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(9) Citizens' consultations: image campaign or effective democracy tool?

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Speakers: Joachim Ott (Head of the Citizens Dialogues Unit, European Commission), Regina Kothmayr (Head of the Task Force of the 2018 Austrian Presidency), Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul (Citizens' Consultations, Ministry for European Affairs, France), Dr Anja Trebes (Federal Press Office, Citizens' Consultations, Germany), Claudia Chwalisz (Head of work on the future of democracy at the Open Government Unit, OECD), Federico Guerrieri, (#Cities4Europe campaign manager, Eurocities)

Moderator: Jiri Buriánek, Secretary-General, European Committee of the Regions

The main goal of this workshop was to discuss the results of the various citizens' consultations organised by the EU institutions and Member States and to examine how they can feed into policy-making. The debate brought together organisers and experts on democratic participation to discuss whether this new 'trend' could be considered a tool for increasing the democratic organisation of a political system or whether it was more an image campaign for the organisers that produced little effect.

The Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and moderator of the workshop, **Jiri Buriánek**, opened the session with an overview of the citizens' dialogues conducted by the CoR across the EU, the aim of which was to involve citizens in the debate on the future of Europe. The CoR, which represents regions and cities, has had a considerable impact. Responding to a request from the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, in 2016, it has held more than 180 debates initiated by 176 of its members in 30 European countries. Under the CoR's Reflecting on Europe campaign, renamed Future of Europe in October 2018, the main mechanism for gathering feedback has been the online Have Your Say on Europe survey/mobile app, which has received more than 22 000 replies. Based on the feedback coming from the local debates and the online survey, the Committee published the Final Report Reflecting on Europe-How Europe is perceived by people in regions and cities and the opinion on Reflecting on Europe: the voice of local and regional authorities to rebuild trust in the European Union.

However, the main challenge is to understand how to harness the potential of these citizens' consultations and make them an effective tool in the European decision-making process beyond the European elections.

Joachim Ott was the first to address the question of whether citizens' consultations constitute a tool for participatory democracy or a communication tool. Over 1000 citizens' dialogues have been organised across



Europe. He argued that based on the European Commission's experience in organising these debates since 2016, citizens' consultations had been viewed as a communication tool for explaining political priorities and policy-making at the Commission. However, they also had the potential to become a tool for supporting policy work. The European Commission was therefore launching an improved participatory format, in order to test how more participatory elements could be included in European governance.

Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, who is responsible for the citizens' consultation process in France, described the tool as an experiment in participatory democracy. She argued that it could potentially be improved in the future. She highlighted three main features of the project: pluralism, inclusivity and openness to all citizens. Each EU Member State had decided on a different methodology and agreed to report on the participatory exercise to the European Council by mid-December 2018. A common European report, 27 Member State reports, and a report based on the online consultations would be presented.

Dr Anja Trebes, who is in charge of the German citizens' dialogues, elaborated on the citizens' consultations' potential as an additional means of organising political will, given that people seemed to have lost their trust in political parties. She made three main points: (1) dialogues needed to be honest; (2) the feedback from the participatory exercise had to fit the EU system; and (3) the representative element of the full range of citizens' opinions had to be improved.

Regina Kothmayr, representative of the Austrian Presidency, explained how citizens' involvement in participatory democracy depended on their interest in EU politics. She claimed that the citizens' consultations were not just an image campaign; they were about engaging in dialogue with people and hearing what they had to say. The aim was to include citizens' voices in policy work. Austria had been holding participatory debates as part of the Austrian Presidency of the European Council and had also launched an online survey. The results of this exercise had been positive and more than 4000 people had taken part in the consultation. The age groups of the respondents and the main issues of concern would be presented in a final report, supporting the analysis of the future of the project.

Claudia Chwalisz highlighted a number of other critical elements. Despite the positive approach and results, there was still room for improvement. Some critics had argued that it was more a listening exercise than a tool for participatory democracy. Others points to be considered in the future included: (1) the lack of a transparent methodology for analysing the results and (2) the way in which citizen engagement would be taken into consideration. It was also difficult to compare the results coming from different countries because of the lack of a common approach. There was no transparent methodology involving the different sections of society. Finally, the focus had been on numbers and not on who had participated in the exercise. She therefore concluded that citizen involvement lacked transparency and needed to be evaluated more effectively.

Federico Guerrieri focused on the importance of reaching citizens at the local level. EuroCities had launched the *Cities for Europe – Europe for citizens* campaign and more than 300 local events had been organised. The main outcome of the campaign was the adoption of the EuroCities Declaration on Citizens' Engagement, which committed local governments to building a more positive future that focused on citizens. These consultations were therefore not a communication exercise but an attempt to improve EU politics and rebuild citizens' trust in the European Union.

During the debate it became clear that future dialogues needed to produce meaningful results and have an impact for them to be credible and for the results to be reflected in policy. The strategy should include a social media dimension, reaching people beyond the EU bubble. Indeed, both the project and the EU needed to go beyond their comfort zones, speaking with one voice and cooperating at institutional level.

In the future, citizens' consultations should include the following: a clear purpose for engagement, a clear impact, a mechanism for collecting feedback, bipartisan backing, a media strategy, accountability and transparency. The main aim was to improve citizens' trust in politics and institutions, particularly Eurosceptics, and to consult and involve the local level.

Citizens' consultations have the potential to increase democracy and become a permanent link with citizens. Representative democracy sometimes needs to be strengthened, not replaced. Some of the examples to follow are the "Irish assembly", the Polish citizens' assemblies and the Madrid "consul".

The key take-away message from the session was: **"Listening is not enough. We need to take citizens' dialogue to the next level: it should become a truly participatory and democratic exercise involving all levels of society"**.