could constitute a counterweight for the shrinking working-age population. Digitization needs values and extroversion to be established. The administration should make life easier for citizens and businesses, not more complicated.

For the digitization of work, all public administrations need to be interconnected. It is proposed that public administration should be interconnected, also informing the population about possible forms of digitization, and helping with the transition to the online world. Another recommendation is the introduction of a system or mechanism to widely digitize elections across EU, making them accessible to young people, as it has already been implemented in many specific countries around the world and Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland, Estonia, etc.). The member states should establish safe channels, to inform about possible dangers and protect the public. It is important that cooperation between schools and families is settled at all levels, and digital education is provided to the wider public, including the privileges but also threats of digitalization. The public and private sectors should also provide public information about security and provide guidance on how to safely use all the capabilities and tools that today's online age offers. Another crucial point is the systematic fight against misinformation or Fake News and the cooperation of public profit and non-profit organizations to that cause. The introduction of new channels for cooperation between the public is also important to be implemented by the states and the EU institutions in national languages, in order to allow the public to be most effectively informed.

3.4. Citizens 'Forum on European Migration and Security

The international event was held in Greece by the Regional Association of Local Government of Western Macedonia, located in the city of Kozani on 18th of March 2022. The representatives of each country had to analyse the topic of immigration and security, which has concerned Europe and Greece in particular, in recent years. More specifically, they had to focus on issues such as security challenges in Europe, asymmetric threats

(terrorism, organized crime, cybercrime, etc.), raising public awareness and the issue of migration management, social cohesion, and solidarity between EU Member States. Generally, according to the European Commission (Statistics on migration to Europe, 2022), at the beginning of 2021 there were 447.2 million inhabitants living in Europe, of whom 5.3% of the total population were non-EU citizens. In addition, in terms of refugees, the share of them in the EU is 0.6% compared to its total population. In 2021 630,500 Asylum applications were lodged in the EU, while in the same year EU countries granted protection to around 257,000 people. Regarding Greece, in 2022 4,212 refugees entered the country in contrast to the record high of arrivals that was recorded in 2015, with 856,723 refugees and immigrants entering the country (operational data portal, refugee situations). Thus, the massive influx led to the inability of the country to provide material infrastructure. Furthermore, technological developments, digital governance and prosperity of Member States of the European Union have led them to become targets of cyber-attacks. In addition, according to data from the European Parliament (2021), in 2020, 57 terrorist attacks (complete, failed and thwarted) were recorded in the European Union, compared to 55 by 2019.

One of the main challenges is the existence of an open strategic autonomy, in order to ensure the EU's resilience (European Commission, 2020). More precisely, before the COVID-19 pandemic, security threats are also becoming more complex, and EU should take advantage of the possibility of further cross-border cooperation and interconnectedness. EU Member States therefore need a change of mindset to ensure their ability to act autonomously in security and to ensure the EU's resilience to crisis management. Furthermore, in an environment in which the nature of emerging threats is constantly changing, it is important to exchange and complement every research idea and assessment in order to address security threats.

The main obstacles recorded in relation to the topic are the inadequate responsiveness of EU Member States and the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to security issues and the increase of crime. According to the UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency, 2016), some Member States, in order to reduce the influx of refugees into their territory, have shifted responsibility to neighbouring countries and denied accepting any immigrants or accepted a few, at significantly low (almost neglectable) levels. This situation resulted in some countries (such as Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Sweden) to accept refugees at disproportionate high levels in comparison to their population and to other EU countries. In 2015, Greece received such a large number of refugees (almost 10% of its regular population), making it impossible to provide material infrastructure. Thus, the

European Union's approach to migration has created a crisis of solidarity. While immigrants' arrivals in Europe have declined, so has the cooperation and responsibility sharing within the EU.

An opportunity that emerges through the development of Citizens' Europe e-Paper is the exchange of ideas in order to form a Common Asylum Policy proposal. This proposal could include, a balanced and proportionate distribution of asylum seekers and immigrants, providing housing and setting up EU-wide structures for unaccompanied asylum seekers and also an effective framework of processing applications in countries other than the country of arrival ("Conference on the Future of Europe: European Citizens call for a common asylum policy", 2022). Another crucial point is that immigration is both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe, as immigration strengthens the working age population and immigrants may also contribute to technological progress (News, European Parliament, 2022b). Understanding these parameters are important if societies want to discuss the role of immigration in a useful way. Also, the need for cooperation between the Member States based on their strengths, is more than ever essential and the EU can be a significant pillar in this. Thus, the EU can give the first example, strengthening its overall system for crisis management and making efforts inside and outside its borders to contribute to global stability.

