

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS REPORT

The Forum succeeded in steering the discussion towards the fundamental question of democratic values and active citizenship as constitutive elements of EU democracy today and tomorrow. This discussion produced operationally transferable conclusions for further policy making in the field of civic participation. This report summarises the conference proceedings and presents the key messages in a nutshell.

I. OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE FORUM – Thursday, 13th November 2008

The opening addresses provided the essential impetus for reflection and for deepening the knowledge around the meaning of civic participation: The **Commissioner Ján Figel'** touched on the importance of the continuation of the civil dialogue as an element for the future of European integration and on the participation and support of the grass root level as a vector of legitimacy to the European project. **Hannu Takkula** reflected and reiterated that it is worth making participation a subject on its own, due to its capacity to cultivate and bring about common values among the peoples of Europe. **Jean-Pierre Jouyet** highlighted mobility as one of the most effective elements to incite towards a new generation of European citizens and reminded the opportunity that the event at La Rochelle offered to civil society to engage in public dialogue. **Janusz Marszalek** concluded that civic participation has also an impact in the reconstruction and peace process as well as a role in strengthening a sense of belonging to Europe and the building of a common

identity with respect for diversity, a message also strongly echoed in **Marek Mora's** speech.

II. FORUM OPENING PLENARY – Friday, 14th November 2008

The opening plenary was scheduled to provide reflection opportunities and serve as input for the subsequent thematic workshops. **Odile Quintin** in her introductory address reflected on the issues of mobility – as an enabling factor of civic participation and on the connection between civic participation and the current big challenges we face. **Sandra Kalniete** dwelled on the importance of History and of learning from the past for forming a common European consciousness and on the role of civic participations in attaining such common identity. She called for Europeans to ensure tolerance and mutual understanding vis-à-vis their differing stories about memories and seek reconciliation among them, because these are a part of Europe's living history and of our collective memory, a point endorsed by **Tomasso Padoa-Schioppa**, who offered his personal account on the subject.

The ensuing panel debate offered a concrete follow-up to the key-notes by presenting the panellists' reflections on the value of citizens' participation in EU context through the concrete programme actions and taking into consideration the broader theoretical and political framework. They demonstrated the innovative forms of participation inspired and encouraged by the Europe for Citizens programme.

III. FORUM THEMATIC WORKSHOPS

The parallel Workshops introduced and analysed the proposed themes, by outlining the general context, identifying existing challenges and proposing prospective solutions which require EU-level action. This analysis was complemented by concrete examples of projects supported by the Europe for Citizens programme as well as other interesting EU-wide initiatives. The

ensuing discussions revealed the progress, the remaining obstacles ahead and some useful recommendations.

The Workshops one by one:

Workshop "Europe on the move"

This workshop was about the development of civic engagement in the European Union:

Firstly, the workshop gave an overview of the: a) growing relevance of EU for European citizens as a result of the increase of the Community competences and participatory nature of EU democratic process, b) emergence of the European civil society, c) greater citizens interest and involvement in the European affairs.

It examined whether the existing opportunities provided by the EU institutional and decision-making setup have been fully explored by the EU citizens and civil society or if there is any unused potential.

Furthermore, it was called to address the issue of adequate response of European civil society to citizens' interest in the EU affairs and effective transfer mechanism of citizens' feedback on to the relevant decision-makers in the EU.

The following questions were dealt with:

- *In which areas of EU affairs is the citizens mobilisation most apparent?*
- *What has been the response to this development from the European civil society?*
- *What are the most effective links between EU citizens, EU civil society and EU decision-makers?*
- *What tools can the Europe for Citizens programme offer to European citizens and European civil society to fully engage in the EU affairs?*
- *What additional support is needed and how it can be generated by the Europe for Citizens programme?*

The workshop provided feedback as to the existence of links between citizens and the EU. These exist at horizontal level, in the multiple connections through projects, citizens and networks which result in the sharing of information, values and in learning; and vertically, between citizens and EU level, an interaction that results in more citizens' engagement and input to policy-making and political

priorities.

