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In today's EP feature on Radio Bulgaria, we bring you more on [the conference 'Europe 2020 – Civic Visions'](#) which took place in Sofia at the end of January 2010. European and Bulgarian non-governmental organizations, university researchers and MEPs exchanged ideas about what they imagined Europe would be like in 2020. The conference was part of [the initiative 'Interacting with the European Parliament'](#) organized by the European Institute, Europe Gateway and the Center for Policy Modernization with the financial support of DG Communications of the European Parliament. Radio Bulgaria is a media partner of the project.

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The conference is in accord with the EU-launched 'open consultations' with European citizens for mapping out the direction of EU development in the next budget period 2014-2020. It is essential that the opinions of European citizens be heard now, that is, within the preparation period in which the EU is preparing its plan of development in the coming years up to 2020. The plan includes the direction and strategy of the EU financial frame. In other words, now it is the moment to define the amounts of the European funds and their exact appropriation. In all these issues, the deciding word belongs to the European Parliament. This is why it is important for MEPs to get an accurate view of the kind of Europe its citizens would like to live in.

The discussions at the conference in Sofia circled around [three main sets of topics](#) vital to Europe's future: the EU institutions and democracy expansion; cultural diversity and European identity; and social policies and development. The discussed period covers the first decade following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty which widens the possibilities of European citizens to participate in the planning of EU strategies and policies.

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With regard to the first set of topics, [“European democracy – mission possible?”](#), **Michael Bruter from the London School of Economics** paid special attention to the paradox related to the chronic low turnout of EU citizens during EP elections:

"For instance when French citizens voted against the proposed Constitution in 2005 at the very same time their support for European integration was the highest France had shown for several years. At the same time by voting against the Constitution, they were actually saying “we want more Europe”. And they very much support EU integration but somehow there is a gap between what they expect from it and what the member states can actually provide them with.”

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One way of trying to involve more European citizens was the idea of setting up transnational polling lists for EP elections promoted by **Sylvie Pruvot from the international organization Alternatives Européennes**:

“We call for all political parties to comprise transnational polling lists for EP elections. We believe that this opens new political opportunities. This way political discussion would concentrate on common European issues rather than being a pledge to internal struggles.”

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As expected, the topic of European identity sparked heated debates. Is there something like it? What is its relation to the national identity of European citizens? **Marco Incerti from CEPS** said: We think that it is possible, slowly, but steadily build a sense of European-ness which will be a thinner layer of

citizenship. But this will require a long time. The EU will not become a state but a common culture could be created.

By 2020, the formation of [‘social Europe’](#) is expected to be completed the same way that ‘economic’ and political Europe’ has been completed. This was the vision of Europe that participants in the debate on development of social policies formulated.

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They called for reforms in the European employment policies as well as for more flexibility in the labor market. **Ani Nedkova from the European Institute** pointed out some of the recommendations:

‘Increasing the authority of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in addition to its current consultative functions is one of the beneficial measures. Social integration must be a priority for the Europe-2020 strategy and through the solidarity policies investments must focus in spheres with actual growth potential. Anti-poverty measures must continue to be implemented as minimum standards of social security and quality of life must be defined.’

The growth of the European Union is the most convincing expression of EU solidarity, participants in the conference said, insisting on continuing the process.

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Marc Garcet from the Belgian AIGS Association for support of people with disabilities (Association Iterregionale de Guidance et de Sante) is of the opinion that the EU must not give up on its solidarity principles, as the benefits are for both sides.

“People from Western Europe also need you, as your culture will enrich the community. This way we can establish a connection with the Eastern world that we did not have before. This new multi-cultural space is something valuable that you bring with you. Eastern Europeans also bring bigger hopes and expectations that may be needed for Europe’s progress.”

[The European cultural space and identity](#) were a major topic, too.

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Chairwoman of the Committee on Culture and Education of the European Parliament, [Doris Pack](#), who was a special guest to the conference in Sofia, pointed to the popularity of the international exchange programmes: Komensky – for students and teachers; Erasmus – for students and university lecturers; Leonardo – for professional qualification; Grundtvig – for education of adults. She underlined the necessity for introduction of longer-term exchange for teachers.

“I mean the teachers’ mobility which is needed implies that at least, I don’t know if we can do it, but we should allow each teacher to have been some months outside of his country, Mrs. Pack explains. Other ways he will never understand Europe. I cannot say how much money it will need ... But we are trying to put this in our new program and I ensure you that it will be in, because we want it to be in.”

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[Joao Santos](#);Anna, **Head of the European Ombudsman’s Legal Department**, also took part in the conference in Sofia. Mr Santos;Anna voiced his satisfaction from the increased citizens’ rights for participation and monitoring of the work in the EU, adopted in the Lisbon Treaty. The reforms include the right for one million EU citizens from different Member States to offer legislation initiatives to the European Commission.

“The Lisbon treaty made in deed considerable progress regarding the citizens’ rights. There are several parts in the treaty which really indicate that the Union is pushing in this direction. There is the idea that the citizens do have the right to participate in the democratic life of the union and

that the decisions the Union takes should be taken as close and as openly as possible to the citizen. The citizens and their associations are encouraged to participate in the legislation of the Union, they are encouraged to evaluate the work of the Union. We think that this new treaty challenges the civil society and the citizens to really step forward and participate in the daily life of the Union, to really intervene and make their voices known. And the ombudsman is there if there are complaints concerning the way the institutions have addressed these citizens or NGOs wanting to participate and being denied the right to do so. The European ombudsman is the one of the means of redress that exists. The net of European ombudsmen which exists in the countries can probably help citizens resolving most of the problems they face and that have their origin in the non respect of the community law.”

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With the financial support of the European Parliament, a team of experts from the European Institute is to analyze and publish the main conclusions and recommendations of the two-day discussion in Sofia, entitled “Europe 2020 –Civic Visions.” The publication will be given to all MEPs. This way they will have a better knowledge of the opinions and desires of the ordinary EU citizens, when starting to define the EU policy for the period 2014 –2020. Videos from the “Europe 2020 –Civic Visions” conference can be found at the web site of the Interacting with the European Parliament project – <http://parliament.europe.bg>. Comments and opinions are welcome in our editorial office, as well as at info@europe.bg email address.

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