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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Citizens' Dialogues as a Contribution to Developing a European Public Space

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Citizens' Dialogues as a Contribution to Developing a European Public Space

As Europe is overcoming the financial and economic crisis, more and more decisions that have a direct impact on people's lives are taken at European level. This is therefore the moment to start a reflection on how to further strengthen the democratic structures of our Union. Before Europe implements the big reforms this will require, national and European politicians need to have a broad debate with citizens about what our future Europe should look like. This has to be a truly European debate, with citizens at its centre.

That is why the European Commission has tested and developed a new communication tool to complement existing instruments that involve people directly: Citizens' Dialogues. The concept builds on the model of "town hall meetings" or local fora during which politicians listen to and debate with citizens about policies and decisions being taken.

All in all, 51 Citizens' Dialogues have been held in all Member States. 22 out of 28 European Commissioners participated usually together with representatives of the European Parliament and national or local politicians (see table in the Annex). This gave the Citizens' Dialogues a real European dimension, which is enhanced by the fact that in many Member States, similar debates are now being organised at the national, regional and local level.

The series of more than 50 Dialogues started in September 2012 and continued into March 2014, framing the European Year of Citizens and placing the debates at the heart of the European Year's aims: marking the 20th anniversary of the introduction of EU citizenship with the Maastricht Treaty and preparing the ground for the European Parliament elections in May 2014. This will be a crucial moment for citizens to decide which course they want Europe to take.

The Commission's experience with Citizens' Dialogues over those 18 months has shown that they have the potential to effectively complement the already existing tools to enable citizens to make full use of their rights as EU citizens, such as public consultations. The Citizens' Dialogues are one more occasion to give citizens a say in the decisions taken at European level. The debates gave citizens an opportunity to voice their opinions and ask questions on the issues most important to them (such as overcoming the economic crisis) whereas Commissioners and other politicians had the opportunity to listen first hand to the citizens, explain policies and point out the tangible effects of decisions taken at European level on citizens and their lives. The Dialogues have therefore established themselves as an instrument to inform people, restore trust in European and national Institutions and make citizens aware that their voice does count in the EU.

The fact that the Dialogues involve members of EU Institutions and actors at national level, and that the format has spread and multiplied within Member States shows clearly that they can effectively contribute to the development of a European Public Space. A space in which

Europeans speak with each other rather than about each other, in which European issues are debated from a European point of view, creating a European narrative that is based on our shared values and that takes into account national and regional specificities. At the same time, this space will also allow to make clear to citizens that, like at the national level, they also have a specific choice of politics and policies at the European level.

POLITICAL CONTEXT: A CHANCE TO ENHANCE DEMOCRACY

1.1. Taking big steps forward

The financial and economic crisis has been a catalyst for change. Bold steps towards a deeper Economic and Monetary Union have brought more coordination and decision-making to the European level. The European Union has made a huge leap forward. It has put in place new instruments and policies to address the effects and root causes of the crisis and prevent difficulties from escalating in the future – for example by creating the European Stability Mechanism with a lending capacity of Euro 500 bn; introducing the European Semester to coordinate Member States' economic and fiscal policy much more strongly; and by putting in place central parts of the Banking Union to make the financial system more stable and prevent taxpayers from having to pay for bank managers' mistakes. These changes need to be followed by reforms which will make these new structures much more democratic, ensuring transparency and accountability.

The "Blueprint for a deep and genuine Economic and Monetary Union"¹ outlined which institutional changes are required and how political awareness and influence can be built. It constitutes the basis of proposals to make progress towards a Fiscal Union and ultimately closer Political Union.²

The crisis has reinforced a fall of trust in governance and political leadership at both national and European levels. To counter this, more efforts must be made to engage with, listen to and inform citizens about how EU policies can help them, how to exercise the rights EU citizenship gives them and about how they can use our system of representative democracy to have their say at the European level. The debate with citizens on the political change we need has to take place before rather than after new structures are put in place.

Approaches from sectoral EU policies to rebuild citizens' trust in EU governance through dialogues, for instance, in the area of research, are an important complement to the Citizens' Dialogue initiative.³

