



# Linking the levels of governance in the EU

## SUMMARY

The coronavirus crisis has further underlined the need for a more cohesive European Union (EU). Previous ideas about how best to link the levels of the EU's system of multilevel governance have become even more important, while new paths of cooperation have been opened by changes triggered by the crisis itself. Every level of governance, from the EU to the local, via the national and regional levels, has been affected by the crisis and all are involved in the response. This crisis has shown that coordination between the levels can improve and should be improved. EU decision-making could become even more effective, efficient and legitimate if it draws appropriate lessons from the crisis.

The first part of this paper focuses on the rationale for, and form of, an EU strategy to better connect the different levels of the multilevel system of governance in Europe. The second part assesses the consequences of the current crisis for the links between EU governance levels, reflecting on the various lessons to be drawn, for each level, and suggesting different practical implications for the process, such as the need to adjust the network of key partners and seize the moment to further incorporate digital technologies in partnership-building. Finally, the paper highlights the historic opportunity provided by the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe to develop and establish a more permanent system to link the levels of our Union. Concrete proposals are summarised in a table of potential initiatives.

## Principles of Linking the Levels<sup>1</sup>

Connecting the different levels of the multilevel system of EU governance can and should make the Union more integrated and stronger in its diversity.

### Rationale

To help the EU meet citizens' expectations and deliver on key issues, the EU level of decision-making must coordinate effectively with the national and other levels of government that have responsibility for, or are concerned by, the transposition or implementation of EU policy. Efficient and effective exchange of information between experts from the various levels of government in the EU can help all levels move forward together faster than would otherwise be the case.

EU citizens increasingly feel that their voice matters in the EU, but the trend remains fragile.<sup>2</sup> This feeling must be sustained by the regular consultation and participation of citizens in the EU decision-making process, which in turn needs to reflect their views and concerns. Surveys indicate that citizens trust and feel closer to the most familiar local and regional levels,<sup>3</sup> while at the same time a majority of citizens feel these authorities are insufficiently taken into account when deciding EU policies.<sup>4</sup> By building bridges from the EU to the local level, through the national and regional

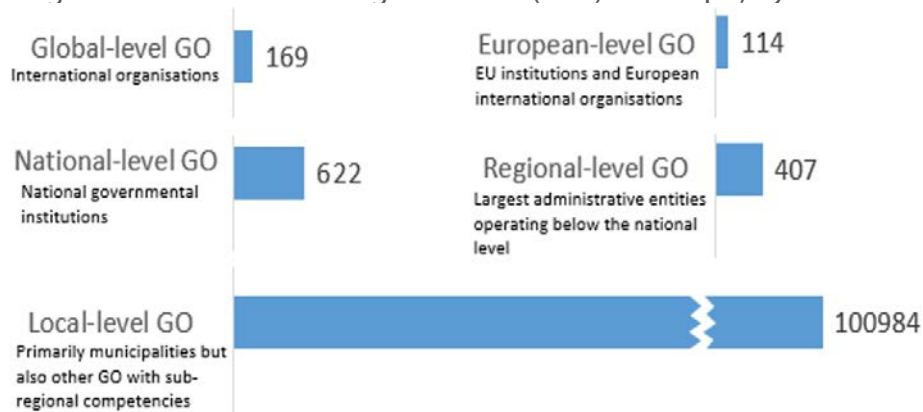
levels, the EU should improve participatory mechanisms and respond to a growing demand of European citizens.

## Mapping

While connecting directly with citizens and with civil society organisations is crucial for reducing the gap between the EU and its citizens, this paper focuses on the relations between governmental organisations (GOs). These are defined as structured organisational entities with legal personality, endowed with executive, legislative or judicial powers, and consisting of elected representatives and/or civil servants. Figure 1 outlines the over 100 000 GOs considered of interest for EU policies that have been identified, through internal research, at various levels of governance.

Some 169 **global level** GOs, about half of which are headquartered in an EU or an EEA Member State, are considered as relevant for EU policies. These are international organisations with a membership of countries from various continents, or from within a non-European continent, that operate supranationally. This

Figure 1: Governmental organisations (GOs) in Europe, by level



implies that EU institutions would benefit from strong links with, for example, the World Bank, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the United Nations (UN) and its agencies.

At the **European level**, EU institutions and bodies can benefit from establishing systematic partnerships with each other to improve EU cohesion and policy-making, as well as with other European GOs to exchange best practice, data and expertise on relevant policy topics. European-level GOs are defined as EU institutions and bodies, as well as organisations whose member countries are mainly European states. The three main EU institutions would benefit from being further linked with the European Committee of the Regions (COR), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Ombudsman, the Council of Europe, and/or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

As far as the **national level** is concerned, EU institutions should continue to develop even deeper relations with national parliaments. This would contribute to strengthen 'the most evident Achilles heel of the intergovernmental union':<sup>5</sup> the fact that national executives are accountable only to national parliaments. In addition, links could be improved with key organisations in the wide constellation of 622 identified national-level governmental institutions and bodies of EU Member States with state-wide competences, such as Member States' permanent representations to the EU, national ministries and agencies, Member States' Courts, Ombudsmen, or Central Banks.

