



EuroPCom session report

What's next for citizens' consultations?

Friday, 8 November, 09h15 – 10h45

Speakers: **Doreen Grove**, Head of Open Government in the Scottish Government, Scotland; **Karine Badr**, Analyst at the OECD, France; **Christophe Rouillon**, Mayor of Coulaines and President of the PES Group in the European Committee of the Regions

Moderator: **Dr Anja Trebes**, Head of Unit for Communicating Europe, Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, Germany

In recent years, institutions and governments at all levels have involved citizens more frequently in participatory processes, with the aim of engaging them in their decision making. Citizens' consultations in particular, where ordinary people are entrusted with delivering policy recommendations on specific issues, are trending all over the world. Where is this development in participatory democracy going? Will there be a more permanent or coordinated approach to citizens' consultations? Come and enrich the debate with your experience and ideas!

The focus of this workshop was citizen involvement in decision-shaping and decision-making. Currently, the citizens' consultation process and structure are still lacking in methodology. For this reason, the panellists tried to offer solutions and improvements based on their own experiences.

Doreen Grove stated that the most important thing was to be sure that governments were listening to the public. **Ms Grove**, who works for the Scottish government, then provided an example related to a new system they had created whereby legislation and policies were developed by the citizens themselves. Two thousand people had helped to shape the new reforming government, acquiring a real voice in the decision-making process. To participate in these processes, people needed to be informed and have the right skills. Moreover, they needed to trust the movement for better engagement. For these reasons, **Ms Grove** insisted that more investment was required to train people and provide them with tools and techniques to improve their expertise. Only in this way could participatory democracy support representative democracy.

Karine Badr presented the four main challenges of citizens' consultations. Firstly, today's specific demographics were disproportionately represented: consultations usually involved well-educated adult males living in urban areas. The second challenge was the quality of the input, as most of the participatory processes designed to gauge public opinion turned into forums for the expression of personal grievances. Thirdly, citizens' consultations were still too focused on individuals: people were asked what they

personally think and not how to find collective agreement. The final challenge was related to the fact that citizens did not trust institutions because they did not feel that they were really shaping decisions.

Christophe Rouillon said that citizens' consultations needed to be properly structured and held regularly in order to succeed. Otherwise, as happened during *le grand débat national* held in France in January 2019, they would be hampered by a succession of personal claims where everyone talks about different issues, and would thus fail to meet the objective of strengthening democracy.

After the initial statements of the speakers, the debate continued with the audience, who brought up some further interesting angles. Civil society organisations were the only intermediaries that could put institutions and citizens in contact with each other; they needed to be trusted when organising participatory formats. They could get citizens to trust institutions by giving them a more visible role in legislative processes and by trying to rebalance the current system, which was more focused on the state level, and therefore did not promote the European community spirit. In this way, they would direct citizens to the EU institutions and rebuild the necessary confidence. Obviously, rebuilding this trust required time, experience and, especially, a clear idea of how citizens' consultations should be structured, with only a few topics being selected to prevent control of the topic and the discussion itself being lost.