



EuroPCOM 2015
Session 29 report
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Unconference: EU open policy-making

EuroPCOM 2015 concluded with an unconventional gathering. The series of conference-style workshops and open/plenary sessions ended with an "unconference" - a participant-driven forum on open policy-making in Europe, hosted by the [Democratic Society](#).

The agenda was created on the spot by the participants themselves. 15 sessions of 30 minutes each set in motion the exchange of ideas from every corner of the continent on a range of diverse topics and initiatives.

15 attendees claimed their 60 seconds to present an idea, a project, a concern, or a new initiative. Participants therefore had the opportunity to choose from among 15 topics running in parallel and arranged across three consecutive sessions. The only rule was that there were "no tourists" i.e. that everyone should participate and contribute with an argument, a suggestion, or even a personal experience.

Many of the sessions focused on improving citizens' involvement in the decision-making of policy-makers from diverse public institutions and international organisations. A call for ideas was opened by DG CONNECT, developers of the [Futurium](#) - an online platform supported by the European Commission, which offers tools and exercises on how to involve citizens in the Commission's decision-making process. The platform aims to enable citizens to participate in and co-create the digital future post-2020. In light of this, the Futurium facilitates the online sharing of policy proposals, particularly by ICT businesses, to create public support for the quickly-evolving digitalization of Europe. Even more so, it provides access to advice from specialists, most of these related to funding and legal matters.

A similar session focused on the same issue but with a different, more grass-roots approach. The session invited ideas for getting citizens involved from the bottom up, particularly by examining the experiences of social entrepreneurs from outside the EU. The DG DEVCO representative announced The European Year of Development and used EuroPCOM and the unconference as venues to reach out to communication officers and seek advice on how to bring citizens on board when pursuing the post-2015 development initiatives. A related, and probably the most playful session, promoted the EU card game "Come on Over". Usually referred to as the "quirky European game", this uses EU fun facts to offer players an interactive learning experience that ultimately stimulates greater interest and participation in the work of the EU Institutions.

The other sessions were dedicated to ways of improving the work of the EU and its institutions. Whether this related to access to justice, e.g. whom to appeal to when EU laws are broken; direct democracies, e.g. dissecting states into smaller administrative units for referendum purposes; telling organisations to reduce bureaucratic barriers; or facilitating mobility across



Schengen zones by removing "illegal" border controls via [SchengenWatch](#) - all these aimed to attract know-how from other attendees or simply raise awareness about an existing problem that could be addressed with joint action and innovative solutions.

The online communities' session brainstormed potential solutions. It reflected on the role of online communities in governance, and how this role could influence policy and improve the work of decision-making bodies. In a nutshell, it was talking about flashmobs - i.e. groups of people who are interested in a particular topic. The idea was to reward people who contributed towards a positive change in society. Online communities are conference-like communities, only outside of a conference. More than just participants, community members are stakeholders and membership requires year-round engagement.

An example of an online community is the [Smart Cities Stakeholder Platform](#) launched three years ago to promote energy efficiency and innovation in key urban sectors. The community agglomerates around specific action clusters depending on the issue in question. Working groups use the platform to put forward their ideas but also to schedule face-to-face meetings, brainstorm, write a policy and send it to the European Commission. Acknowledgement is public and incentivizes the membership to expand and tackle emerging issues.

An online community does not always need a website. Social media is a great way to create, manage, and motivate online communities. Among the attendees was a village mayor who administers a Facebook group of his villagers with more than 15 000 members. Here, the mayor gets daily updates on the needs of his electorate, polls on different initiatives, looks for feedback on implemented projects, and provides information about local opportunities. If things get out of hand when comments are not polite, there is always the option to block the individual in question or add a disclaimer. A mix of online and offline ways of publically and physically meeting to discuss the issues raised on social media can also motivate people to be more careful about what they communicate.

Another initiative to get people thinking about what they say publically is the [Factbar](#) - with the only distinction being that this puts politicians under the spotlight. This award-winning factchecking service was first launched to bring accuracy to the public election debate in Finland, within the framework of the European Elections of 2014. The project is already crowd-sourcing for funds and a workforce for the next European Elections in 2019. The aim is to increase scrutiny of both politicians and the media outside Finland, especially once they enter campaign periods. For this, the 2019 EP factcheck will crowdsource from among public servants, journalists and existing factcheckers (for example www.factcheck.org.eu based in Brussels).

Additional suggestions included using [Wikinews](#) as a source, especially because the content can be edited; involvement of university students as this promotes expertise and a critical approach to information; or drawing on the experience of the American e-democracy project: an (automatic) generation of a CV from the content posted by politicians on their social media accounts.

Last but not least, the question of how to improve EuroPCom and build up to an even better EuroPCom in 2016 was raised. A "wish list" for future topics at the conference was proposed.



This would make the audience more pro-active and better-prepared beforehand. One of the suggestions was a greater focus on in-house relationships and how to improve communication among EU institutions. In other words, how can we bridge the communication gap between politicians and administration? Or simply, how can we reach politicians? Alongside content, facilitation was considered important to ensure the smooth running of the workshops. For this, it would be necessary to brief the moderators well in advance. In terms of speakers, increased involvement of non-European speakers was proposed as there was a lot to learn about communication best-practices from outside the EU. Audience-wise, EuroPCOM traditionally brings together two communities: EU workers from Brussels and journalists from Member States (i.e. outside Brussels). Therefore, the question that arises is how to mix the two communities and enable them to learn more from each other? In fact, most attendees agreed that the Brussels environment was too formal. Maybe a EuroPCOM outside Brussels is not such a bad idea.