**Regional-level** GOs are key actors in linking the levels. They are the largest administrative entities operating below the national level in EU Member States, holding responsibilities for a part of national territory. Their competences vary between Member States, depending on the administrative organisation (e.g. unitary or federal) and the legislative powers they possess. EU institutions would benefit from establishing systematic partnerships with 407 identified regional GOs (both individual and umbrella organisations), to share expertise and data on relevant policy topics, as well as experience with the transposition and implementation of EU policy. Regions with own legislative powers should be given priority, involving both their executives and parliaments.

Key GOs include the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), as well as individual regional administrations.

The **local level** is the largest and most diverse. It represents administrative entities in EU Member States operating below the national and regional levels. It includes municipalities and other organisations with sub-regional competences: for example, cities. Some 100 984 local-level GOs have been identified in the EU, with only a few dozen European cities individually represented in Brussels. By contrast to the regional level, local-level GOs are usually represented by umbrella organisations. Eurocities, the European Local Authority Network (ELAN), the Capital Cities and Regions Network (CCRN) and the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy are among 53 national umbrella organisations representing local authorities and 10 umbrella organisations representing both local and regional authorities. These are central in helping the EU level understand the concerns and take into account the priorities of local GOs.

The governmental organisations are different levels within the EU and are currently largely disconnected, suggesting unused potential in unlocking mutual benefits by establishing systematic links with and between these organisations, through sharing of knowledge, experience and best practices. The aim of the 'Linking the Levels' project is to overcome the conception of a 'Brussels bubble' by focusing on local and regional levels of government, which are closest to citizens and responsible in practice for the implementation of 70 % of EU law.<sup>6</sup>

## Approach

Drawing on research conclusions, as well as an EPRS pilot project with regional and local GOs,<sup>7</sup> the approach to best link the levels in the EU consists of: (i) increasing awareness about ongoing EU policy work among GOs on all levels; (ii) listening in order to understand GOs' priorities and concerns, and (iii) establishing systemic partnerships of mutual exchange and input into EU policy, based on experience and expertise. Actions planned for each stage are detailed in the table below.

STAGE I	Actions
<b>Increasing AWARENESS about ongoing EU policy work</b>	1. Meeting and <b>presentation of EU policy work</b>
	2. Agreeing on a <b>system of regular meetings</b> and formal exchanges
	3. Establishing a regular <b>system of information-sharing</b> on EU policy work
	4. Targeted ad-hoc communications <b>on any discovered gaps</b> in awareness
	5. Regular <b>participation at key GO events</b> to present EU policy work
STAGE II	Actions
<b>LISTENING to understand GOs' priorities and concerns</b>	1. Regular <b>analysis of which topics GOs cover</b> and/or are concerned with
	2. <b>Automated digital</b> 'sentiment' analysis of publicly available material
	3. <b>Regular follow-up</b> and issue-specific meetings on common policy priorities
	4. Consultation on the <b>gaps in awareness/misperceptions</b> of EU policy work
	5. Establishing a <b>single entry point</b> for partners to contact EU institutions
STAGE III	Actions
<b>Mutual EXCHANGE and input of knowledge and expertise</b>	1. Aggregating EU/EPRS <b>policy analysts' work plans, priorities and timelines</b>
	2. Examining and aggregating <b>partners' work plans, priorities and timelines</b>
	3. Developing and promoting an electronic platform to collect partners' contributions
	4. Regular <b>consultations</b> of partners on relevant policy topics
	5. <b>Synthesising collected input from partners</b> for the EP and its committees

This type of approach could be adopted by all main EU institutions and thus contribute to a substantial improvement of the links and interactions with actors from other levels of EU governance. Democratic systems must adapt to citizens' expectations and concerns. Technological developments have opened

new ways and significantly multiplied opportunities for engagement, thus enabling closer connection between the governed and the governing. The linking the levels approach aims to make the best of these new developments to help improve the way EU democracy works and is perceived.

## Impact of the coronavirus crisis on EU links

The coronavirus crisis has shaken and changed our relationships, both personal and professional. It has also impacted on the relations between EU Member States, and relations between national, regional and local levels, and has dented the perception of EU governance and ability to act at European level. Despite the difficulties and initially self-centred response, multiple examples of best practice and cross-border solidarity were in fact observed during the crisis. In addition, political leaders expressed and demonstrated their strong will to close the gaps between institutions and move closer to citizens.