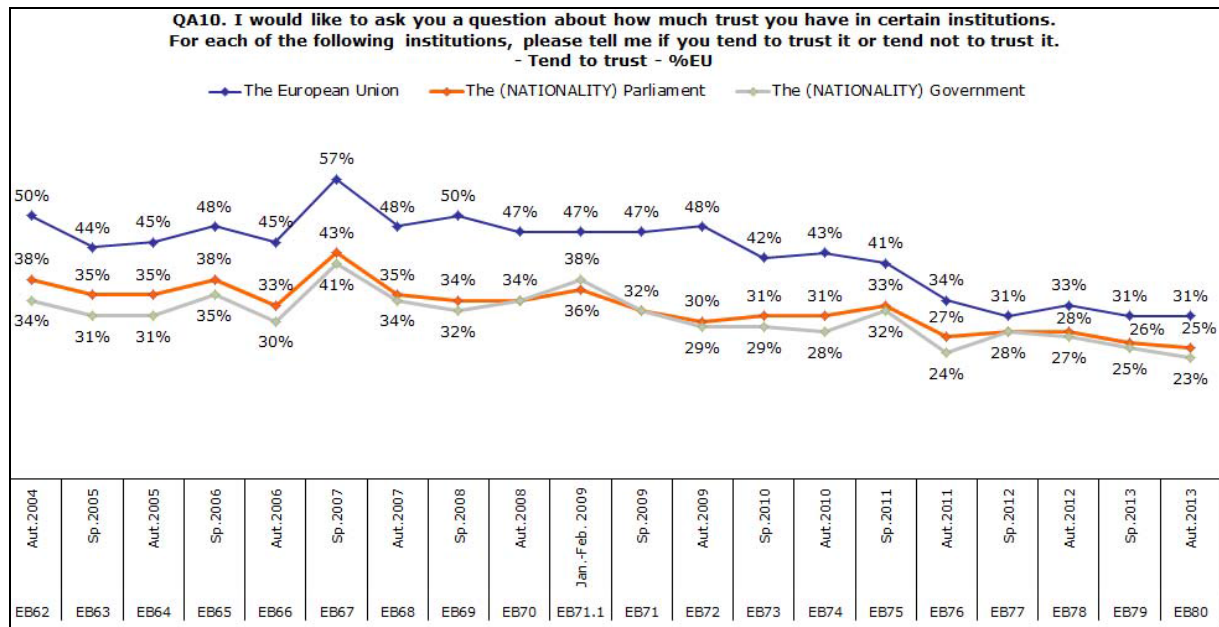
¹ COM(2012) 777.

² COM(2012) 777 final/2; cf. also State of the Union address 2013.

³ One good example is the VOICES initiative (www.voicesforinnovation.eu), a Europe-wide face-to-face citizen consultation process in which citizens' ideas are gathered and then taken on board in the development of research and innovation policy. Similarly, the "Special Initiative for Citizen Engagement in Science 'Have your say...about science'" and the "Mobilisation and Mutual Learning Action Plans" strengthen public and multi-actor engagement in research and innovation.

1.2. The need to rebuild trust

Citizens' Dialogues are a central part of this debate. They started at a time when Eurobarometer surveys were showing that the crisis was contributing to a decline in trust in the EU from 57 % to 31 % and in national institutions from 41% to 23% between spring 2007 and autumn 2013.⁴ Similarly, over the last few years the EU's public image deteriorated and Europeans became less optimistic about the future of the Union.⁵



Standard Eurobarometer 80 - Autumn 2013

The decline in trust runs parallel to a widespread feeling among Europeans that their voice does not count. While the number of Europeans who would agree with the statement ‘My voice counts in the EU’ has fallen from 38 % in spring 2009 to only 29 % in autumn 2013, the percentage of those who disagree grew from 53 % to 66 %.⁶ Only in one Member State — Denmark — does more than half of the population feel that they can effectively influence the EU agenda. In some of the Member States that were particularly severely affected by the crisis — Cyprus, Greece and Portugal — only 11 to 18 % of citizens share this opinion.⁷

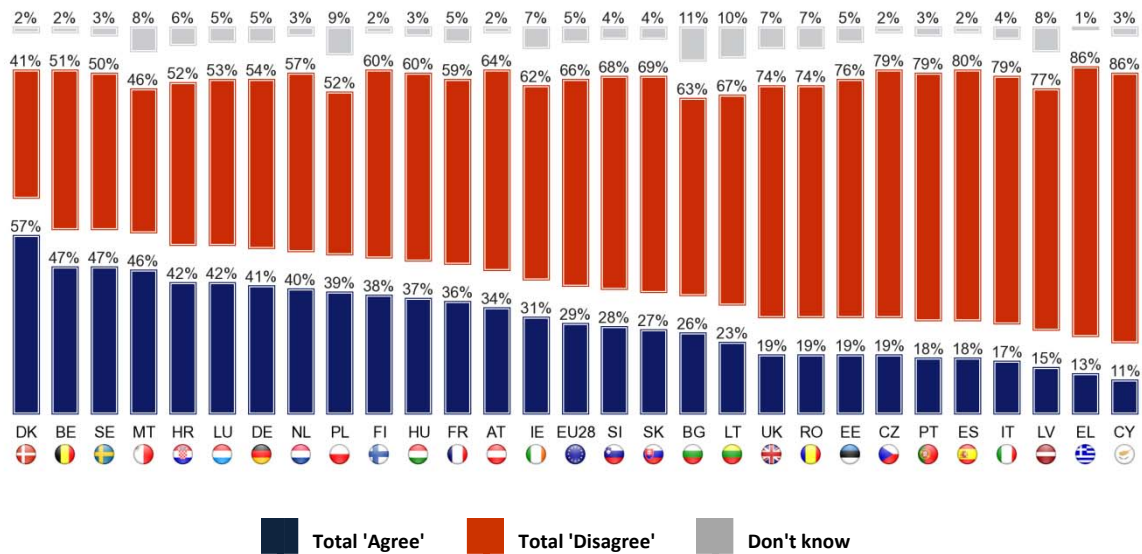
⁴ Standard Eurobarometer 80 (autumn 2013), p. 5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 9, although the negative trend has slightly shifted in the autumn of 2013.

