

European Citizens Consultation:
A large consultation on a vague topic

*Raphaël Kies,
Monique Leyenaar,
Kees Niemöller*

Introduction

The European Citizens' Consultation (ECC09) is a 3.8 million participative experiment conducted by a broad consortium of more than 40 European partner organizations, led by the King Baudouin Foundation (KBF), and co-funded by the European Commission under its “Debate Europe” project (COMM 2008). It is one of the main projects financed by the Commission for testing new procedures aiming at legitimating the EU through citizens’ deliberation. For the 2009 edition the topic of the consultation was: ‘What can the EU do to shape our economic and social future in a globalised world?’ The topic was chosen because it appeared to be of greatest concern for the EU population, a timely and relevant input for helping the EU decision-makers to elaborate the EU new economic strategy (Europe 2020), and an appropriate input for the European elections of June 2009. ECC09 follows a particularly elaborated methodology aiming at defining the main citizens’ concerns on the topic of the consultation and at elaborating common recommendations. It combines web-debates open to all the EU citizens, moderated face-to-face debates with a random sample of citizens, the usage of e-voting technologies for gathering citizens’ opinions and proposals, as well as the intervention of facilitators, experts and editorial responsible. With almost 150.000 visitors online, 29.536 online registered users, 1.635 randomly selected citizens participating at 27 face-to-face national consultations, ECC09 is arguably the broadest and most complex pan-european consultation ever realized.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a general evaluation of the deliberativeness of the different phases of the consultation and to assess to what extent the democratic objectives of ECC09 were met. The analysis of the deliberativeness and democratic potential of ECC09 can be subdivided into three research questions.

1) To what extent did the debates and proposals elaborated by the ECC09 comply with the deliberative standards? This will obviously depend on the definition that is given to deliberation, a topic to which we will later refer. Our research suggests that despite ECC09 was a fascinating and valuable participative event, it did not meet all the deliberative standards that would be required to become a legitimate and influential EU democratic instrument. From a procedural perspective the requirement of reaching a limited number of common recommendations occurred to the detriment of the great variety of citizens' opinions and propositions that were formulated during the different consultative phases. With regards to the online phase, the debates and voting were to a large extent dominated by citizens already well informed, and organized groups generally not concerned by the topic of the consultation. Finally participants in the face-to-face national consultations were selected on quotas that did not ensure a sufficient representativeness of the EU population.

2) Did the ECC09 recommendations influence the decision makers? Our analysis reveals that ECC did not influence, even indirectly, decision-makers. This absence of impact can be explained by two important shortcomings: The first is that ECC09 is still an experimental procedure which deliberative quality needs to be ascertained before decision-makers can trust it; the second, derives from the choice of the topic that was far too broad in order to lead to propositions that could have any tangible political impact.

3) Can ECC09 contribute to face the EU democratic deficit by increasing the knowledge of and the trust in the EU institutions? The data gathered in this study suggest that we can be quite confident concerning the potential of ECC to allow citizens to be closer to and better informed about the EU. What is more problematic is the extent to which the

beneficial civic impacts of ECC will also concern the large majority of citizens who did not participate at the event.

The chapter is divided in three sections. We will first present and discuss the way the consultation is organized in relation to the other existing consultative processes. This comparison will provide useful standards for evaluating the deliberativeness of the procedures followed by ECC. The two following sections will examine the findings concerning the deliberativeness of the web-debates and of the face-to-face debates that occurred during the 27 national consultations. The analysis is based on original data stemming from the scientific evaluation report commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation (Leyenaar and Niemöller 2010). It also refers to existing studies on ECC 09 that focus on the deliberative quality of the online phase (Kies and Wojcik 2010, Badouard 2010), on the general structure of the consultation (Wojcik 2011), and on the potential impact of the event on decision makers (Karlsson 2010, 2011).

Introduction to ECC09

ECC09 follows a highly complex procedure that reflects an attempt to fulfill objectives that are to a large extent incompatible between them: it aims to be a strongly visible and inclusive consultation, to promote deliberative debates, to deliver influential proposals, and to increase the trust in EU institutions. Concerning the political impact, the promoters of the project argue that the recommendations elaborated through ECC09 could serve “as policy advisors: feeding citizens’ opinions into the political debate at both European and national levels”. With regards to the civic potential, this same document states that ECC09 could contribute (i) to close the gap between the citizens and the EU institutions, (ii) bring the EU closer to citizens and citizens closer to the EU, (iii) increase the general public’s interest in the EU by generating substantial media coverage of the dialogue between the EU and its citizens and (iv) promote interaction between citizens and policy-makers.¹ In this section we will present the different phases of the consultation and will discuss its deliberativeness by comparing it to other existing types of citizens’ consultations.