### Coronavirus as a link changer

The closing of intra-Schengen borders has shaken the EU pillar, which had already been weakened by measures taken as a result of terrorist threats and the migration crisis. The united Europe we had been constructing over many years was forced to suddenly follow the global approach of limiting interactions and stopping exchanges between countries facing different levels of pandemic and applying diverse measures. As pointed out by Chancellor Angela Merkel in a speech to the Bundestag on the eve of the start of the German EU Council Presidency, the first reflexes 'were rather national and not entirely European' and this has shown 'how fragile the European project still is'.<sup>8</sup>

Progressively, as adequate measures were put in place and the pandemic brought under control, a common approach could be established. The EU discussed how to interact with the rest of the world and a more precise strategy focused on local and regional situations was developed. This period nevertheless demonstrated the difficulty of a coordinated response in times of crisis, especially when countries are hit at different moments and degrees. This underlined the weak links in our multilevel system of governance.

More practically, with lockdowns and social distancing measures put in place in most EU Member States, the coronavirus crisis has changed the nature and structure of citizens' relations. Work habits have been profoundly affected. While 39.4% of European citizens declared they did some work from home before the pandemic, more than a further third said they started to work from home as a result of the measures to restrict the spread of the virus.<sup>9</sup> In consequence, the relationships that underpin work have been transformed. Contacts have become less frequent and physical meetings the exception rather than the rule. The EU institutions reacted and adapted themselves quickly to the new situation, but the pandemic has put enormous constraints on the work of the EU, as it 'relies on a dense network of formal and informal contacts within and between European institutions and EU Member States'.<sup>10</sup> The European Parliament had to move quickly to a system of 'hybrid' meetings, whilst negotiations in the Council system were halted for a while. The negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework became more complex with several inconsequential virtual meetings and a stalemate that was only unblocked by a classic European Council meeting over five days.

Measures continue to evolve in correlation to the pandemic, while some practices, inadvertently pilot-tested during this crisis, might turn into new permanent practices.

### Best practice and cross-border solidarity

The crisis has triggered multiple expressions of solidarity and good practice, shared between Member States, regions, and cities. Acts of solidarity and innovative ideas to respond to the pandemic and its consequences have flourished across the EU. Most of the initiatives have logically been health-related, such as the cross-border sharing of hospital beds, sending medical staff to the most affected regions or providing medical equipment to other countries. Germany for example

[flew patients in from Italy and France](#) whilst [doctors and nurses from Romania and Norway](#) were sent to Italy under the EU Civil Protection Mechanism.

Besides all the many essential health and economic measures, good practice could be observed in various ways and areas, such as in community mobilisation, support for the elderly and children, in food supply, accommodation, information sharing and dialogue, mobility, or culture. Interesting examples also include calls for volunteers to respond to various crisis challenges, from the [production of masks](#) to [countering cyber-attacks](#). Another instrument with potential long-term effect was the development of online platforms to connect people or share information. In Sweden, for example, the Östergötland Region set up a [collaborative platform](#) to connect job-seekers and employers. In France, the sub-regional governmental organisations (*départements*) helped [connect people seeking employment and farmers](#). In Malta, an [online platform](#) enabled politicians and staff in local councils maintain dialogue and coordination with their communities and thereby ensure that the elderly were not forgotten, neighbours were safe and communities kept good health.

These initiatives demonstrated how innovative, resourceful and generous European communities can be during these challenging times. Such dynamism should be highlighted, encouraged and promoted via sustainable tools fostering the links between citizens. The EU is well placed to facilitate and support such developments. EU-driven cooperation 'offers critical opportunities of learning from others and to achieve collectively what would not be possible at the individual country level.'<sup>11</sup> In this optic, the European Committee of the Regions already launched an [exchange platform](#) in order 'to assist, inform, engage and represent regions and cities by sharing news and information.' It gathers stories, solutions and responses from local and regional bodies and their representatives and aims 'to provide an on-the-ground reality check of EU measures to fight the pandemic' and to 'serve as evidence to improve EU policies based on the experiences at local and regional level'. For its part, the European Parliament decided to show solidarity with local communities by making some of the institution's capabilities and facilities available to [provide accommodation and food to vulnerable people](#) and [host a consultation and screening centre](#). In trying times, political leadership showed strong commitment to use the means available to fight the crisis.

## Increase in political will to close the gap

The pandemic has not hit every Member State and region equally. The economic consequences will also vary, as shown by the interim summer 2020 [European economic forecast](#), which predicts a GDP contraction ranging from 4.6% in Poland to 11.2% in Italy. The disparities have led to tension and polarisation between countries and within them, often leading to divergences between national, regional and local levels.