⁶ Ibid., p. 7, although the negative trend has slightly shifted in the autumn of 2013.

⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

**QA19.a.3. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.
My voice counts in the EU**



Standard Eurobarometer 80 - Autumn 2013

1.3. Citizens' Dialogues: a new format with a European dimension

The Citizens' Dialogues were conceived as open door events that invited citizens to share their views in "town hall"-style meetings across the Union. The Dialogues were organised as 1.5-2 hour sessions with three discussion topics: the recovery from the economic crisis, citizens' rights and the future of Europe. Moreover, other issues specific to the country in question and the area of expertise of the Commissioners holding the debate were discussed. In general, the open nature of the debates allowed citizens to raise any issue they wished to address.⁸ Information on the events was widely published in regional media, through the websites of the Commission's Representations and via social media. The Dialogues were completely open events, therefore the participants cannot be judged as a representative sample of the EU population as a whole. The views expressed by citizens during the events were, however, in line with the results of the representative surveys regularly conducted by the Commission.

The aim of the Dialogues was to enable citizens to directly address their questions on the future of the Union and EU policies to European and national politicians. Citizens were offered an opportunity to voice their opinions, obtain concrete information, but also to see that EU policy has a human face. The reaction of citizens and politicians involved as well as the media coverage show that this objective – which evidently corresponded to participants' expectations – was achieved. Moreover, the direct exchanges have also proved an apt tool to

⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe>

demonstrate to citizens that European politicians, like national politicians, stand for a particular political outlook and policies.

From the beginning, the events had a European character. For most Dialogues, Commissioners were joined by Members of European Parliament as well as national, regional and local politicians. Members of the European Parliament were particularly engaged in many of the debates, sometimes sharing the central stage with Commissioners, sometimes contributing with questions or statements. Similarly, a number of high level national and regional politicians, such as the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Vice-Chancellor of Austria and Minister-Presidents of some of the German and Austrian Bundesländer were part of the debates. Mayors of the host towns played a crucial role in getting in touch with citizens. They helped people to bridge the gap between local and European issues and to see the European dimension of local problems and the local dimension of European policy issues.

This approach underlined that the broad debate on European issues should involve all levels, from the European to the local. It helped to turn the Dialogues into truly European events, contributing to the development of a European Public Space. This was enhanced by a number of tools and techniques:

All debates were web-streamed live in the language(s) of the host region and in English, and the moderators asked questions or relayed comments received via social media, mainly via Twitter (with the specifically created hashtag #eudeb8) and the Commission's Facebook accounts. The platform www.debatingeurope.eu provided an opportunity for follow-up discussions.⁹ Several debates were also transmitted live by regional or national TV stations of the host Member State.

In particular social media activity before, during and after each event proved to be more than opening up a physical event to the internet world. It made it possible to link Dialogues across Member States and to enable participants of previous debates to get involved in the following Dialogues. An Online Citizens' Dialogue involved citizens all over Europe by using TV, a webstream and social media.

Some Dialogues physically involved citizens from several countries: for instance, the debate in Esch was targeted at citizens from the "Grande Région" covering Luxembourg and neighbouring parts of France, Belgium and Germany, and the Trieste Citizens' Dialogue involved participants from Italy, Slovenia, Croatia and Austria.

As a conclusion to this series of Citizens' Dialogues, a pan-European event is scheduled for 27 March 2014 with participants from each host town of the more than 50 Dialogues held between September 2012 and March 2014 in all Member States. This full-day event will take place immediately before the final phase of the 2014 European Parliament election campaign,

⁹ It was a deliberate choice to extend the debate to an existing online platform rather than creating a new one. The debatingeurope platform already had more than 100,000 followers at the beginning of 2013 who were identified as potential participants for the 15 online debates organised around physical Citizens' Dialogues.

and it will allow participants to discuss with a number of European and national politicians. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that European politics, like national politics, is about voters choosing their preferred policies.

The Online Citizens' Dialogue

An Online Citizens' Dialogue¹⁰ involved citizens all over Europe, using social media to engage in an EU-wide debate. It was preceded by a hangout with bloggers¹¹ from different Member States who are engaged in political debate on the web and social media. These two online debates generated over 15 000 posts on social media, nearly 5 000 views on YouTube and 40 media items.

The Online Citizens' Dialogue itself was organised in cooperation with Euronews. A central aim was to open the event to as many people as possible, so questions were taken from several of those who could not join the hangout which due to technical reasons was open to a limited number of citizens. The Online Dialogue took the form of a Google Hangout, streamed live on YouTube. It followed a prime-time 'Global conversation' interview live on Euronews (a fusion between a classic television broadcast and an internet discussion forum).

The volume of online conversation generated by the Online Dialogue and the chat with bloggers was significantly higher than at regular Citizens' Dialogue events, which is an interesting lesson for the future in terms of alternative ways to engage with different groups of citizens. Keeping in mind the specific audience reached on the web, it is apparent that this kind of event is complementary to physical, face-to-face exchanges.

1.4. Enhancing the outreach

An integral part of the concept of the Citizens' Dialogues was that all citizens could participate without needing any in-depth knowledge of the European Union or its policies. With very few exceptions, the Dialogues were attended by citizens who spoke for themselves and not on behalf of specific interest groups. Participants were not pre-selected: they were simply members of the public interested in Europe and in having an exchange with European and national policymakers.