The different phases of ECC

Similarly to a rocket that is constituted of different detachable components for each phase of its ascension, ECC is a consultation that is subdivided in four major phases leading to the elaboration of 15 shared propositions. The first phase of the consultation, the online phase, was introduced for the first time in 2009 with the objective to increase the visibility and inclusiveness of the consultation. Concretely it corresponds to a specific web-portal that offered the possibility to all the EU citizens to debating and elaborating proposals on the topic of the consultation during several months (from December until March 2009). From a technical perspective, the discursive web-portal was subdivided into 28 national web sites (there were two for Belgium, one for the Flemish part and one for the French-speaking part) and one general web site (the European portal) which provided basic information and direct access to the national web sites. The national web sites were structured in three complementary sections: the information section, the debate

¹ These goals are drawn from the website of the project: <http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/content/about-project> [Accessed: 2 February 2011].

section, and the proposal and voting section. Each national web site was moderated by one or several responsible of the national teams that had received specific instructions therefore. One of the major incentives for participating to the online phase was that the ten most voted recommendations of each national web site would be discussed during the next phase of the consultation. It is important to note that in order to participate actively, whether for posting a message or for elaborating and voting on proposals, citizens were required to register to the national forum to which they wished to contribute. While such a requirement was justified in order to avoid that the same person would vote several times, it constituted a barrier to the inclusive and transnational nature of the online event.

The online phase was followed by two days of consultation that were organized in each of the 27 Member States, over three weekends in March 2009. A total of 1.635 citizens chosen at random on the basis of quotas participated at this event. The number of participants varied from about 30 participants for the small countries to more the 100 participants for the larger countries. The objective of the national consultation was to elaborate ten recommendations that reflected at best the opinions expressed during the two days of the consultation. In order to reach this outcome the national organizers had to follow a strict scenario that defined step by step how the consultation should take place². On the first day of the consultation citizens were invited to define together the ten concerns that should be further discussed, then on the second day, they were requested to draft recommendations and express a confident vote on these ten issues. The consultation alternated between small groups debates (table of 10-12 people) during which the opinions and recommendations were elaborated and general event during which, among other things, citizens were required to vote on the recommendations they had privileged. This phase of the consultation involved a large number of actors: (i) the facilitators whose role was to promote an inclusive and respectful debate, while at the same time encouraging citizens to reach a consensus on common proposals, (ii) the resource persons (also called experts) who, depending on the phase of the consultation, were requested to help citizens formulate realistic recommendations by providing relevant information or

² This method elaborated by the German consultative firm IFOK that was inspired by the *21st century meeting*. For a critical analysis of the methods see Wojcik (2010).

by challenging them; (iii) the editorial team, that was responsible for gathering the ideas and proposals formulated in the different tables and for sharing them with the other national consultations taking place simultaneously; (iv) the national candidates to the European elections that were invited at the end of the national consultations to discuss the final list of recommendations. The communication technologies played an important role for transferring to the editorial teams the opinions and proposals elaborated at each table, for allowing participants to express their preferences and for sharing images and information with the national consultations occurring simultaneously in the other countries.

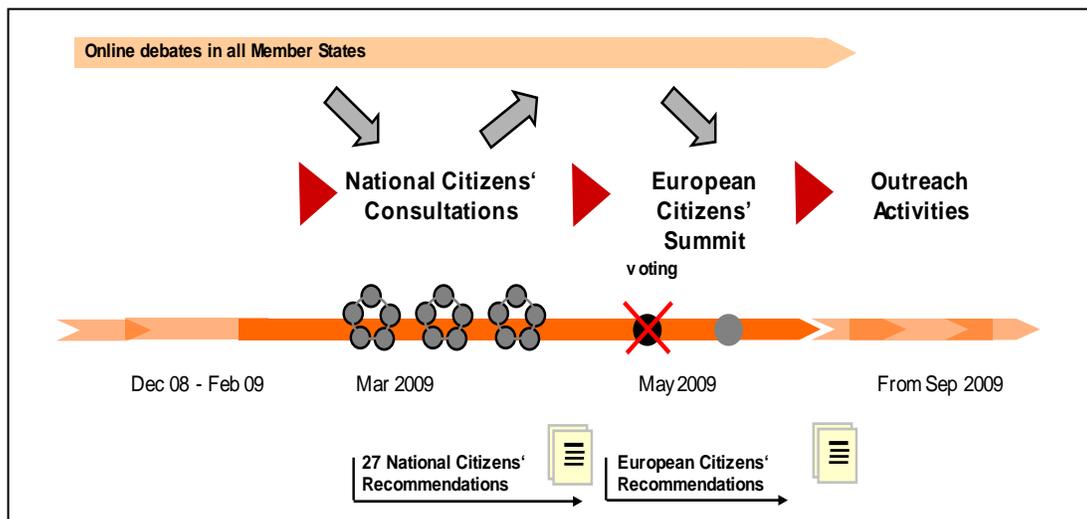
In the third phase of the consultation the ten most voted recommendations of the 27 members states (a total of 280 propositions) were summarized into a limited number of recommendations (88) that were included in conceptual categories (such as economy, employment, social policy, health, etc.) and presented on each national website. The registered internet users could comment on them but only the participants to the national consultations had the right to vote (online or per postal mail) on the 15 recommendations that they wish to become the official and final recommendations.³ At the end of the voting period 958 out of the 1600 participants at the national consultation had voted (Wojcik 2010: 14). This rather low rate of participation is probably due to the absence of internet connection for some users as well as to the decreased interest of some participants once the national consultations were over. It is also likely that the organizers underestimated the knowledge and capacities required for expressing preferences on such a large number of specialized proposals.