However, as the European Council has put it, fighting such a pandemic 'requires urgent, decisive, and comprehensive action at the EU, national, regional and local levels.'<sup>12</sup> On Europe Day, the European Parliament's President, David Sassoli, said that 'without a common answer no one will be able to recover' and underlined the need to 'walk together, faster than in the past'.<sup>13</sup> The huge economic and social difficulties resulting from the crisis are strong incentives to work together to overcome the challenges we face. Even if, according to a [survey in nine Member States](#), most citizens consider the EU did not prove its relevance and did not live up to its responsibilities during the pandemic – which can to a large extent be explained by the lack of EU competence in the health field – a clear majority (63%) said the crisis has shown the need for greater European cooperation.

On 20 July 2020, following the longest negotiations on record, EU leaders reached a [historic and unprecedented agreement](#) to strengthen the EU and overcome the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic together. The agreed programme, equivalent to 4.7% of EU GDP, was composed of the 2021-2027 MFF worth €1 074 billion and a €750 billion EU recovery fund. The European Parliament, which has been a strong advocate of a robust MFF and an ambitious recovery plan, welcomed in its [resolution](#) the 'historic move for the EU', but pointed out that cuts to the long-term budget in key areas such as climate protection, digital transition and health were unacceptable. It demanded full democratic involvement in the recovery instrument, stressed that binding commitment to new resources was indispensable and that the rule of law must be upheld.

This unprecedented investment, expression of solidarity and will to cooperate between Europeans has the potential to lead to a quantum leap towards a stronger and closer Union, provided it goes hand in hand with efforts to close the gaps between citizens and the institutions representing them. This crisis has exposed the urgency to better inter-connect the various levels of government in Europe, in order to construct a more resilient EU.

## Lessons from the coronavirus response

This section looks more closely at the lessons from the coronavirus crisis for each level of EU governance.

### European level

The lack of EU competence in health policy has put the European level in a very difficult position. Limited ability to act contrasted sharply with the high expectations of EU citizens. This is damaging to the European project and could be prevented by reinforcing the competences attributed to the EU.<sup>14</sup> A poor alternative is much better communication with citizens on the respective responsibilities, which has always proved an uphill struggle for the EU. In any case, crisis management structures with adequate mechanisms to effectively coordinate relevant stakeholders are needed at the EU level to speed up the processes and produce results.

The EU political system will have to continue to respond to the systemic challenges posed by this crisis. Fortunately, the functioning of European democracy was preserved, with the European Parliament quickly putting in place temporary arrangements for [remote participation and voting for its Members](#). The technology developed internally for remote committee meetings, which features up to eight languages in simultaneous interpretation, proved especially valuable. In the aftermath of the crisis, long-term adaptations, including legal ones, need to be put in place for similar situations in the future.

Furthermore, the coronavirus crisis highlighted the central role of some European institutions and bodies, such as the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and national health agencies. Organisations like the EIB, the ECB and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) are significantly increasing their role in view of the economic recovery. This implies that closer engagement and partnerships should be built with these important organisations.

### National level

At the beginning of the crisis, the lack of coordinated action between Member States due to the asymmetry of the shock across the EU led to a measure of disharmony and less than optimal responses.

The health threat initially jeopardised the functioning of the democratic institutions and affected citizens' rights and liberties in an unprecedented way. The states of emergency declared in several EU Member States had immediate implications and could even have long-term consequences on the respective national political systems.<sup>15</sup> In national parliaments, as in the European Parliament, new ways of virtual and remote functioning had to be embraced and will likely impact long-term practices.

The national parliaments and their scrutiny role have been particularly challenged by their executives. The economic and financial crisis, and then the migration crisis, have already shown the need for more direct EU intervention through executive capacities, especially in crisis times.<sup>16</sup> The coronavirus crisis has further underlined this evolution that aims to close capacity gaps, ensure implementation of actions, as well as fulfil citizens' expectations. Complementary executive capacity requires the European and national parliaments to play a strong role in ensuring the EU can deliver, as well as bringing the necessary democratic legitimation to the measures. This transformation implies a strong dialogue and cooperation between parliaments, both political and administrative. Besides the political relations, which should continue to be reinforced, partnerships at administrative level would greatly contribute from multiple active communication channels and further systematic exchanges.

## Regional and local levels

Despite the fact that most of the decisions were taken at the national level, the pandemic was very much a regional and local issue. Figure 2<sup>17</sup> illustrates the diverse impact of the current pandemic on EU regions. This highlights the essential role of governments 'closest' to the citizens, especially in time of crisis, when regionalism and localism became even more relevant. This in turn strengthens the need for other levels to carefully identify local actors and their representatives in order to establish close and dynamic ties with them.

Regions were key territorial units in the crisis, in part because of their competences in areas such as disease control and education (as in federal states like Germany). Cities have been resourceful pools of good practice and expressions of solidarity as they organised food supplies, help for the elderly and children, innovative mobility measures, and financial support for local economies, as well as facilitating dialogue between citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Through such concrete actions, local organisations once again showed they are the final link in the policy chain. They play a key role in the implementation of policies, including European ones.