To make the Dialogues more meaningful for participants, in many Member States (including the Czech Republic, France, Lithuania and Spain) the Commission organised preparatory and follow-up debates (either physical meetings or on the internet). These supported participants in setting priorities for the main Dialogue and maintained the interest generated by the discussions.

For the Dialogues in Sweden and Italy an effective approach was developed with thematic dialogues (with or without EU Commissioners) organised in different regions ahead of their

¹⁰ The Online Dialogue is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHYPDoO9sVKc>

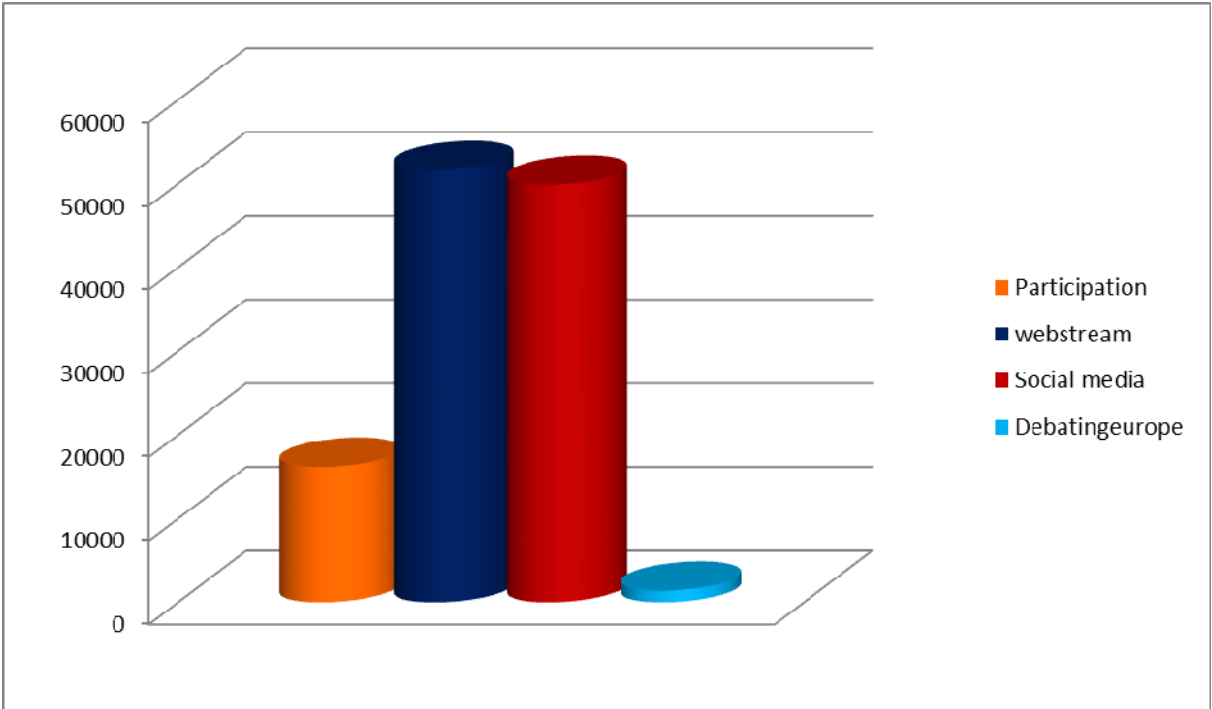
¹¹ Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7qKlqDsKa8>

main national Citizens' Dialogue. This enabled in-depth preparation of those themes that were of particular importance to people in those countries.

Most Citizens' Dialogues had one or more media partners. These were in most cases local or regional newspapers and local and regional radio and TV stations. In some cases, national public TV transmitted Dialogues live fully or as features shortly after the events (for example national TV in Bulgaria, in Greece, in Portugal, Sweden and Croatia broadcast the dialogues entirely or in parts live).

1.5. The response

On average around 350 citizens were physically present for each Dialogue (with a maximum of 800 in Trieste). In total, more than 16 000 citizens took part in the Dialogues. Over 105 000 participated via the live web stream and on social media and many more have followed it via TV. The great potential of social media was particularly visible at the Dialogues in Dublin, Tallinn and Barcelona where the number of people who followed the event actively on the internet was up to 100 times higher than the number of people in the room.

