

Engaging citizens in a debate on Europe: local dialogues "Reflecting on Europe"

9th November 2017, Brussels

Speakers

CoR members: Jelena Drenjanin (Member of Huddinge Municipal Council, SE/EPP), Marco Dus (Member of Vittorio Veneto Municipal Council, Province of Treviso, IT/PES), Apostolos Tzitzikostas (Head of the Region of Central Macedonia, GR/EPP), Luc Van Den Brande (Special Adviser of the President Jean-Claude Juncker for the outreach towards citizens, BE/EPP).

Representatives of the EU institutions and local partners: Joachim Ott (EC - European Commission, DG COMM, Head of Unit "Citizens Dialogues"), Gabriele Bischoff (Member of the EESC - European Economic and Social Committee, the German Trade Union Confederation - DGB and special adviser on European policy issues), Marycruz Arcos (Director of EDIC - European Direct Information Centre in Seville), Michele Cercone (CoR - European Committee of the Regions, Head of Unit "Events") and Ginevra Del Vecchio (CoR, *Reflecting on Europe* Campaign Manager).

Moderator: Dan Carbutaru, Director Calea Europeana

The main goal of this workshop was to discuss ways to effectively engage citizens in local dialogues about the EU. In particular, it aimed at sharing and reviewing experiences of CoR members, local and regional partners, and the EU institutions holding similar events, as well as exploring and identifying good practices for citizens' participation initiatives.

Michele Cercone introduced the session by outlining the *Reflecting on Europe* campaign whose aim is to provide a platform for citizens at the local and regional level to take part in the ongoing debate on the future of the EU. It is an initiative created in cooperation with CoR members whose engagement lies at the heart of the CoR efforts to reach out to citizens across Europe. As trusted and elected politicians being close to and able to connect with local communities, CoR members are the main ambassadors of the campaign. In terms of timeline, it was launched in 2016 with the aim of contributing to the respective CoR opinion in October 2018 and it will further continue in view of the EP (European Parliaments') elections in 2019. The local dimension and bottom-up approach of this initiative enable citizens to not only share their concerns and views, but also to collect their feedback. To this end, a comprehensive set of tools has been developed, with an [online survey](#) and a mobile app "Have your say on Europe" as the main feedback gathering mechanisms thanks to which the CoR has already collected almost 10 000 responses. In addition, there is a dedicated survey results map and a local events map, and an update is also sent to those citizens who are interested in being informed about how the CoR represents their opinions.

The *Reflecting on Europe* initiative was subsequently presented in more detail by **Ginevra Del Vecchio**. Since the beginning of the campaign until the end of 2017, about 140 local events/citizens' debates will have been organised, in partnership with CoR members and local and regional partners, in 19 EU countries involving 150 CoR members and reaching to around 20 000 citizens. The number of local debates will increase in the future given the positive response of regions, cities and CoR members to this political call. While audience and format of debates can differ from one event to another, the majority of these dialogues target youth. Based on the experiences to date, a few good practices have been identified in this regard. Namely, a successful citizens' debate requires

- a strong political commitment from CoR members and the city, as well as a partnership with the other EU institutions, national associations of municipalities, etc.;
- a concept and communication adequately adapted to fit both the EU and local context;
- sensible argumentation and a narrative that can inspire;
- use of social media platforms;

- and an enhanced cooperation with other EU institutions to create a better coordinated and participatory communication approach.

Jelena Drenjanin, the first speaker, explained how Huddinge - the second largest municipality in the Stockholm region - involves its citizens in town affairs of their direct interest through local debates, democracy forums and the European Council of Democracy Week. The *Reflecting on Europe* initiative in this context provides an opportunity to not only debate local issues, but also EU affairs and values. Recent developments such as Brexit, the transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based society and economy, migration, human capital, employment and the importance of education were discussed during a local event in Huddinge organized under the umbrella of the above-mentioned CoR initiative. Jelena Drenjanin concluded that this kind of dialogues represent a good platform to engage citizens in EU-related matters.

Marco Dus, gave an insight into a local community project in Vittorio Veneto in Northeast Italy. The initiative, which takes the form of an annual public event on Europe, involves high-school students who are invited to illustrate, in a creative way through comic strips, poems and videos, the impact of EU policies on the daily life of citizens. For example, the event that took place in May was combined with a citizens' dialogue in which topics such as European identity, rights stemming from European citizenship, opportunities for young people, languages, immigration and economic issues were discussed. The event's results proved encouraging and serve as a catalyst for similar activities in different European countries that can empower the youngest generation as European ambassadors on the ground.