## Practical implications for linking the levels

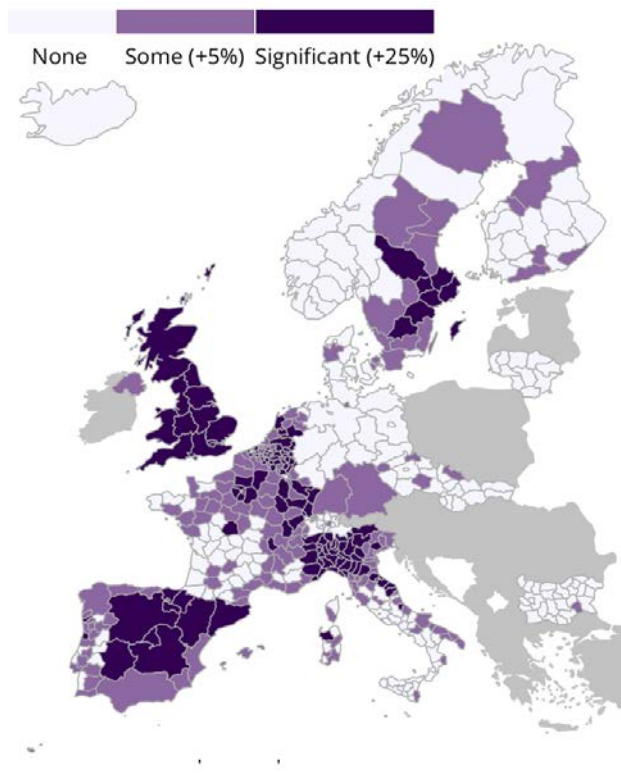
### Strengthen horizontal and vertical partnerships

The coronavirus crisis has shone a spotlight on the various organisations that play an important role in crisis situations or will play one in the aftermath of the crisis. We should therefore integrate them in an updated mapping of governmental organisations and start cooperating or reinforce existing relations with them. The case of the ECDC has underlined the value of agencies in terms of providing expert support and detailed data. Establishing partnerships with some key European and national agencies has the potential to give new value to often underused resources. Simultaneously, established partnerships with institutions such as the EIB, ECB, ESM and ECA deserve to be strengthened.

In the interest of the EU's democratic accountability, even more attention should be paid to the work on and with national parliaments. The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), as well as Parliament's Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union's (DG IPOL) Economic Governance Support Unit have already engaged on this path during the crisis by organising virtual meetings with the research services and administrations of national parliaments, to share experiences and best practice. In June 2020, the EPRS launched a new series of publications, examining how each national parliament processes, scrutinises and engages with EU legislation.<sup>19</sup> Linked to the rotating presidencies of the Council, the series reflects the growing importance of the parliamentary dimension of EU presidencies and opens new ways of interaction and sharing information.

The regional and local levels merit attention in line with the expectations and role attributed to them. The European Committee of the Regions has to play a central role in nurturing links between these levels and the European level. In this regard, its recent [RegHub](#) and with [CALRE](#) pilot projects take a step in the right direction and should be transformed into fully fledged mechanisms that feed

Figure 2: Excess deaths by region, from the start of the pandemic to late June 2020



Source: Eurostat, Destatis, ONS, NRS, NISRA, IRCIII, CBS

into EU policy-making. This also requires closely involving the European Parliament in these instruments.

The systematic approach to linking the levels, which we outlined in the first part of this paper, was developed and tested by EPRS in 2018-19 and confirmed by the crisis. The linking the levels ambition thus needs to be upgraded and prioritised at the EU level, including for example by the European Parliament signing memoranda of understanding with key partner organisations. This can further strengthen vertical partnerships in the EU.

## Digital linking and hybrid relations

The coronavirus outbreak has pushed us to quickly adopt different habits. Digital communication and media have transformed our professional and private interactions. The European Commission's June 2020 [public consultation](#) 'to ensure that its forthcoming new digital education action plan will reflect the EU's education and training experience during the coronavirus crisis' is a good illustration of the consequences of the crisis on our relationship with technology.

The more natural and systematic use of digital tools across the EU, as a consequence of the crisis, could aid in the expansion of the Parliament's Linking the Level Unit's network and reduce inequality between affiliate organisations, due to their different resources and representation capacity in Brussels. The EU level should use this opportunity and invest in digital linking to virtually connect with partners across the EU.

Reinforcing such digital linking would translate into more digital and hybrid meetings, including formal and informal exchanges, for example through the organisation of 'digital away days' or 'virtual retreats'. These would offer significant benefits in terms of reducing travel costs for all participants and allowing colleagues from across the EU to participate in the sessions specifically related to their work, therefore saving their valuable time.

Nevertheless, digital linking does not imply the end of face-to-face meetings. To the contrary, our experience shows that physical links are very important in establishing relationships – especially when meeting for the first time. This would in practice lead to hybrid relations, with both personal and digital dimensions occurring simultaneously. An example would be a yearly exchange on the Commission work programme, which could take place in the European Parliament, with partners present both in person and online.