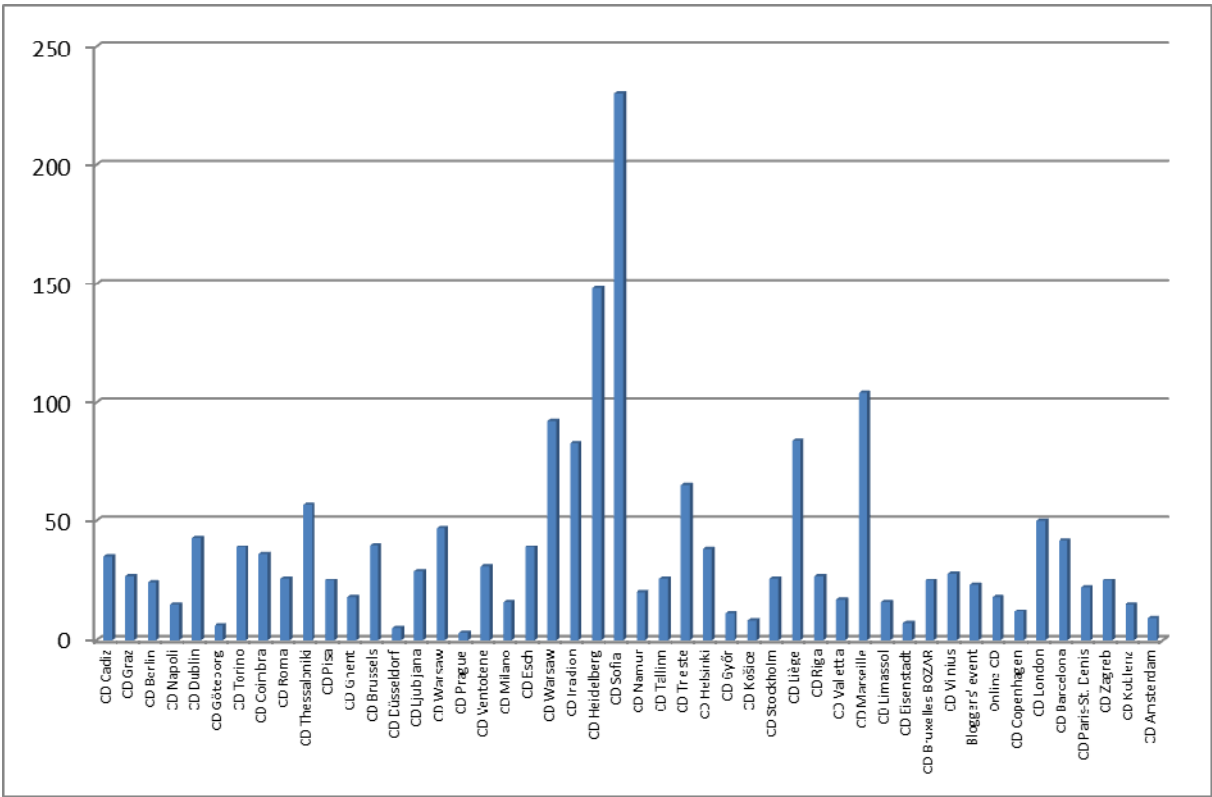


Forms of participation in the Citizens' Dialogues

Still, this represents only a fraction of the EU's total population. This shows that the EU is still beginning to develop this communication tool. There is great potential as the format is spreading, with similar debates increasingly being held at national, regional and local level. But already, the Dialogues are an effective addition to the communication tools the Commission (and other EU institutions) are using to establish direct contact with citizens, for

example public consultations on plans for new legislation and more specialised initiatives such as Share Europe Online or Back to School.

A regular feature in many of the Citizens' Dialogues was to publish, on the day of the event, supplements about Europe, its institutions and the rights that citizens enjoy, in regional newspapers with a combined circulation of over 12 million copies. Together with specific interviews of the Commissioners participating in the event, in national or regional newspapers, this led to a potential reach of 43 million newspaper readers and 51 million readers of the related websites.¹² In addition, several million Europeans were able to receive information about the Dialogues through TV, radio, print and online media: there was live coverage of events in some Member States and an average of 38 media items per event, mostly in mass media.