Overall, in a complex and challenging international environment, stepping up security research is more than necessary. By serving as the primary venue for cross-border, interoperable cooperation, and exchange of good practices between the Member States and an effective immigrant integration system, the EU should maximize its effort to the protection of its citizens.

3.5. Citizens' Forum for Competitive Europe

The event entitled "Citizens' Forum for Competitive Europe" was hosted by the associated partner of the Polish Robert Schuman Foundation in May 2022. For a better understanding of the phenomenon, the challenges must be first defined. More precisely, finding and naming the current (and possibly future) challenges in Europe must be the first step to define what competitive Europe is, what it consists of and how its Member States want to build it. There is a big diversity in approaches to those challenges, so it is

obvious that while searching for answers and solutions, concerns coming from many countries, backgrounds, cultures and point of views must be taken into consideration. The major challenges in relation to the topic of "Competitive Europe" are the challenges related to ecology/ European Green Deal as EU still needs to find common ground and to find out how to act properly to fasten the process. A common challenge is also migration and specifically the approaches, the findings of new solutions, coming up with common policies and dealing with the migration crisis. Furthermore, it is generally agreed that all the countries of Europe are experiencing high inflation now and almost for sure they will keep experiencing this phenomenon for the next coming year. Other challenges are connected to digitalization, artificial intelligence, and evolving technology.

There are many obstacles in relation to challenges in Europe in general and in relation to a competitive Europe in particular. The main ones are the combination of different points of views, the development of common approaches and policies and the agreement on the financial matters and the cost of coping with the ecology issues. The interaction of democracy and technology is also an issue and the redefinition of the concept of migration and more solidarity as well as the lack of general social involvement, willingness to create new solutions and patterns of behaviour are other crucial barriers that are identified. It's important to acknowledge that facing the challenges cannot be exclusively considered an issue to be solved, but also a great opportunity to work on new solutions. Another key opportunity is the existence of the European Green Deal, and its subsequent activities that may drastically decrease CO_2 levels, improve environmental sustainability and promote Green economy in the EU. Regarding the technology challenges, especially the new generation can be considered immersed in technology, however it's important not to see this as a problem, but as an opportunity to manage the technology issues more effectively and to use technology to increase the level of democracy in EU (digital elections, public consultation and public services' digital platforms, digital detection of weak societal groups, etc).

Some of the main policy recommendations / solutions for the EU Member States are to strictly follow the deadlines for implementing climate change (deadlines are already set by the European Green Deal), and to keep educating people. A crucial policy recommendation is also to create a common, just (for all EU countries) and applicable migration policy, which will be respected by all the involved parties and to trace and understand the reasons for high inflation in order to limit its high prevalence in the future. It is also important to prepare people for the possible threats created by the constantly

evolving technology and to build tech awareness, cooperation, and sense of solidarity among all the generations.

3.6. Citizens' Forum on Climate Change and Environment

The sixth and last conference entitled "Climate change and Environment" was held by the leader of the project named Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency on July 1, 2022. Over one in two young people see climate change as main global challenge for the future of the EU. According to the European Council of the European Union (2022d) the latest data from leading scientists show unprecedented changes in the world's climate. According to the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), global warming is causing significant, and in some cases irreversible, changes to rainfall patterns, oceans, and winds in all regions of the world.

For Europe, the report predicts an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, including marine heatwaves, and warns that a 2°C increase in temperature will have critical effects for nature and people. The European Parliament (Think Tank, 2021) states that, although the EU met its 2020 targets for reducing greenhouse gasses (GHG) and increasing renewable energy use and energy efficiency in the extraordinary context of the coronavirus crisis, the pandemic recovery led energy consumption and emissions to rebound in 2021. Member States are required to invest 37 % of EU Recovery and Resilience Facility Funds on climate objectives. The European Climate Law sets the targets of reducing net GHG emissions by 'at least' 55 % by 2030, compared with 1990, and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. At the same time, EU-27 total GHG emissions were 3 743 million tonnes (Mt) CO2 in 2019, marking a 19 % decrease from 2005 levels and a 24 % reduction compared with 1990, overachieving the 2020 target of 20 % compared with 1990 (Jensen, 2021).

The major challenges regarding climate change are considered amongst the most important challenges in the world. Nevertheless, there are several different areas that might be more important than others, as the reduction of global warming. Specifically, the world temperature has been constantly rising in the last decades, causing different negative climate phenomena. The decrease of global warming shall stay below 2°C compared to the pre-industrialized levels in the 19th century. According to the European Environment Agency (2022), out of the 20 warmest years, 19 have occurred since 2000. Furthermore, the carbon footprint is a factor that is gradually becoming increasingly

important in consumers' perceptions and is becoming part of a complex set of decisions that help them make justified decisions about certain purchases. The carbon footprint is monitored throughout the production chain of a product until it reaches the end user and the end of its lifecycle, i.e., from raw materials, through production, packaging, distribution, sale, use and disposal or recycling of the product. For example, the food supply chain is affected by the impact of greenhouse gas emissions from the use of agricultural land of different crops, livestock farming, processing, transport, sale, distribution, packaging, and consumption.