In addition to hybrid relations, the European Parliament could significantly benefit from developing digital tools to automatically alert Members and staff of relevant input from partners on all levels of EU governance. A current EPRS pilot project to build EPRS digital capacity for data analysis of partners' positions would provide precisely such an instrument. It should lead to a better EU level understanding of partners' work, priorities, positions and expertise, as stated on partners' official websites and public social media channels.

Finally, building an attractive, dynamic and user-friendly platform where GOs can interact with EU institutions, as well as with each other, would help grow a community able to swiftly respond and contribute to EU policies. Developing such an electronic platform that would also allow to collect, store and organise relevant contributions from partners is another pilot project currently being developed by EPRS, in cooperation with Parliament's Directorate-General for Communications.

## Looking ahead

Despite early reports on the situation in China and calls alerting to the risk of a possible global pandemic, the sentiment of the abruptness of the onset of the coronavirus crisis in Europe is something to try to avoid, and indeed prevent from happening again in the future. The emergency situations that followed and unpreparedness in some aspects have underlined how essential it is to be ahead of the curve and have well-functioning early warning systems to better respond to potential future crises. These systems should benefit from the input provided by the dense network of partners and be equipped with mechanisms ensuring appropriate actions are taken when necessary.



More generally, inter-institutional cooperation and cross-level cooperation regarding risks and capacities gaps should be developed. This would inform the EU institutions and Member States as to where action and capacities are needed and enable them to act more swiftly. In a [resolution](#) on the EU's public health strategy post-coronavirus, adopted in July 2020, the European Parliament called on the Member States to urgently carry out 'stress tests' of their health systems to identify weaknesses and verify that they are prepared for possible future crises, and asked the European Commission to coordinate this work. At the administrative level, the example of the European Parliament's inter-DG working team on risks and capacities gap analysis can provide a source of inspiration. Flagship issues involving all levels of governance, such as projects related to climate change and the environment, have the capacity to galvanise energies and trigger a common effort.

Finally, to be in a better position to anticipate events, foresight work should be reinforced. Stronger internal foresight capacities, especially through inter-institutional cooperation and closer involvement of policy-makers, would be a strategic choice enabling to put the EU level at the forefront of crisis management. The explicit inclusion of foresight in the portfolio of Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič is a recognition of the role this discipline is set to play. The existing [European Strategy and Policy Analysis System](#) (ESPAS) already provides a framework for cooperation and consultation at administrative level on foresight between the EU institutions. The European Parliament and the European Commission are cooperating well with the Council and the European External Action Service to make a good use of the existing framework. The recent expansion of the ESPAS process to include the EESC, COR, EIB, ECA and EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) – all of which have a role to play in determining and assessing the medium- and long-term trends the EU might face – is most encouraging.

## Conference on the Future of Europe: A historic opportunity

Many of the practical implications outlined could be fostered and accelerated by the forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe. In the midst of the (consequences of the) coronavirus crisis, this conference represents a historic opportunity for the EU to consult and engage with national, regional and local communities. Now planned to start in the autumn of 2020 and last until the summer of 2022, the Conference can help develop a (permanent) structured dialogue with the governmental organisations closest to the citizens that have been at the forefront of the response to the crisis, especially regarding the implementation of various policies.

First of all, the conference should involve all levels of the EU's multilevel governance structure. The European Parliament [resolution](#) of 15 January 2020 stresses that 'the involvement of citizens, organised civil society and a range of stakeholders at European, national, regional and local level should be the key element of this innovative and original process'. The process to reach out to and include input from various actors belonging to different levels will in itself be a fundamental measure of success of the conference. The Parliament's Linking the Levels Unit's work of mapping governmental organisations from different levels and proposed ways to reach out to them could therefore be useful to enhance EU level dialogue with relevant actors.

Furthermore, how the different actors participate has to be well thought-out and designed. Over the last decades, multiple representative and deliberative processes have been developed and tried out to involve citizens more directly in decision-making, from large online consultations to assemblies composed by randomly selected citizens.<sup>20</sup> Most have been developed at the local and regional levels, and lessons can be drawn from these experiences. A recent OECD report, '[Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions](#)', sets out good practice for deliberative processes, such as ensuring easy-to-find information about the process or ensuring the public commitment of the commissioning authority to act upon recommendations in a timely manner. Using a systemic approach, such as that of the Linking the Levels Unit, could also help determine the appropriate strategy and develop sustainable two-way interactions.

