

Permanent Citizen Dialogue in Ostbelgien

PRESS INFORMATION

Motivation and history

In recent years, trust in politics has been shrinking. The Permanent Citizen Dialogue in Ostbelgien aims at fighting this phenomenon: it intends to achieve the following objectives:

- actively involve citizens;
- make political processes comprehensible;
- strengthen the support of public decisions.

Through the participation in assemblies, citizens are given a deeper insight into the work of a politician: they get a better understanding of what it means to thoroughly inform themselves on a topic, to exchange arguments and finally, to agree on a text. The involvement of citizens in the political decision-making process should help increase the legitimacy of public decision-making and thus, ultimately strengthen the democratic institutions.

In autumn 2017, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community started a first Citizen Dialogue around the topic of childcare. Motivated by positive feedback from participants, it then developed the idea of making the Citizen Dialogue permanent.

In spring 2018, they contacted the "G1000" – a group of experts experienced in citizen involvement – in order to discuss the implementation of this idea. In summer 2018, "G1000" and the "Foundation of future generations" invited notable Belgian and international experts to develop a model for permanent citizen involvement in the German-speaking Community.

Based on this model, the Parliament then elaborated and voted in February 2019 in favour of a law (decree) regarding the introduction of a permanent citizen involvement in the German-speaking Community, called "Dekret zur Einführung eines permanenten Bürgerdialogs in der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft."

Implementation has started in September 2019 with the appointment of the first Citizen Council and the first Citizen Assembly in March 2020.

The pillars of the Dialogue

In order to achieve these objectives, three precepts have been determined:

Stability of the Dialogue: Citizens are regularly called to meetings to discuss certain topics and make recommendations. A Citizen Council organises these meetings and oversees the implementation.

Representativity of the Assembly: The citizens taking part in the dialogue are randomly selected. This will allow the involvement of citizens, who would otherwise probably never have got a chance to speak. During the selection, certain criteria – such as age, sex, geographical origin and socio-economic background – will be considered, so that the selected citizens represent a good cross section of the population. Additionally, there will be a continuous change regarding the citizens taking part in the dialogue.

Quality of the debate: Citizens must be well prepared, informed and supervised, in order to be able to formulate their recommendations with full knowledge of the facts. Assemblies are led by a professional facilitator.

Bodies and Participants

The permanent citizen involvement is based on several bodies:

- The *Citizen Assembly*: It is the heart of the citizen involvement. During these assemblies, topics are discussed, and recommendations formulated. These Citizen Assemblies take place between one and three times a year. Between 25 and 50 people take part. Attendance is voluntary. The participants are randomly selected amongst the citizens who are at least 16 years old and have their main residence in the German-speaking Community. Ideally, the participants should be a representative cross section of the population. People who perform certain mandates, hold public offices or functions are excluded in order to avoid any conflict of interest.
- The *Citizen Council*: The 24 members of the Council define the topics addressed during the Citizen Assembly. Ideally, these people already have participated in a previous Citizen Assembly. These 24 people are also selected by lot. Their term of office is limited to 18 months. Every six months, a third of the Citizen Council is substituted. The Citizen Council meets on a regular basis. Its role is to prepare, organise and follow-up the Citizen Assembly. In addition, the Citizen Council is tasked to evaluate the Citizen Assemblies that have already been held in order to draw conclusions for future panels. Finally, the Citizen Council monitors the implementation of the recommendations.
- The *Permanent Secretary*: The secretary takes on the daily management of the Permanent Citizen Dialogue. The secretary prepares all the resolutions made by the Citizen Council and the Citizen Assembly. This especially involves the organisation and execution of the drawing lots, the recruitment of the facilitator, the selection of information and experts, public relations, the management of the budget and all the logistical aspects. The Permanent Secretary is part of the parliamentary administration.
- The Parliament and the government of the German-speaking Community.

Agenda setting for the Assembly

The Citizen Council determines the topics addressed during the Citizen Assembly. These topics should, as a rule, be within the competences of the German-speaking Community. Such a restriction is important because both citizens and politicians have an interest in ensuring that the recommendations made during the Citizen Assembly can actually be implemented. However, there is a possibility to deal with issues that do not relate to the competences of the German-speaking Community if these generate an exceptional public interest.

The Citizen Council is able to address proposals of topics submitted by its own members. Proposals may also be formulated by the Parliament's political groups and the government (limited to three proposals per calendar year). In addition, citizens from the German-speaking Community may also submit proposals. In order to guarantee a certain representativeness, these proposals have to be supported by at least 100 citizens. Ultimately, the Citizen Council decides completely freely on the topics that will be addressed by the Citizen Assembly.

The proceeding of the Dialogue

As soon as the topic is set, the Citizen Assembly convenes. Citizens will then need an estimated 2-3 days to discuss the topic presented. In order to decide in full knowledge of the facts, an information package is compiled, various experts and stakeholders are consulted, and in-depth discussions take place. The whole process is supervised by a qualified facilitator. Finally, the Citizen Assembly adopts, ideally by consensus, a series of recommendations.

These recommendations must be followed by concrete actions. Since the Parliament and the government are primarily responsible, the procedure provides for an open exchange between citizens and politicians. First, the recommendations are presented in a public committee session and debated jointly. Subsequently, the members of the responsible committee and the relevant minister meet to formulate a report on the recommendations. This report describes if and how the recommendations will be implemented. If political representatives conclude that a recommendation cannot be implemented, this must be explicitly justified. Finally, the citizens and the politicians meet again to discuss the report. The Citizen Council then follows the implementation of the recommendations. An additional public committee meeting will be held within one year during which the participants from the Citizen Assembly get informed about the implementation of the recommendations.

The allocated funds

The Citizen Council adopts an annual budget which must be submitted for approval to the Parliament's bureau. Upon approval, appropriate funds are provided for in the budget of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

The funds are used to cover the Permanent Secretary, the compensation of citizens participating in the Citizen Council and Citizen Assemblies, organisational and logistical expenses, the fees of the experts and the facilitator, the costs occasioned by the lottery and much more.

The total amount of money needed depends essentially on the number, size and extent of Citizen Assemblies.

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