The consultation was concluded by *the European summit* that took place in Bruxelles on May 10-11. For this final phase, some 150 volunteers participating at the national consultations had been selected on the basis of their English proficiency and some basic quotas (age, gender, nationality). During the first day they reviewed one more time the final recommendation and, the second day, they handed over and discussed these

³ Initially the vote was open to all the registered internet users, but the organizers changed their mind after they noted that the web-sphere tended to be dominated by some organized groups that could heavily influence the outcome of the vote.

recommendations with top EU policy-makers in an official setting.⁴ This European summit was followed by four thematic conferences (climate change, health, education and fight against poverty) in four different countries (Denmark, France, Ireland and Slovakia) where citizens from neighboring countries were invited to discuss the recommendations of the European summit with newly elected MEPs. These follow-up activities of the consultation will not be analyzed in this chapter.

Figure 1: Different phases of ECC09



A maxi mini-public on a vague topic...

According to the classification adopted by different scholars (see for example Goodin 2008; Gastil 2008; Smith 2010), the European citizens' consultation fits in the category of the "mini-publics". The mini-public is the generic term - originally inspired by the "minipopulus" of Dahl (1989: 340) - referring to the consultation procedures allowing a limited number of lay citizens to elaborate a considered judgment on a predefined topic through moderated discursive exchanges with other lay citizens and experts. The outcome can be the expression of a more informed opinion (like the outcome of the *deliberative opinion poll*) or the elaboration of propositions (like the *Citizens' assemblies*, *citizens'*

⁴ The policy-makers that participated at the event were Hans-Gert Pöttering (President European Parliament), José Manuel Barroso (President of the European Commission), Margot Wallström (vice-president of the Commission), Mario Sepi (president du the European and social committee), Luc Van den Brande (president of the committee of regions) as well as the heads of the four major groups of the European Parliament.

juries or the *consensus conference*). From a normative perspective Goodin argues that the mini-publics are democratic instrument for they correspond to “groups small enough to be genuinely deliberative and representative enough to be genuinely democratic – although they rarely meet standards of statistical representativeness, and they are never representative in the electoral sense” (Goodin 2008: 11).

The European citizens’ consultation 2009 is however a particular type of mini-public. It is particular not only because it follows, as we just saw, a complex procedure but also because it involves a large amount of citizens of different nationalities and deals with a topic that is extremely vague. The involvement of a large number of citizens from different socio-linguistic horizons raises the question of the “loss of plurality”. This danger results from the tension between, at one end of the spectrum, the plurality of opinions and proposals generated by hundreds of participants on- and off- line and, at the other end of spectrum, the requirements for obtaining a limited number of clear recommendations supposedly shared by all the participants. By analyzing the structure of the consultation this loss of plurality is perceptible in at least four moments. First, it occurred between the online phase and the national consultations because only the ten most voted proposals of each national web-forum were supposed to be discussed during the national consultations. In cases such as France or Germany where respectively 257 and 132 online proposals were elaborated, it is needless to say that much of the substance of the web-debates got lost. Second, it occurred during the face-to-face consultations because participants had to restrict their choice to only ten topics on which elaborate recommendations and because moderators and the editorial teams were asked to put aside minority and conflicting views and propositions (Wojcik 2011). A third important loss occurred through the summary realized by the editorial team that transformed the 280 national proposals into only 88 common recommendations. The fourth one intervened in the following voting phase that required the participants to the national consultations to choose 15 proposals they preferred among the 88. While such a loss of plurality is inevitable and normal in a process aiming at reaching some coherent, shared and synthetic recommendations, ECC09 clearly faces a problem of scale. By way of comparison, the loss of plurality of ECC09 is not comparable to the one of a consultative

procedure such as *citizens' jury* that is based on the inputs of 12 to 24 citizens over two or four days.

