

Democracy at Stake - What Role for Participatory Policymaking?

Exclusive MP discussion at European Forum Alpbach – 26 August 2018
Outcomes Report

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ABOUT

In cooperation with the European Forum Alpbach, for the first time, the Mercator European Dialogue (MED) provided members of its network with the special opportunity to be selected for a scholarship to join the high-level political symposium of the forum, benefit from side-meetings exclusively designed for parliamentarians and connect to actors and innovators in the inspiring surroundings of the Austrian Alps.

The European Forum Alpbach and the MED share the same goal of creating dialogue across generational, ideological and political lines of division and thus invited members of parliament to explore the tension linked to the theme "Diversity and Resilience".

The exclusive Mercator European Dialogue discussion "Democracy at stake - What role for participatory policymaking?" offered MPs the opportunity to share first-hand information, discuss new concepts around participatory democracy, and share the developments from their country. How should national parliamentarians respond to new political developments and this rapidly changing environment? What can be ways of engaging a diverse set of citizens while remaining true to recognized channels of decision-making? Do these new ideas hold the potential to make democracies more resilient or are they destabilizing societies?

The conversation was preceded by two inputs from (1) Philippe Narval, recent author of a book on models for participatory democracy, and (2) Andrea Venzon and Colombe Cahen-Salvador, representatives from VOLT, a newly-formed European party. 10 Members of Parliament attended the meeting, representing voices from Austria, the UK, the Netherlands, Romania, Germany, Greece and Latvia.



TAKE-AWAYS FROM INPUTS

Why should policy-makers promote participatory democracy?

Philippe Narval pointed out that there are a number of benefits for policy-makers when using participatory formats. Participatory tools of citizen consultations:

- should not be understood as bringing in a competitive but rather a complementary element to politicians' daily work, providing wider input on a topic and increasing legitimacy.

Example: The story of former MP Axelle LeMaire (FR) who developed the first process for citizens to be involved in co-drafting the legislation for a digital law that is nowadays in place.

- are useful for debates around polarized, ideological issue areas where parliaments lack sufficient time to debate and find compromise. They further understanding of perspectives and can help develop a compromise that is resilient to the different sides of the political spectrum. They create room for personal encounters and can create new alliances between citizens and politics, fostering trust in democratic institutions.

Example: The story of citizen assemblies in Ireland over the issue of abortion.

What are the needs that transnational parties such as VOLT Europe are responding to?

Most established political parties are suffering under these new developments, given their rigid organizational structure, decision-making processes, and as a result of not providing for flexible enough solutions to respond to citizens' desire to participate and have their voice be heard.

As political debates are increasingly connected across countries, with issues mostly affecting more than just one Member State, political actors i.e. parties should seek ways to address the interconnectedness of debates in constructive ways.

Therefore, parties, whether established or new, should dare to reform and innovate, by (1) including participatory means in its deliberation and decision-making processes, (2) remaining local and approachable while (3) using the advantages of digital communication for its purposes.

MP DEBATES

During the conversations, MPs discussed the benefits, challenges and the best possible application of participatory tools, reflecting on their country's experiences and sharing best practices from their political career.

Citizen consultations - blessing or curse? Members of parliament debated the benefit of holding citizen consultations, exploring examples from Romania and the Netherlands where pilot projects had been unsuccessful and resulted in less citizen participation overall. "If we do it, we need to take it seriously", one MP noted.

Where does the money come from? As "it remains a medium- to long-term investment in terms of organization and money", participants emphasized the need to ask where some Member States should find the money to sponsor citizen engagement. It seemed evident to all participants that financial support for organizing and holding citizen consultations should best come from public, rather than neutral institutions. However, they wondered whether the EU would be willing to invest more in increasing citizen participation as a tool to foster dialogue within and across European Member States.

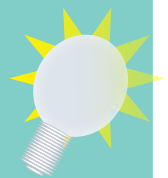
(Re)invest in personal relationships - Discussing the question how representatives can nowadays be more approachable to citizens, some participants argued in favor of investing more in personal relationships, for example by being present in one's constituency.

The need to share best practices from across Europe - Having heard about the successful co-drafting of legislation in France, participants acknowledged the need to engage more often with colleagues from other Member States to foster exchange on best practices and to harvest the benefit of successful participation projects.

"You can do it yourself." - Especially in bridging the growing polarization in societies, an MP from Austria noted that he initiated own gatherings between citizens and politicians from across parties in his constituency to discuss pressing problems. This has helped understanding on both sides and normalized exchange between groups with different views.

"Through the constituency system in the United Kingdom, it has always been part of my job as a parliamentarian to stay close to the needs of the people and in personal contact with local citizens from my constituency. This is not an innovative idea but one of the easiest ways to re-connect citizens and politics."

European Citizens' App



An Austrian MP raised the idea to create an application for European citizens that could inform about the latest EU legislation and opportunities for citizen participation and would at the same time gather and share public opinion on the most relevant issues at national and European level. This would allow citizens to be more in touch with politics in Europe and politicians to get an idea of citizens' perspectives in key policy areas.





Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting

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The King Baudouin Foundation's mission is to contribute to a better society. The Foundation is an actor for change and innovation, serving the public interest and increasing social cohesion in Belgium and Europe. We seek to maximize our impact by strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals. We also stimulate effective philanthropy by individuals and corporations. The Foundation's key values are integrity, transparency, pluralism, independence, respect for diversity, and promoting solidarity.

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The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) was founded on 11 October 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. The Institute's main objective is to promote an understanding of the problems of international politics through studies, research, meetings and publications, with the aim of increasing the opportunities of all countries to move in the direction of supranational organization, democratic freedom and social justice (IAI Bylaws, Article 1). Its main research areas include: EU Institutions

and Politics, the EU's Global Role, Turkey and the Neighbourhood, International Political Economy, Mediterranean and Middle East, Transatlantic Relations, Security and Defence, Italian Foreign Policy, Energy. A non-profit organization, the IAI is funded by individual and corporate members, public and private organizations, major international foundations, and by a standing grant from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



The Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) is an independent and plural think tank based in Barcelona, dedicated to the study, research and analysis of international affairs. Created in 1973 as an International Documentation Centre of Barcelona, it is a private foundation since 1979.

re that people possess the basic elements to live their lives free from fear and in liberty, by facilitating a dialogue that includes all diversities and which actively defends human rights and gender equality. CIDOB is a dynamic community of analytics that works to produce and offer to all political actors – from individual citizens to international organizations – information and ideas to formulate and promote policies for a more secure, free and fair world for everyone.

CIDOB promotes global governance and good practices – based on local, national and European democratic government – to ensure



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The Mercator European Dialogue is working to transform the way politicians talk about and with each other in Europe. Turning European politics on its head, one conversation at a time. Across parties, across political ideologies, across borders. Our network of national parliamentarians is as diverse as Europe itself.

This European network is a project by the German Marshall Fund of the United States in cooperation with the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy in Athens and is funded by Stiftung Mercator and since 2017 also by the King Baudouin Foundation.

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