Apostolos Tzitzikostas, Head of the Central Macedonia Region in Greece, shared his experience with a citizens' debate held in Thessaloniki. The event which gathered many Greek citizens showing that people still believe in the EU project, focused on the benefits of the ESIF (European Structural Investment Funds) and the impact the EU has on citizens' lives. Apostolos Tzitzikostas emphasized that people should be given the opportunity to be heard through regular and sustained dialogues in view of the challenges facing Europe today such as lack of social cohesion, unemployment, racism or populism. This is particularly important as the EU draws its legitimacy from the support of its citizens. In conclusion, regional and local authorities are best placed to provide the platform for open discussions with the society and address the democratic deficit. Europe, now more than ever, needs its citizens and vice versa. The comparative advantage of each region and cooperation with social partners should be explored to implement targeted and effective programmes and actions, as well as achieve tangible results.

The fourth speaker, **Luc Van Den Brande**, focused on his report on outreach to citizens. Public trust is essential for community engagement and governance. It is crucial nowadays that people have the feeling that they are part of the EU project, and democratic citizenship and open government are the means to attain this. In terms of participatory democracy, an intertwined 3D approach that combines the following elements is therefore needed: (i) citizens' focused and citizens' owned Europe, as well as a position based on EU values, (ii) a project in which the rule of law, human rights and democracy are indispensable to protect, empower and defend people and (iii) a multi-level citizenship and multi-level 'actorship'. More Europeanization is thus only possible with more democratization while the EU should directly connect with the regional and local level of government that plays a key role as intermediary in this process. Citizens' empowerment also requires a systemic use of new communication technologies. Particularly important is to improve the quality of communication between 'the sender and receiver' by recognizing citizens' aspirations and the social reality, and adapting the message accordingly. While focus on youth should remain a priority, the intergenerational relationship needs to be preserved. In summary, to boost citizens' engagement (i) existing Treaties should be fully explored

as they offer an array of possibilities to reconnect with citizens (e.g. the European citizens' initiative, vertical and horizontal dialogues), (ii) focus should be on how the EU institutions can jointly act in this context, (iii) communication methods should be revamped, and (iv) actions should be taken together with citizens.

Joachim Ott spoke about the role of the EC citizens' dialogues which were initiated as a response to the crisis with the aim to hear and address citizens' concerns. These dialogues take the form of public, open and inclusive events in the EU regions and cities with the participation of Commissioners and in conjunction with political milestones and local partners, whenever possible. The 2017 has been a turning point as more and more pro-European civil society groups get involved showing that we all bear the responsibility in the democratization process.

Gabriele Bischoff, the sixth speaker, explained how the EESC engages in a dialogue with citizens. One way is through the organization of 27 citizens' debates on the future of Europe in all EU Member States (except the UK). Each of these events included representatives of employers' groups, trade unions and civil society organizations that served as multipliers by reaching out to their constituencies. What is particularly important is to address issues (e.g. unemployment, social situation) of direct people's concerns and connect to those not interested in the EU affairs. While local politicians will continue to play a key role in this process, it is necessary to include social partners like welfare and youth organizations that have the trust of their constituencies.

The last speaker, **Marycruz Arcos** shared her experience from her work at the EDIC in Seville. The EU should reach out to people by leveraging its network of local partners like Mayors who are close to local communities and are able to effectively engage with them about the EU values and ideas. As the EU is often perceived as distant, these types of actions are needed to increase interest in EU affairs.

Q&A discussion - key messages:

- To better understand the functioning of the EU, there is a need for civic education in Europe with educational programmes at all levels starting from elementary schools.
- During the discussion, it was emphasized that deliberative and participatory democracies have to complement and strengthen representative democracy and not be used as a substitute. Emmanuel Macron's call for democratic conventions to rebuild Europe represents a step in the right direction and more focus is needed on the trans-regional level by not only consulting but also empowering citizens. The outcome of such conventions should be publicly discussed at the EP with a view to attaining concrete policy goals and proposals.
- City participation and open government should be further encouraged as a way of policy-making while local events can be used as opportunities to reduce the communication gap by bringing together the EU institutions' representatives and citizens.
- Consultations and reflection papers in the context of the ongoing discussion on the future of Europe should embrace a citizens' dimension to take into account their perspectives (e.g. Social Europe, Young people's Europe, anti- Europe).
- Citizens' feedback from local debates will feed into the respective opinions of the EESC and the CoR with the aim to inject this contribution into the debate on the EU project.