

# CITIZENS FACING “BRUSSELS’ EUROPE”

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**O**n 5 May 2014 Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute continued the second stage of the project “Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development” bringing together 52 citizens from 18 European Union member states in Brussels so that they could discuss their vision of the EU and their means of access to the EU with representatives of European institutions. This synthesis covers the main points of the discussions between the 52 European citizens and representatives of European institutions.

Yves Bertoncini, director of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, introduced the debate by mentioning some names chosen for the various buildings and places in Brussels symbolising Europe. Examples include József Antall, the first Hungarian Prime minister elected democratically in 1990; Simone Veil, the first woman to preside over the European Parliament and elected by universal suffrage from 1979 to 1982; and Altiero Spinelli, one of the EU’s founding fathers. He underlined that the choice of these symbolic figures, as varied as the places where European institutions are located - Brussels, Strasbourg, Frankfurt and Luxembourg - or citizens attending the debate, reflects European diversity. Moreover, he considers that the choice of the building where the debate with 52 citizens and representatives of European institutions is symbolic since it is the European Parliament, the workplace of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) elected by universal suffrage by all Europeans.

Discussions were then conducted between 52 citizens and speakers in two round tables. As in discussions held the day before<sup>1</sup>, the 52 citizens, speaking 16 different languages, met in groups according to language while the debates were re-transcribed in their entirety by booth interpreters. Some 52 citizens from 18 member countries were chosen because they had participated in the first phase of the project “Horizon EU: European citizenship, a horizontal development”, bringing together 150 citizens for discussions in groups of about ten people to address the same issues<sup>2</sup>. They also were chosen so as to obtain a sample that represents European citizens in their

diversity regarding several sociodemographic criteria (see Table 1).

**Table 1 ► The profile of the 52 European citizens participating in the second stage of the “Horizon EU” project**

Participants		52
Age range	25-34 years	16
	35-49 years	24
	50 years and +	12
Socio-professional category	Lower to middle (labourer, supervisory staff and employees)*	29
	Middle to upper (middle and senior managers, small and medium size company managers, independent professions)**	21
	Students	2
Gender	Male	30
	Female	22

\* Among the participants, here are some examples of professions within the lower to middle socio-professional category: logistic manager, project manager, car driver, employee in a municipality, etc.

\*\* Among the participants, here are some examples of professions within the middle to upper socio-professional category: shop owner, lawyer, farmer, owner of printing and publishing company, etc.

Yves Bertoncini, director of Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, and Daniel Debomy, founder and managing director of the opinion research institute OPTEM, led the debate.

The first discussion between citizens and representatives took place with:

- Vasco Cal, member of the Bureau for European policy advisors (BEPA), European Commission;
- Ian Barber, head of the Strategy, corporate communication actions and Eurobarometer unit at the Communication directorate general, European Commission.

The second discussion took place with:

- Isabelle Durant, vice-president of the European Parliament;
- Luc Van den Brande, member and former president of the Committee of the Regions.



## 1. More transparency for a better understanding of the European decision-making processes

In their introductions, speakers briefly presented the institution for which they worked and its role.

Vasco Cal recalled the two major functions of the European Commission. First, the European Commission has the power of legislative initiative, and not the decision-making power that is granted to the Council of the European Union - made up of different ministers from 28 member states - and to the European Parliament. The European Commission is also guardian of the treaties. These two main functions give it a role of arbitrator of the different national interests so as to promote the common interest. The decision-making process is lengthy due to the fact that compromises are sought, which takes a minimum of one or two years. This does not suit the frantic pace of media. It is one of the reasons for which important European decisions such as the mutual recognition of beer and wine in different countries, which would allow for their free movement in the European space, are not reported.

Luc Van den Brande compared the EU to a car in which the Commission is the actual vehicle, the European Parliament and EU Council the fuel and the Committee of the Regions the route. The Committee of the Regions was created in 1992 and the Commission consults it before every legislative proposal. Taking into account local actors is essential given that they are the ones who apply the decisions, who benefit from European funds and who

know what their own problems are. European integration belongs to each of us. It is important to continue to develop the "multiple-level governance" in which each level has its own responsibilities and shares them with other levels. The EU must be created step by step, "united in diversity": there are no miracle solutions. The EU must therefore be built in its own village, its city, its region: we must work together and be responsible.

Isabelle Durant explained that the European Parliament, and the EU as a whole, has a great deal of influence over the daily lives of European citizens. Once the European Commission puts forward a proposal, for example concerning agriculture, it sends it for discussion to the European Parliament committee on agriculture and rural development and to national ministers responsible for these issues: they are the ones who then decide. European issues are local issues and vice versa. National and European actors play a full role in the decision-making process. It is true that national decisions makers, whether they be parliaments or governments, do not discuss many European issues, putting the blame on Brussels when something goes wrong and taking credit for a decision when it is good. National actors must put decisions into their context. European democracy can be improved because the EU is a work in progress. For this to happen, citizens must get involved, first by voting, but also through local associations, taking widely shared positions on social networks or expressed via the signature of a European Citizens' Initiative, by questioning their local, national and European elected officials. Elected officials, each at their own level, must be responsible.

