



European citizens agree on agenda for future of Europe debate

Environment and energy; social welfare and the family; and Europe's global role, its external borders and immigration - these were the topics chosen by members of the public to be discussed over the coming months in the biggest-ever pan-European debate on the future of Europe.

Over the weekend of 7-8 October, 200 citizens from all 25 EU member states came together in Brussels to agree on a 'European Citizens' Agenda', discussing and identifying the issues which matter to them most. The results of their deliberations have now been handed to the organisers of the national debates which will take place in every EU country in early 2007, with the results of all these discussions presented to EU policy-makers in the spring.

This weekend's ground-breaking event launched a process designed to ensure that the voices of Europe's citizens are heard in the current debate over the EU's future direction following the 'No' votes to the EU's constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands in 2005. This unprecedented exercise will provide key input for the decisions on the future of the constitutional process which will be taken by EU leaders before the end of 2008.

The citizens have succeeded in giving a real sense of direction and impetus to this whole process, said Luc Tayart de Borms, Managing Director of the King Baudouin Foundation, which is leading the project.

The members of the public chosen to participate in this event were selected randomly to reflect the diversity of the population in terms of age, income and profession, following the same methodology used for opinion polls.

During 48 hours of intensive discussions at the Agenda-Setting Event, they were asked to identify the issues which were most important for them and discuss the key goals which Europe should aim to achieve in the areas chosen for further debate.

They started with a list of 24 topics identified during interviews with participants ahead of the event and gradually narrowed these down to produce the final list of three broad topics for discussion at the national debates.

There was a high level of consensus across national boundaries on what those issues should be. As one participant put it: Knowing that citizens can come together for the first time and, despite language and cultural differences, agree on a common agenda in 48 hours, is a lesson to our politicians to make the EU work faster and better.

More than 100 observers attended the event to watch the citizens' deliberations. They commented in particular on the often original insights and observations made by participants, their ability to distinguish between the different levels of decision-making - European, national and regional - and the connections they made between different policy areas.

In her keynote speech to participants on the first day of the event, European Commission President Margot Wallström pledged her support for the project, stressing that it was essential for the EU to overcome its participation deficit as it considers the way forward.



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The Commission's Director-General for Communications Claus Srensen echoed this, saying that the Commission would reflect the results of this and initiatives launched within the framework its Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate in its report to the June 2007 European Council.

Partners in the project and observers stressed the need for EU policy-makers to ensure that the expectations of citizens participating in this exercise are not disappointed. It is essential for them to see their recommendations given due weight in the political process.

The Consultations are genuinely innovative, adapting techniques previously used at a more local level to a multi-lingual, transnational setting, using interpretation and sophisticated technology to transcend the boundaries of geography and language and create a truly European debate.

ECC Project Media Coordinator: Nathalie Calmejane, ECAS, nathalie.calmejane@ecas.org
Tel: +32.2.548.98.27 +32.2.512.01.13, Fax: +32.2.511.90.87

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