Regarding the main obstacles, the majority of the world population has already understood that a change is needed if we want to keep our planet as it is. Nevertheless, the major obstacles are directly related and probably even caused by people's way of living. They are connected to all major sectors of economy, which also provides jobs to an important segment of the human population. Some of those sectors are the energy production, industry, agriculture, transportation, construction, and the trade services. Human activity added to some natural causes are provoking changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere. The anthropogenic climate change created by human activity is constantly increasing in the recent decades. In short, the biggest barrier is that there is a need to change our way of living in order to keep the environment and prevent climate change.

There is a saying about difficult times demanding bold decisions. The society is on the verge of such a scenario. Nevertheless, Europeans are lucky to be on the front line in leading the way to a more sustainable society and economy. Different policies, including the EU Green Deal will help the process. The opportunities that will appear in the future could be divided in two major categories. From economic perspective, the (financial) coping with challenges that European countries face, may act as an investment, creating new technologies that will be used in creating green businesses and sustainable green jobs. Moreover, companies may slowly adopt circular economy business models, which are more suitable and sustainable than traditional ones. From the societal perspective, a society that has achieved sustainability may find a way to replace fossil fuels and mining industries preventing the physical degradation of the environment that way. Society won't be subject to conditions that undermine people's capacity to meet their basic human needs.

An important point noted in the conference is that the awareness of the participants in the specific topic was proved to be particularly high. Specifically, they were asked to break into groups and present proposed policies related to the thematic topic at global, European and regional level. From the summary of the proposed solutions, the following results emerge: On worldwide level, an investment of Hydrogen based energy sources and infrastructure , the limitation of single-use plastic and replacement with alternative resources, the limitation of trade with environmentally aggravating countries through imposition of higher taxes and trade tariffs, and the creation of a network of ecological schools in all countries globally adapted to all age groups of the population, have been proposed. On EU level, it is proposed for the EU to develop exclusive competences in the field of environmental policies. Furthermore, the investment of a train network across EU that will be used according to the GHG emissions (less green commercial and cargo companies will be paying more to use it) is proposed, as well as an EU wide network of recycling machines for plastic and glass bottles. Finally, on regional level, it is proposed the promotion of short supply chains, local products and urban agriculture, the integration of public composters along with separate waste collection, the creation of an alert system for local climate anomalies (such as air pollution, floods, etc.), and the promotion of local initiative for recycling, such as "Trash for books".

4. Conclusion

In accordance with the above, the participation of the citizens in the events held in the 6 countries was active, a fact that proves their awareness of the challenges set by the project. It is also concluded that over the years the EU has implemented security policies to address its main challenges. However, given the ever-evolving trend of societies, the EU's response will also have to evolve. This highlights the necessity of the implementation European programmes such as this one, which enables the participants and the beneficiaries at a wider scale to expand their knowledge, broaden their cultural horizons and to recognize the weaknesses and opportunities of each country. Thus, through interaction and cooperation, the aim has been to propose policies for a better and united Europe. An overall conclusion is that this can be achieved both between the cooperation of citizens and the Member States, as well as between Institutions at the local, regional and international level. For example, in the issue of European Demography and Society, a proposed policy is the compulsoriness of a social protection system at the European level. Also, a key issue in the topic of better communication and digitization between the EU is that in order to ensure long-term sustainable prosperity and social cohesion, extroversion is needed. This is also necessary in terms of supporting the environmental objectives since, according to the data of the European Parliament (2022), almost half of Europeans (49%) consider climate change as the main global challenge for the future of the EU. At the same time, 21% of European citizens perceive the prioritization of strengthening solidarity between member states as a main issue and 20% consider energy independence (20%) a key factor that should be promoted. In addition to cross-border and cross-functional cooperation, a key policy proposal on the issue of migration and security is the creation of a system for the exploitation of the potential of migrants and the creation of a common asylum policy. All this combined may make Europe more competitive and resilient in a sustainable and democratic way.

Project Consortium

Stara Zagora Regional Economic Development Agency (Bulgaria)
www.szeda.eu

Regional Association of Local Government of Western Macedonia (Greece)
www.peddm.gov.gr

BIDA e.V.Kultur und Bildung (Germany)
www.bida-kultur-bildung.de

Mine Vaganti NGO (Italy)
www.minevaganti.org

Polska Fundacja Im. Roberta Schumana (Poland)
www.schuman.pl

European Integration and Training Centre ALPHA (Spain)
www.alphacentre.eu

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