The European Parliament's resolution of January 2020 also specified that the 'most efficient, innovative and appropriate platforms, including online tools should be used to reach all parts of the EU.' The current crisis certainly provides a window of opportunity, due to citizens' greater digital awareness,

and the digital linking and hybrid relations outlined above can help inform this discussion. Digital tools can be employed to overcome the ongoing uncertainties related to in-person meetings. An online platform to interactively link communities of stakeholders would serve as a useful facilitator and provide a good way to gather input, provided it is multilingual and user-friendly. It would have to be supported by dynamic and innovative digital engagement, which will help to mobilise young people especially. Several of the innovative digital parliamentary projects by the European Parliament outlined could both be useful for the Conference and benefit from it for their development.

The Conference on the Future of Europe offers a historic and unprecedented opportunity for an inclusive and open debate across Europe on EU's future priorities and the search for concrete solutions. In doing so, it must envisage building a sustainable system to take the expertise and knowledge of governmental and non-governmental actors across the EU into account. When it succeeds, our Union will emerge from this crisis stronger and better inter-connected.

## Potential initiatives<sup>21</sup>

	Project	Likely lead actor	What should be done?	
<b>Strengthen horizontal and vertical partnerships</b>				
1	Strengthen partnerships with ECB, EIB, ESM, ECA, and ECDC.	EP + EC + Council + ECB + EIB + ESM + ECA + ECDC	Build on existing contacts and inter-institutional working groups, to establish better systemic links between European institutions that will be involved in the Covid-19 crisis recovery, such as the ECB, the EIB, the ESM, the ECA, and the ECDC.	
2	Establish systematic partnerships with national and regional (health) agencies	EP + EC + Council + National and Regional Agencies	Adapt the NATIONAL and REGIONAL LEVEL governmental organisations' partnerships, to include the national and regional (health) agencies.	
3	Sign memoranda of understanding to systematise partnerships	EP	Upgrade and priorities the linking the levels ambition in the European Parliament with memoranda of understanding signed with key partner organisations to lock-in cooperation and strengthen the joint inter-institutional work with regions and cities.	
4	Systematic feedback loops from the regional level	COR + EC + EP	Develop timely and systematic feedback mechanisms, involving the EP, providing assessments of EU policies and input on EU initiatives from the regional level, including from regional parliaments with legislative powers (alike RegHub and COR-CALRE pilot projects).	
5	Develop even deeper relations with national and regional parliaments	EC + EP	Strong political dialogue and cooperation between parliaments from all levels to be reinforced by partnerships at administrative level to ensure active channels of communication and systematic exchanges (including through virtual meetings) and increase understanding about national and regional parliaments' work on EU affairs.	
6	Linking the Levels WORKING GROUP	EP + EC + Council + COR + EESC + ECA + ECB + EIB	Coordinate the linking between key partner organisations on all levels by regular consultations on relevant policy topics and sharing of expertise; involving EP, EC, Council, COR, EESC, ECA, ECB, EIB as well as CALRE, CEMR, Eurocities, ELAN, and CCRN.	
7	'What Europe does for me' in the coronavirus crisis	EC or EP	Build on the successful EPRS website 'What Europe does for me' to track the recovery spending projects and feature short and easy-to-read notes about the	

			concrete impact of the EU recovery funds on regions and cities; social groups and citizens.	
8	Conference on the Future of Europe	EP + EC + Council	Make the best of the historic opportunity to consult and engage with national, regional and local communities to build a stronger Union together – with the involvement of EP liaison offices and Europe Direct Information Centres.	
<b>Increase EU capacity to act</b>				
9	<a href="#">European Health Union</a>	EP + EC + Council	Endow the EU with stronger competence in the area of health, including setting common minimum standards for quality healthcare, stress test Member States' healthcare systems to identify weaknesses and verify that they are prepared for future pandemics.	
10	European (health) crisis management instrument	EP + EC + Council	Create a European health response mechanism to respond to all types of health crises through better coordination and management of the strategic reserve of medicines and medical equipment. Envisage to replicate this model to manage other types of crises.	
11	Interinstitutional foresight capacities and early warning systems	EC + EP + Council + EEAS + EESC + COR + EIB + EUISS + ECB + ECA	Reinforce foresight capacities (ESPAS+) through interinstitutional cooperation (with additional actors) and closer involvement of policy-makers. Ensure well-functioning interinstitutional early warning systems, benefiting from input provided by network of partners and equipped with mechanisms so appropriate actions can be taken, when necessary.	
12	360° online platform of solidarity and exchange of best practices	EC	Develop an online platform on the EU level to support good initiatives observed at different levels of government and encourage a cooperative attitude during crisis situations.	
13	Horizontal and vertical cooperation on risks and capacities gaps	EC + EC + Council + NPs + Regions	Set up interinstitutional and cross-levels cooperation on risks and capacity gaps (including through 'stress tests') to identify where actions and capacities are needed for each level.	
14	EU-wide remote committee meetings and voting technology	EP + national and regional parliaments	Sharing of technology for remote committee meetings and voting between parliaments to keep democracy on all levels alive and active during crises.	
<b>Digital and hybrid linking the levels</b>				
15	Digital or hybrid relations	EC + EP	Seize the opportunity to employ telework-tested video conferencing and engage with a wider array of actors in their own local communities, via digital or hybrid exchanges.	
16	Digital capacity to gather input and better understand partners	EC + EP	Develop digital capacity to gather partners' input and analytical tools to understand their interests, priorities and positions.	
17	Platform for interactive communication with partners on all levels	EC + EP	Upgrading, maintaining and promoting an attractive, interactive, and mutually beneficial electronic platform to collect relevant contributions from partners.	