Discussion was then engaged with European citizens attending. **An Irish citizen** was the first to ask a question: "Regarding the decision-making process, the size of the EU and its member states, how can you monitor lobbies?"

Vasco Cal explained that, first, in the European Parliament, lobbies must officially declare themselves in the transparency register<sup>3</sup> and MEPs must declare any exchanges they have with them. Monitoring is much more complicated at national level, and therefore in the Council of the European Union. It is easier for a lobbyist to influence ministers, particularly in large countries, ministers who will also be responsible for voting on European decisions with the European Parliament. Lastly, concerning lobbyists in the European Commission, they are

heard during major consultations, as are European citizens given that everyone can participate. It is essential that the Commission consult citizens and professional organisations before submitting a draft decision. For example, a consultation was organised regarding the 2014-2020 budget framework proposal, the allocation of a substantial portion of the budget to agriculture and education having direct consequences on citizens. Moreover, the budget only represents 1% of the European gross domestic product but its redistribution is critical for certain member states and sectors, for example Poland and Spain, which receive many funds via the common agricultural policy.

Following this comment, a **Polish citizen** asked what the EU is doing about corruption because it provides European funds, but there is no monitoring of the governance of member states or even management of European funds. He questioned the EU's impact on corruption in member states.



Vasco Cal responded that there is European Commission monitoring via European regulations. Member states and local governments that receive funds must organise public calls for tender. Unfortunately, in real life, it is very difficult to monitor all of them given their large number, and audits show that there are many cases of corruption. Countries that are attempting to catch up in terms of administration, such as Bulgaria or Romania, have special rules to meet. The differences between countries, in terms of business productivity particularly, explain that the construction of a motorway costs more in Poland than in Germany for example but that is not due to corruption or poor administration. Luc Van den Brande raised this issue in the second debate explaining that to re-establish a relationship of trust between citizens and European institutions, it would be better to monitor the spending of European funds.

A **Latvian citizen** questioned the efficacy and rapidity of the European decision-making process, which at times should be more responsive in the face of major problems or threats, such as in Russia today. A **Maltese citizen, joined by an Italian citizen**, later talked again about the main problem in their countries: immigration. Everyone was wondering what the EU is doing.

Vasco Cal explained that crisis resolution mechanisms do exist. Relations between Ukraine and Russia remind the EU and its member states that peace is fragile. The EU's traditional role in conflict situations is to implement its peaceful crisis resolution mechanisms. However these areas are directly linked to the sovereignty of states and few means are provided, therefore the processes are much more complex. Foreign affairs, like justice and interior affairs, are not exclusive competences of the EU, even though citizens would like to see the EU to do more in these areas. The high representative for foreign affairs and security policy has little room for manoeuvre. Member states attempt to establish common positions but this process is very long and complex given the traditions and history of European countries. According to Luc Van den Brande, who spoke about this issue in the second part of the debate, solidarity does exist at the EU level and policies are being implemented, and that includes in the area of immigration.

The difficulty, even impossibility, in understanding the decision-making process generates a lack of trust towards European institutions on the part of citizens. A **Spanish citizen** stressed this by asking how to rebuild the trust of the citizens in the EU after the crisis and its management, which has caused many jobs to be lost.

To re-establish the trust of European citizens after the crisis, it is first essential to solve root problems that are associated with it. According to Luc Van den Brande, it is necessary to act locally and invest in human capital in the hardest hit regions. Isabelle Durant added that this will be difficult but all levels must act to re-establish the trust of citizens that have been hit hard by the crisis. She added that this also could be done through means of communication.

## 2. Better communication to strengthen the relationship between European citizens and actors

In his introduction, Ian Barber again addressed the tools the European Commission has to communicate with citizens. It organises Citizen Dialogues<sup>4</sup> in all member states, which provide an opportunity for citizens to talk with European commissioners. Every year is devoted to a particular European theme to be promoted to citizens, and quite appropriately 2013 and 2014 are dedicated to citizenship<sup>5</sup>. The European Commission likewise manages the "Europe for Citizens" programme<sup>6</sup>, which conducts citizens' projects via various national and European associations. In order to be closer to citizens, the Commission and European Parliament have representations in capitals and "Europe Direct" information contact points<sup>7</sup> in most large cities. The Internet is also a common tool the Commission uses to hold different consultations<sup>8</sup>, for instance on the 2014-2020 budget, or on "Europe 2020" economic objectives, Vasco Cal explained. Citizen tools are numerous; one of the most important ones, which has existed for 40 years, is the Eurobarometer<sup>9</sup>. This tool is used to survey the opinion of citizens of the 28 member states on various issues at the same time, then compare the evolution of opinions over the years. According to Ian Barber, all these actions enable the European civil servants and policymakers to understand, in their grey buildings in Brussels, what is happening in the real world.

**One of the Austrian citizens** raised the issue of channels of communication asking if the decision-making process is difficult to understand because citizens do not seek information or because information is not available. The final decision-making process - the triad - is opaque: shouldn't the European Commission communicate directly with citizens on the issues discussed in these meetings? Another essential question was raised by **an Italian citizen**: what channels are used to provide information? Euronews is good, but is not accessible to everyone.