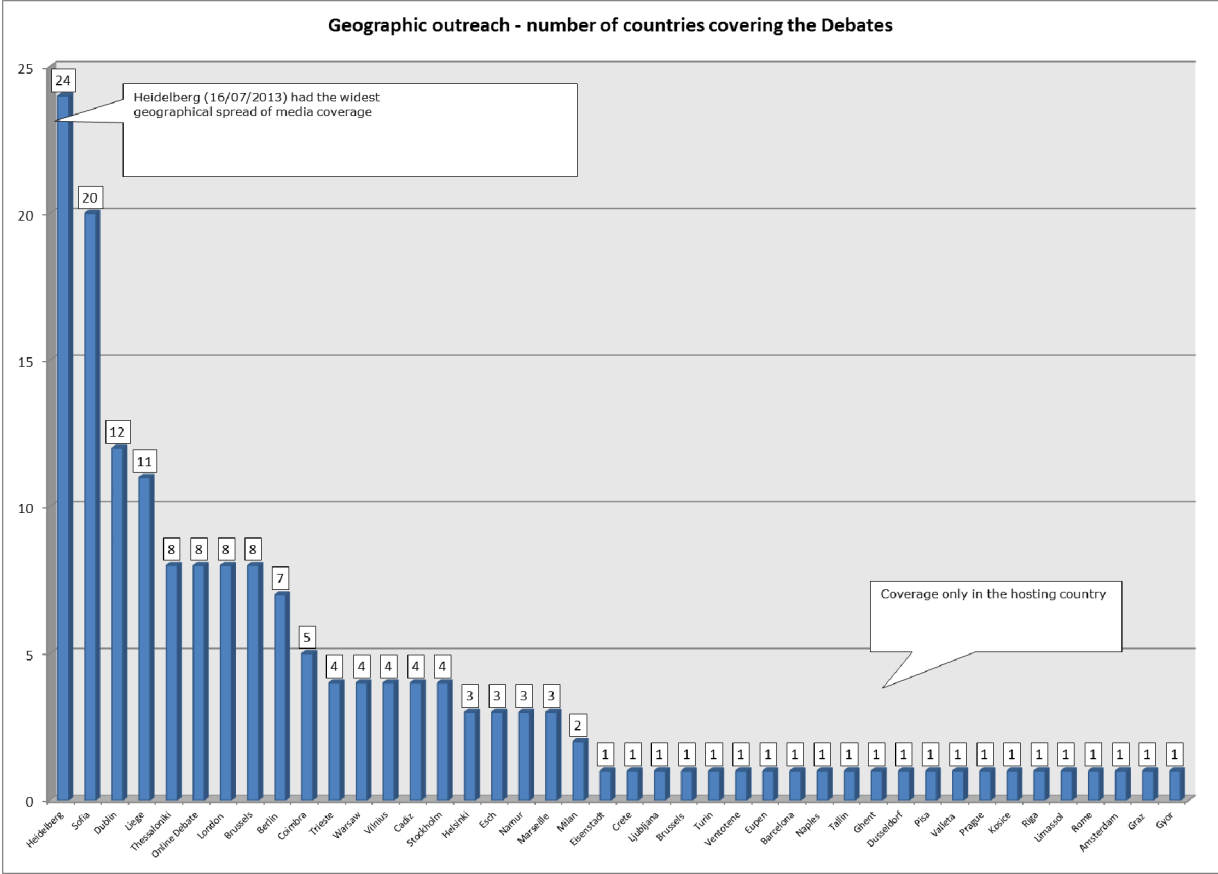


Media items published after the Citizens' Dialogues (Cadiz-Amsterdam)

Very often media coverage was not only confined to the country where the debate was held but also extended to other countries (for instance in the case of the Dublin, Heidelberg or Liège Dialogues). Clearly, the events have a significantly larger outreach when covered by mass media, in particular TV and radio. It also became apparent that apart from the coverage on the actual debate, many media items focused on particular political points made by the Commissioners and their partners.

¹² Gross rating points (GRPs) newspaper impressions: 42 643 868; GRPs web site impressions: 51 202 539.

What is more, the questions and comments received after the Dialogues in the Representations and in the Europe Direct Call Centre demonstrate that the debates had an effect that goes well beyond that of the classic one-way-delivery of a speech. Citizens stayed and engaged after the actual events, encouraged by the interactive nature of the debates. They raised questions and also expressed criticism of specific EU policies as well as the general political outlook of Commissioners.



Geographical spread of media items (Cadiz-Amsterdam)

1.6. Measuring citizens’ attitudes

To complement the physical meetings, Eurobarometer surveys for the Commission and for other EU institutions documented the views of Europeans on the future of the Union and their expectations regarding ongoing and upcoming policy initiatives.¹³ The network of Europe Direct information centres as well as the Europe Direct call centre played an important role in preparing and following up the Citizens' Dialogues: They informed citizens about Dialogues in or near their region and provided a better understanding of citizens' concerns in their geographical areas to those holding the debates. Moreover, Commissioners encouraged

¹³ E.g. Standard Eurobarometer 80 (autumn 2013); European Parliament Eurobarometer 79.5 (August 2013)

citizens to send unanswered questions and feedback to Europe Direct after the events and ensured that the senders received a reply.