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This part of the paper summarises and builds on the existing paper '[Linking the Levels of the Union](#)', prepared for the European Parliament's Management Innovation Day, January 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> According to the Parlemeter for 2019, [Heeding the call beyond the vote. A stronger parliament to listen to citizens voices](#), 49 % of Europeans believe that their voice counts in the EU, while 46 % consider this not to be the case.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Fitzgerald and J. Wolak, '[The roots of trust in local government in western Europe](#)', *International Political Science Review*, 37(1), 2016, p. 130–146.
- <sup>4</sup> Special Eurobarometer 307, 'The role and impact of local and regional authorities within the EU', European Committee of the Regions and European Commission, February 2009.
- <sup>5</sup> S. Fabbrini and U. Puetter, 'Integration without supranationalisation: Studying the lead roles of the European Council and the Council in post-Lisbon EU politics', *Journal of European Integration*, 38/5, 2015, p. 492.
- <sup>6</sup> European Committee of the Regions, '[A new treaty: a new role for regions and local authorities](#)', 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> The Linking the Levels pilot project 2018-2020 built partnerships with a sample of organisations at each level of governance to determine the most relevant partners and mutually beneficial approach. This *in persona* project, completed by a broader online outreach, confirmed partners' interest and willingness to engage with the European Parliament.
- <sup>8</sup> [Statement](#) by Angela Merkel to the Bundestag, 18 June 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> See Eurofound [survey](#) conducted in April 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> J. Greubel, '[Governing in times of social distancing: The effects of COVID-19 on EU decision-making](#)', Commentary, EPC, April 2020.
- <sup>11</sup> R. Alter, 'Regional Governance: An Opportunity for Regional Organizations?' in World Economic Forum, '[Challenges and Opportunities in the Post-COVID-19 World](#)', Insight report, May 2020, p. 14.
- <sup>12</sup> See the [Joint statement of the Members of the European Council](#), 26 March 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> D. Sassoli, '[Speech of President Sassoli on the occasion of Europe Day, 9 May](#)', 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> During the 9 July 2020 European Parliament plenary debate with Health Commissioner Stella Kyriakides and the Council, Members called for a [stronger EU role in the area of health](#). A [public opinion survey](#) released the same month showed that 68 % of EU citizens think that the EU should have more competences to deal with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
- <sup>15</sup> EPRS has published a series of briefings on the 'States of emergency in response to the coronavirus crisis', analysing the situation in all Member States: [No 1](#), [No 2](#), [No 3](#), [No 4](#).
- <sup>16</sup> This trend was also identified by Klaus Welle, Secretary General of the European Parliament, in his May 2016 [speech](#) at the LUISS University, as well as in the ESPAS Report '[Preparing Europe for the next twenty-five years](#)', May 2016.
- <sup>17</sup> Infographic from C. Guibourg, [A fraction of European regions account for a majority of covid deaths](#), 24 June 2020.
- <sup>18</sup> To give a few examples: food supplies for children or people in need provided by the [city of Madrid](#), the [city of Nantes](#) or [Finnish cities](#); support for elderly and children organised by the [city of Helsinki](#) or [Tallinn](#); mobility initiatives observed in [Budapest](#), [Zagreb](#), and [Rome](#); financial support to the local economy provided by [Lille](#), [Brno](#), or others listed in this [note from Eurocities](#); and facilitation of dialogue between stranded citizens by the [city of Rennes](#).
- <sup>19</sup> See Y.-S. Rittelmeyer, K. Eisele and K. Žumer, '[The German Parliament and EU affairs](#)', EPRS, European Parliament, 2020.
- <sup>20</sup> The OECD report '[Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions](#)', June 2020, looked at 289 case studies taking place from 1986 to 2019 in four categories: informed citizen recommendations on policy questions, citizen opinion on policy questions, informed citizen evaluation of ballot measures, and permanent representative deliberative models; see especially part 5 of the report. The EPRS publication '[The practice of democracy A selection of civic engagement initiatives](#)', G. Sgueo, EPRS, European Parliament, June 2020, explored various participatory initiatives run by local, national and supranational administrations.
- <sup>21</sup> Further concrete ideas for action can be found in the '[Linking the Levels of the Union](#)' paper (op. cit.) end table.

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