The Europe for Citizens programme should reflect this dual dimension. But for the programme not to become a mere fig leaf for clearing the EU institutions' conscience regarding participatory democracy, an **accompanying policy for civic participation should also be developed.**

Workshop "European Elections: What role for civil society?"

European Elections present an opportunity at European level:

The workshop explored the added value of the European civil society including local authorities in motivating the European citizens to participate in the European Parliament elections and in empowering them to make informed choices.

Following questions were addressed:

- *What are the most effective methods and tools the European civil society organisations employ to raise awareness about the significance of the European Parliament elections and about the issues which are key in the European citizens' political choices?*
- *How to guarantee both national and European dimension of debates of European elections?*
- *What are the examples of information campaigns, public debates and other types of events civil society and local authorities organise at local, national, cross-border or European level?*
- *What lessons can be drawn from these examples for the development of the EU in general and for the Europe for Citizens programme in particular?*

The situation in the field revealed that the majority of citizens are alienated from the EU decision making system and they either aren't informed about the upcoming elections or empowered to make informed choices with regard to them. European elections are still based on national realities and currently there are no bridges in place between participatory and representative democracy. The creation of a true European public space is an ongoing process, which can be facilitated by the European Political Foundations, European action programmes and by civil society campaigning.

For citizens to get connected to the European political reality the EU must touch upon more local and concrete issues, issues that people care about. Therefore the EU programmes should take up and encourage such initiatives. These programmes should also facilitate the two-way process between the European and the grass roots level and act as the appropriate channel between what is going on at the two levels. The debate in the workshop also revealed that

strengthening participatory democracy actually strengthens citizens' participation in the European Elections, which **leads to a stronger representative democracy.**

Workshop "Innovation through participation: democratic innovations"

The workshop dealt with new, innovative forms of civic engagement:

This workshop looked at new emerging forms of participation such as deliberative polls, local referenda, e-democracy, e-participation, neighbourhood and youth councils amongst others. It examined their impact on the European citizens, European civil society organisations and participatory process in the EU in general.

The following questions were addressed:

- *What opportunities do the new forms of civic participation present for*

strengthening citizens' interest in the public life at the European level and forging closer link between the European citizens and the EU institutions?

- *How is the new dynamic reflected by the European civil society organisations, local authorities and other relevant actors?*

- *What are the consequences of the emergence of the new forms of civic engagement for the current Europe for Citizens programme as well as future generation programme?*

Observations from the field have revealed that participation nowadays can be facilitated by new tools such as Internet. The new generation of internet-driven, wiki tools are by nature less consensual and more open to controversy and disagreement.

The presentations and the debate revealed that participation too starts with disagreeing on topics relevant to ordinary people and with discussing controversial issues. **The message for EU institutions would be then to be more open to disagreement. And for doing so, it should be ready to use the new generation tools in an effective way.**

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL Mrs. ODILE QUINTIN

Mrs Quintin recapitulated the main ideas that came out from the thematic workshops. A general conclusion: civic participation is an important and indispensable democratic ingredient, due to the vitality and legitimacy it confers to European democracy. In this area there is room for EU initiatives

but also an opportunity for the Member States to exchange good civic participation practices.

Another conclusion repeats culture's and mobility's contribution to civic participation. They offer to expand the cultural horizons and the engagement of those practicing them. Civic participation was also found as key element in the efforts to combat the current financial crisis. It is also needed to meet the more long-term challenges, like climate change or the Lisbon strategy. For any such project to be strong, it needs to be embraced by its citizens that want to take an active role in it.

The key messages of the Forum in a nutshell

- 1) Civic Participation should be made a subject on its own
- 2) Civic participation confers vitality and legitimacy to the European democratic system
- 3) Mobility is one of the most effective tools to promote civic participation in the EU context
- 4) Civic participation contributes to the attainment of a common European identity
- 5) Strengthening participatory democracy means strengthening representative democracy too
- 6) The Europe for Citizens Programme should be accompanied by a relevant policy
- 7) New generation "e-participation" tools, in allowing controversy and disagreement, present a particular challenge for the "consensus-oriented" EU Institutions
- 8) Contemporary crisis and long term preoccupations are both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of civic participation