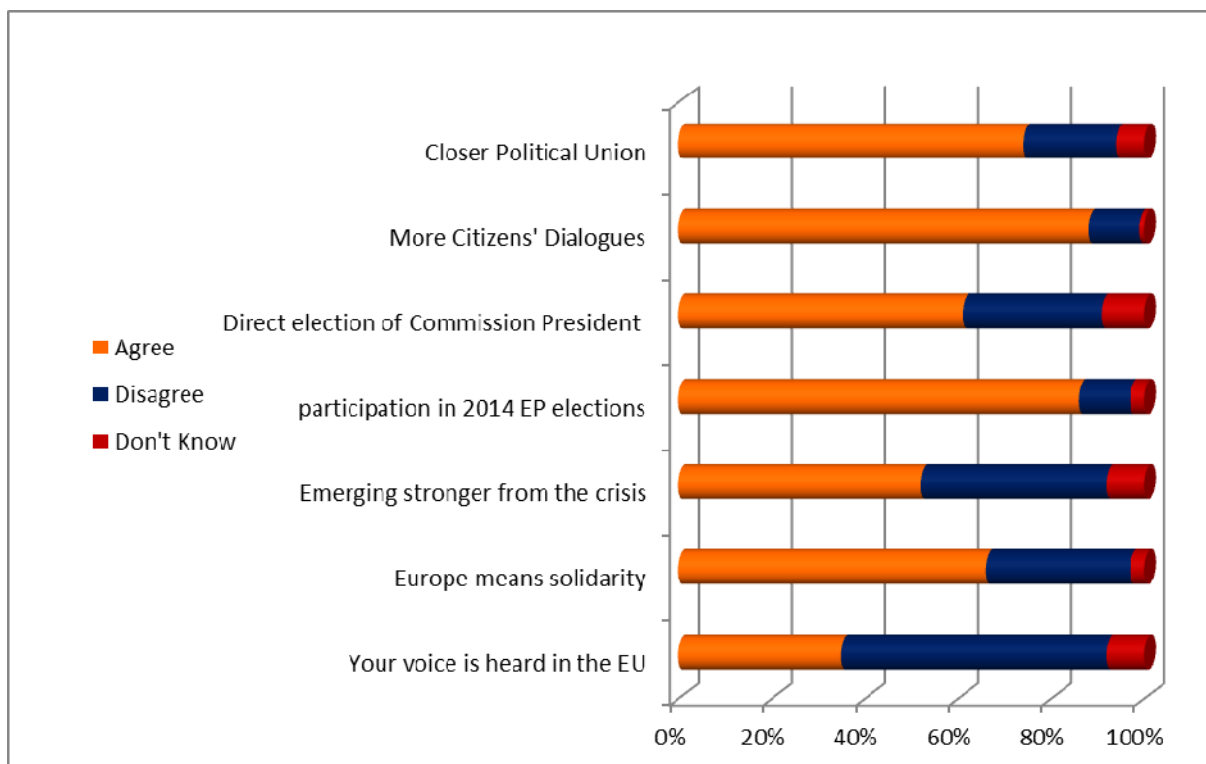
From an early stage, the Commission asked all those who participated in the debates for their opinions. Electronic voting devices were used to get citizens' feedback on a number of crucial questions, like "Do you feel your voice is heard in the EU?" and "Do you think that Europe will come out of the crisis stronger?". These questions were published in all EU languages and issued by the Commission's Representations at other events with citizens and by the Commission's Visitors' Centre in Brussels. During the 18 months during which the Dialogues took place, more than 6 000 reactions were received and analysed.

Feedback from the Citizens' Dialogues, together with the preparatory and follow-up debates, confirmed one significant result of the Eurobarometer surveys: two out of three Europeans feel that their voice is not being heard. Some 57 % of participants in the Citizens' Dialogues shared this opinion. This corresponds to the very strong wish of nearly 9 in 10 participants (88 %) to have more Citizens' Dialogues.

In Member States particularly severely affected by the crisis, the Dialogues gave citizens an opportunity to express their concerns and to directly confront and challenge EU and national or regional politicians, but also to experience that politicians were not shying away from sometimes confrontational debates. At the same time, the events offered Commissioners and other politicians the chance to demonstrate that they are willing to listen, and that they are making efforts to explain the actions being taken to overcome the crisis.

1.7. Topics raised at the debates

The Citizens' Dialogues addressed a broad variety of themes. The subjects discussed revealed which issues are most important to Europeans – and what they expect political leaders to do to address them. In many cases views and questions voiced in the room reflected those visible in survey results.



Surveys among participants of Citizens' Dialogues (Cadiz-Bucharest)

For instance, both the surveys and the debates highlighted that citizens across all Member States, whether they are personally affected or not, are concerned about the economic and social impact of the crisis (in particular about the danger of a ‘lost generation’ of young people facing unemployment). The most important observation in this respect is that participants in the debates in all Member States generally thought that solidarity and responsibility have to go hand in hand. Citizens across the Union gave a strong signal that for them the EU is about solidarity.

The citizens’ voice:

‘Are you of the opinion that Europe should do more to help us coming out of the crisis?’ — 66.9 % of participants replied ‘yes’ at the Berlin Citizens’ Dialogue (10 November 2012)¹⁴.

‘Europe is Greece and Greece is Europe. That means Union.’ — Tweet at the Dublin Citizens’ Dialogue (10 January 2013).

‘What is the meaning of solidarity? We must not lose a whole generation. We are a Union of people!’ — Young man at the Thessaloniki Citizens’ Dialogue (22 March 2013).

¹⁴ The average figure for all Dialogues was 65.7%.

The rights of EU citizens conferred to them by the Treaties were a prominent part of the Dialogues. Participants focused in particular on the right to free movement and policies that boost job creation through education and training.

The citizens' voice:

'How can we achieve justice and a 75 % employment target as long as the gender pay gap persists?'
— Woman at the Dublin Citizens' Dialogue (10 January 2013).

'PRISM and TEMPORA have been a wake-up call. Surveillance laws in the EU need to be put to the test. The ECJ said that rules on data collection and storage are not effective and this means a breach of fundamental rights.' — Man at the Heidelberg Citizens' Dialogue (16 July 2013).

'I've been in ERASMUS. I'm now in EVS [European Voluntary Service] and I come across people from around Europe and I feel great sharing time, ideas and dreams with them ... We like to be together and we suffer together as well ... We ask for the ones in charge now to give us the opportunity to be part of this intercultural way of life.' — Comment posted after the Brussels Citizens' Dialogue (4 May 2013) on debatingeurope.eu.

'The freedom of movement is attacked by populist politicians. The EU needs to act regarding the discrimination of Romanian citizens in some Member States.' — Participant in the Online Citizens' Dialogue (16 January 2014).

