



## **Let's Talk About Europe** **21<sup>st</sup> October 2016**

**Speakers:** Tanya Hristova (Mayor of Gabrovo and Member of the European Committee of the Regions, Bulgaria), Andres Jaadla (Member of Rakvere City Council and Member of the European Committee of the Regions, Estonia), Ursula Serafin (Director of Maison de l'Europe, Paris) and Sjerp Van der Vaart (European Parliament's DG Communication)

**Moderator:** Joachim Ott (Head of Unit for Citizens' Dialogues, DG Communication)

Town-hall style debates of politicians with citizens are increasingly gaining the attention of local communities and media. The heart of the effort is to present and communicate the European agenda, listen to ideas, and engage in active dialogue on Europe. This workshop presented the experience of taking the EU to cities and regions through citizen dialogues and local events, with a view to exploring effective approaches to communicating on Europe with the public at large.

The session opened with the first speaker, **Tanya Hristova**, who emphasised that Europe should support innovation and continue to be a project for peace. She presented a local event that had been organised in her constituency, a CoR initiative called 'Let's Talk About Europe!'. She described her city of Gabrovo in Bulgaria as one with an industrial profile and high absorption of EU funds. The event gathered participants from a wide range of backgrounds to look for solutions to societal problems. A number of challenges facing Europe's future were also discussed, ranging from immigration and Brexit to the future of cohesion policy, territorial investment and initiatives for smart education.

The main idea arising from this discussion was that cohesion policy, job creation and innovation should continue to be supported at the regional, national and European level. The importance of human capital was also stressed, especially in terms of how education can lead to investment. Ms Hristova reminded participants again that the EU project was a project for peace, and that the EU should therefore be the heart and core of stability which guarantees peace worldwide. Bureaucracy should be decreased in favour of building bridges between communities.

The second speaker, **Andres Jaadla**, stressed the importance of everyone being active and creating their own positive news. This means taking part in EU events and EU competitions as well as local campaigns and events. He introduced the concept of a 'crazy city', which combines dance and music festivals with environment and climate conventions, and organised activities for citizens. He also spoke about green energy and smart city initiatives which had been facilitated in Rakvere by European funding. Partnerships with groups like the Covenant of Mayors and European Green Week also allow cities to cooperate and share their experiences.

Mr Jaadla called on the audience to work together towards a common goal, and that organising local events can be one way of doing this. He gave the example of the 'Let's Talk About Europe' citizens' dialogue, held in Rakvere in June 2016 in cooperation with the CoR. Involving local media is also crucial, as is building a network of regions and EU ambassadors. By starting locally we can achieve better public awareness of the European Union, keeping in mind that every big change can start on a small scale.

The next speaker was **Ursula Serafin**, who opened her intervention with a short video about the European Commission's work in support of open dialogues with citizens and exchange of views with decision makers. As examples, she described the debates organised in Paris, bringing together around 200 participants and using social media and live-streaming to promote the event. Ms Serafin admitted that so far these projects have mostly used the traditional model of debate, but she did not necessarily think that recent attempts to 'face lift' the debate model had actually made significant changes. She noted that in order to encourage people to love Europe, we must invite people that can speak engagingly about Europe. The EU is a human project based on common values. Leading on from this, she stressed the importance of dialogue, as the EU was created for all of its citizens.

Finally, **Sjerp Van der Vaart** began his intervention by rejecting political communication entirely, stating that citizens perceive institutional communication as biased propaganda. It is important for communicators to realise that citizens care mostly about their everyday problems, and they often see the EU as a source of these problems. As a result, public institutions must find new ways to engage with citizens. He also offered a couple of ways to approach this issue. First, citizens should be encouraged to view the EU as a fact. Second, since democracy is fundamentally about choice, citizens must be engaged in this aspect.

Mr Van der Vaart went further to stress the key role of education and the need for young people to learn how the EU functions. He also proposed giving people a sense of ownership by showing how they can participate in decision-making, in particular as decisions on issues such as migration, employment and environment have a real effect on people's lives.

**Joachim Ott** closed the debate by summarising the main ideas that had arisen. Buy-in from politicians is crucial, and citizens must be engaged and listened to. He finished by reminding the audience that Europe must be seen as part of the solution, not part of the problem.