According to Vasco Cal, one of the major problems following the meetings of the Council of the European Union is that there are 28 press conferences, with 28 different angles and the feeling that the participants did not attend the same meeting, and this is true

for how all the European decisions are dealt with in general. Adding a 29<sup>th</sup> press conference, held by the European Commission, does not seem to be a viable solution. One of the solutions involves new technologies, similar to how things work in New Zealand or California regarding certain issues: there is therefore no longer a need to go through politicians. However national politicians need to decide on this solution and to create the conditions to implement it, and that depends greatly on the social cohesion of societies and trust in institutions. European institutions are now willing to focus on citizens and their wishes, as can be seen with the "European Strategy and Policy Analysis System" project<sup>10</sup>, which analyses societal trends and which will serve as a basis for work for the next European Commission between 2014 and 2019.

According to Isabelle Durant, who addressed this issue again in the second part of the debate, in order to have more direct communication between European actors and citizens, MEPs and commissioners should meet several days a month with European citizens in different countries. Luc Van den Brande added that young people are increasingly using the Internet and social networks, leaving traditional modes like television by the wayside, so therefore we must adapt.



**A Polish citizen** asked if consultations, and especially social consultations, are held at the right scale. Isn't it up to member states to organise them, even if they should avoid going through the filter of politicians? **An Italian citizen** added that indeed, one of the biggest impediments to transmitting information is national governments.

Vasco Cal explained that the European Economic and Social Committee is a key place for these consultations because it has all the necessary information. However, professional organisations and trade unions are not all represented and so there needs to be other national and European sources

of information: it is especially important to create a European public space. One of the problems is that the issues are understood in completely different ways in Brussels, in the member states and in regions. Therefore an interface is needed that can bring together all these viewpoints, because certain issues might mobilise rapidly. This means transmitting the right information, at the right time to the right people.

**The Italian citizen** also noted that there is a problem in transmitting clear information and communication, probably because there is too much bureaucracy and we lack education. These issues should be taught in elementary school.

According to Luc Van den Brande, the harmonisation of educational paths in the EU is possible and desirable because it would build mutual trust as could be seen in the Bologna Process which helped harmonise the level of university diplomas. Isabelle Durant considers that children should not just study European institutions and decision-making process on its own, but also from the standpoint of history, geography and culture. And beyond education, meetings thanks to Erasmus or European culture capitals should be encouraged. Luc Van den Brande again stated that education is not an EU competence. It is up to the citizens to use their tools and to propose, for example, a European Citizens' Initiative in order to change this.

Since 2008, citizens can question the Commission directly through these European Citizens' Initiatives<sup>11</sup>, but a Latvian citizen wondered what their outcomes are.

Isabelle Durant explained that the first initiative to have worked concerned the right to water and its

consideration as a public good, outside of the area of competition. Following its approval, the Commission and the European Parliament met with certain citizens in charge, who were members of the Citizens' Committee. The responses are not satisfactory for the moment, but the process is going to be re-launched and other initiatives are under way.

**A Greek citizen** underlined that European institutions give citizens the impression that decisions are long, complicated, difficult to take and to approve, whereas when it comes to Greece, decisions are taken very quickly. But citizens are not responsible for the way things work and they should not be blamed. Citizens should be interested but what are European actors doing to interest them? It is not enough to provide information, interest should also be sparked!

Isabelle Durant considers that a feeling of distance between the citizens and European institutions also exists in Belgium. It is certainly essential to better organise communication on decisions that are made, because they are adopted by majority vote. Once again, national filters – the media or governments – too often forget that. Citizens are the leading actors of change, particularly through their vote! And following an election, it is the duty of elected officials to meet with those who have given them their trust: citizens must demand that. Luc Van den Brande pointed out that European elected officials have to be local. However, it is important to avoid making the EU a scapegoat; it does not cause all the problems. We should all be responsible: local actors should ask themselves what they can do for the EU and vice versa.

1. See Virginie Timmerman, "European discussions between citizens", *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, August 2014.  
 2. Daniel Debomy, "The involvement of EU citizens in the European project", *Synthesis*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, July 2014.  
 3. Transparency register available at the following address: <http://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/info/homePage.do?redir=false&locale=en#en>  
 4. Citizens' Dialogues of the European Commission: [http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/debate-future-europe/index_en.htm)  
 5. Platform for the European Year of Citizens: <http://europa.eu/citizens-2013/en>  
 6. To find out more about the "Europe for Citizens" programme: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens\\_en](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens_en)  
 7. To find the Europe information centre nearest you: [http://europa.eu/europedirect/meet\\_us/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/europedirect/meet_us/index_en.htm)  
 8. To see the open European consultations: [http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_en.htm)  
 9. To find out more about the Eurobarometer and European public opinions: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm)  
 10. To find out more about the "European Strategy and Policy Analysis System" project: [http://europa.eu/espas/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/espas/index_en.htm)  
 11. To find out more about open European Citizens' Initiatives: <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome?lg=en>



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