

Plenary Meeting of the LVIII COSAC 26–28 November 2017, Tallinn

Background Information

Session II: Bringing the European Union closer to its citizens

The EU is often accused of opacity, complexity and inability to communicate clearly with its citizens. Although efforts have been made to bring the Union closer to its citizens, little attention has been paid to the role of national Parliaments in this equation. Communicating EU matters and involvement in EU decision making are complex tasks. However, due to their proximity, national Parliaments are in a unique position to reach out to the citizens and to make EU politics more transparent and accountable.

Since the EU directly affects the daily lives of the EU citizens, **the role of political involvement in EU decision making** to gain public support for the EU has become crucial. The political participation of people in EU matters influences the strength of democracy: the better the citizens are engaged, the more legitimate the power and the policy are. [The Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap](#) from 16 September 2016 calls on Member States to improve communication and to address citizens' fears, hopes and expectations, having as its ultimate goal the regaining of trust and legitimacy among the European citizens. The EU has to be a "citizens' project" in order to succeed.

Over the last decade, the EU has introduced numerous **procedures of public engagement** in order to increase the legitimacy of EU matters. Among others, the European citizens' initiative, [Council regulation \(EU\) No 390/2014](#) establishing the 'Europe for Citizens' programme for the period of 2014–2020, the petition rights to the European Parliament, and the work of the European Ombudsman. The European Commission has also set up its regular cooperation formats for the civil society by involving it via public consultations and including it in the process of preparing for the impact assessments of EU initiatives.

According to the findings in the [28th Bi-annual Report of COSAC](#), the majority of **national Parliaments have specific action plans** aimed at improving the interaction between them and the wider public. These action plans provide information about a wide range of actions and tools designed to enhance the legitimacy of EU decision making, such as inquiry services, petition rights, online platforms for public consultations, or initiatives targeting young people. However, the majority of national Parliaments indicated that there were no specific rules on the framework for involving citizens in EU related matters. This could reflect the possibility that EU matters are not handled separately from domestic politics in their models of public engagement.

Besides the formalised ways of political involvement at the EU level, there are other **face-to-face forms of political participation**, such as taking part in debates organised by EU institutions or expressing views to the elected representatives in the European Parliament or the national Parliament. According to the 28th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, the committees responsible for EU matters involved civil society in parliamentary debates both directly (by actively seeking direct contacts with civil society organisations and involving them in hearings, workshops and seminars) and indirectly (sharing information). Almost a third of the national Parliaments indicated that the involvement was achieved by their government, which involved civil society organisations and citizens before rendering EU materials to the Parliament.

There are also the new ways of expressing opinions, for example, online, in social media. This contributes to the development of **digital platforms that allow citizens to be more engaged** in EU matters. According to the 28th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, over half of the national Parliaments have digital platforms that allow citizens to be engaged in EU matters and to express their opinions on topics under discussion. Such platforms range from contact forms on the website, webpages for citizens to express their views, Facebook pages, twitter accounts, Instagram sites, e-petition forms, and blogs. [Social media certainly also increases the level of interest](#) in EU matters and offers easy access to data and unrestricted insight into politics in general.

Creating visibility and public awareness by compelling ministers to publicly justify the negotiated outcome of EU meetings can be an effective measure to make EU affairs more accessible to the public. The attractiveness of parliamentary questions is enhanced by the fact that MPs or parliamentary party groups can raise almost any question they want ([Auel & Raunio, 2014](#)). Furthermore, whether committees meet in public can have a considerable impact on the ability of the electorate to follow parliamentary work. Therefore, providing minutes and streamed broadcasts on the internet may be important as it provides more regular information to a larger audience than attendance at meetings. More plenary debates on EU matters could provide citizens with the opportunity to learn about what is on the agenda of EU politics and what are the positions of parties on these issues.

According to the findings in the 28th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, the majority of EU Affairs Committee **meetings in national Parliaments are regularly open to the public**. All Parliaments have written minutes of the debates on EU Affairs Committee meetings, and in the majority of the Parliaments these are freely available to the public. Half of the national Parliaments hold *ad hoc* plenary debates on EU matters whenever deemed relevant, and the other half of the national Parliaments have such debates on a regular basis. Some form of debate takes place at the plenaries of national Parliaments before or after the European Council, with either the Prime Minister or the European Affairs Minister present. At their plenaries, some national Parliaments discuss the European Commission work programme, subsidiarity issues, EU committee reports on EU matters, important EU documents, or overviews of government activities in implementing EU policy. Most notably, the **main topics debated at plenary** have been related to the migration crisis, Brexit, the future of the EU, climate change, CETA and TTIP, and the digital agenda.

The EU has created a variety of forms and platforms in order to increase public participation and citizens' engagement in the political life of the EU. However, many citizens are still not very connected to the EU; they are either indifferent towards or mistrust the EU. It has become evident that the participation of the national Parliaments in the EU affairs has gradually increased and that the national Parliaments constitute an important channel of citizens' representation in the EU.

Some points for discussion:

- 1) Should national Parliaments play a more active role in the deliberation of European Union issues at large?
- 2) What examples of best practices are there of national Parliaments involving civil society and citizens in debates on EU matters?
- 3) How could national Parliaments further raise the visibility of EU-related parliamentary discussions and decision making?