As far as the future of Europe is concerned, more than half of citizens (54 %) participating in the events of the European Year of Citizens are in favour of more European integration. Moreover, three out of four participants in the Citizens' Dialogues (74 %) supported the idea of a closer Political Union.

The citizens' voice:

'What we need is real Political Union. It is high time to have unified political parties in Europe that represent the people. It is time to take a gigantic leap towards federalism.' — Young man at the Brussels Citizens' Dialogue (4 May 2013).

'We need a central federal government ... or else we'll be divided and consumed one by one, including such giants as Germany, France and the United Kingdom.' — Comment posted after the Brussels Citizens' Dialogue (4 May 2013) on debatingeurope.eu.

'The elections to the European Parliament would be a great moment to draw the big picture and show what is our common identity.' — Participant in the Online Citizens' Dialogue (16 January 2014).

Many comments made by citizens during the Dialogues and the follow-up debates highlighted their view that economic integration must go hand in hand with more democracy. Participants believe in European representative democracy: 87 % of them claimed that they will cast their votes in the 2014 European Parliament elections. A direct election of the next Commission President would be welcomed by about two in three participants (61 %).

The citizens' voice:

'15 000 scholarships have been taken away. Students live in poor conditions or have to give up their studies completely. There are hungry people. The Commission and the Troika are responsible for this.' — Student at the Coimbra Citizens' Dialogue (22 February 2013).

'European leaders must change the approach and also (re-)establish the democratic values. Economy is a very important thing but Brussels must work for the prosperity of the people. — Yes! As a reformed federation of citizens. European integration has outgrown the intergovernmental circus. — It is not a democracy, no! The day I can vote directly on law and on what happens, I probably will.' — Opposing comments posted after the Brussels Citizens' Dialogue (4 May 2013) on debatingeurope.eu.

'Europe is the hope and the dream of young Ukrainians.' — Participant in the Online Citizens' Dialogue (16 January 2014).

A striking theme that emerged, in particular after the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU at the end of 2012, was peace. Against the backdrop of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War in 2014 — and with memories still fresh of the Balkan Wars less than a generation ago — both citizens and politicians highlighted that the most important achievement of the Union was to bring an end to centuries of bloodshed on the continent.

Many participants, in particular young people, expressed pride in sharing a European history and belonging to a European culture. Like many of the other events during the European Year of Citizens, most of the Dialogues demonstrated that Europeans have a genuine interest in the values on which the Union is founded. They expect European integration to foster democracy, the rule of law and human rights and to guarantee a fair society that provides equal opportunities for all.

Finally, feedback received from the Dialogues since September 2012 suggests that citizens want to have a choice — at the next European Parliament elections and beyond — among competing political ideas. These would address the main underlying themes of unity, democracy and solidarity.

The citizens' voice:

'We are happy that you came to our island where the people who were banned from the mainland by the fascist government had to meet secretly in the caves or on the beaches. During the war Altiero Spinelli and the others developed here their vision of Europe when it seemed that there was no hope.' — Mayor Giuseppe Assenso of Ventotene at the Citizens' Dialogue (27 May 2013).

'Discrimination in any form (whether favourable or unfavourable) robs the soul of justice, equity and fair play.' — Comment posted after the Tallinn Citizens' Dialogue (14 September 2013).

CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD: HOW TO DEVELOP THIS TOOL FURTHER

Citizens' Dialogues are a new instrument, an experiment in pan-European communication that has started on a small scale. The 51 Dialogues between September 2012 and March 2014 were a learning process for all involved. They offer a valuable basis to develop the initiative, in particular with regard to the outreach. Open debates between European, national and regional politicians - who take policy decisions - and the European citizens - whose daily lives are impacted by those decisions - give the EU institutions a human face. They also help Commissioners and other politicians to gain new insights.

In view of the important institutional and political decisions to be taken in the coming years, it is in the interests of both Citizens and politicians to continue with debates of this kind after the 2014 European Parliament Elections. To ensure a true European debate, all levels – European, national, regional and local – should participate.

And already, this format has shown the first signs of being taken up at national level, with national politicians in countries such as Germany, Bulgaria and Ireland launching Dialogues of their own. Former politicians, academics and think tanks are also starting to organise debates. This suggests that there is a strong demand among citizens for this kind of interaction – and real potential for this to turn into a lasting European project. This is supported by the fact that in several Member States, among them France, Italy, Poland and Sweden, the preparation and organisation of Citizens' Dialogues has led to the creation of informal networks. These networks can multiply the effects of this initiative and keep the debate alive by bringing together EU politicians, national and regional governments, Commission Representations and European Parliament Information Offices, individual citizens and civil society organisations

A debate has started. The Citizens' Dialogues have demonstrated that European citizens are ready and willing to discuss European issues and *'to bring a truly European perspective to the debate with national constituencies.'*¹⁵ The pan-European Citizens' Dialogue on 27 March 2014 — with participants from all cities that have hosted a debate as well as citizens who took part in the Online Dialogue — should give a further push to this.

The Dialogues are thus one part of the broad, European debate needed before we make the bold changes required to build an even more democratic Union. Already, they have been one instrument to make clear to Europeans that they have a real choice in the upcoming European Parliament elections - and that their vote does indeed count.

¹⁵ J.M. Barroso, State of the Union address (2013).