The concern of loss of plurality is accentuated by the second major limit of this consultation experience, namely that the topic of the consultation is extremely broad and vague. The question of the social and economic future of Europe in a globalized world is indeed likely to attract almost infinite number opinions and critics on what should be done and how it should be implemented. Moreover there is also a risk that the proposals that are elaborated in the end of the process will tend to be too general to serve the decision-makers and to attract the attention of the media. To that extent as well ECC09 differs from the existing minipublics. Indeed even large minipublics, such as the *21st Century Town Meeting*⁵, generally deal with much more limited topics such as the “electoral reform”, the “reconstruction of ground zero”, the “reorganization of hospital services”, etc. When the topic is better defined, the propositions and options are likely to be less numerous, more concrete and, consequently, more seriously taken into account by the media and decision-makers.

Evaluation of online phase

The main reason for implementing the online discursive platform was to render the consultation more inclusive by offering the possibility to all the EU citizens to participate in the consultation. In this section we will further analyze the weakness and strength of the online phase by observing to what extent the debates they generated were deliberative and whether the online propositions that resulted from these debates influenced the national debates.

Method of analysis

⁵ The *21st century meetings* are consultative events organized during one day that can involve between 500 and 5000 people in order to elaborate some common proposals. The structure of these broad consultation has inspired to a large extent the structure followed by ECC for organizing the national consultations. One major difference is that participants are self-selected while for ECC they are randomly chosen on the basis of some quotas. For examples of 21st century meeting see Lunkenmeyer et al. (2005).

In order to evaluate the deliberativeness of the online process we adopted the Habermasian discursive criteria (1989, 1996, 2005) and operationalized each criterion by adapting their evaluative standards according to the nature, objective and characteristics of the debates scrutinized (Janssen and Kies 2005, Kies 2010). Concerning the online national forums we looked at the following deliberative features: (i) whether debates were *inclusive*; (ii) whether they were characterized by an *equal* participation; (iii) whether they were *reflexive*, *respectful*, *justified* and *on topic*. For the online proposals we assessed whether they were *justified*, *on topic* and *concrete*. The main sources for this research were (i) a survey that was sent to all the participants to the national consultations at the beginning and the end of the event, (ii) the content analysis of a sample of the debates occurring in eleven national web-forums and (iii) the content analysis of the 15 most voted proposals for a sample of seven countries.

Inclusiveness of online debates

The criterion of inclusion adapted to the online context of ECC09 requires that the national web-forums should contribute to gathering the diversity of opinions and concerns related to the topic of the consultation. Ideally the inclusiveness of the web-forum should be evaluated by assessing (through content analysis) whether the most important concerns related to the topic of the consultation were discussed and whether the active users of the web-forum were representative of the different categories of the population concerned by the consultation. Because of the absence of socio-demographic data and of the impossibility of evaluating the presence of all concerns on a broad topic such as social and economic future of Europe, the inclusive nature of the online forum could only be approximated by analyzing the usage of the national web-forums. The rationale is that the more the people visit the web-forums, the more likely these will be inclusive. Globally 29.536 people registered to the national web-forums and there were between January 1st and May 31st almost 150.000 different visitors.⁶ This means that each national web site was visited by an average of 30.8 different visitors per day and

⁶ The country with the higher rate of unique visitors was France (31.901) and the one with the lower rate was Cyprus (6.792).

that web sites together received 864.2 different visitors per day.⁷ This general data on the attendance rate should be considered as positive given that the EU issues are generally strongly repulsive for lay citizens and that ECC09 is an experimental procedure that does not guarantee any concrete impact on decision-making. A more accurate evaluation of the inclusion however requires that we also observe whether these registered users were active and representative of the plurality of opinions that are related to the topic of the consultation. In absence of socio-demographic data, we could approach the representativeness of the users by tracking (thanks to *Google Analytics*) how the users accessed the ECC website. According to these data the first source of traffic on national web sites are the referring web sites (for 23 web sites) followed by ‘direct access’ and ‘search engines’. Among the referring web sites, European institutional web sites like *Europa*, and social networks like *Facebook* generated the biggest traffic to the ECC portal. These were followed by web sites of associations involved in the ECC process like the *King Baudouin Foundation* and *Toute l’Europe*. Other associations mentioned as ‘sources’ are the *European Movement*, *Active Citizenship*, and *Euractiv*. In other words these findings suggest that the online communication campaign succeeded in mobilizing ‘friendly’ networks and institutional web sites that are generally visited by a well educated public already familiar with European matters. It did not succeed in attracting its target public of the consultation: the “lay” citizens⁸.

Equality of online debates

Closely related to the criterion of inclusiveness, the criterion of equality requires that participants have the same opportunity to debate and that a minority of users do not dominate the debates and the voting. The debates’ equality was assessed for a sample of seven countries by looking at the proportion of registered users that wrote at least one comment or proposal. The results are particularly low for less than one registered user in five (18.4%) wrote at least one message or proposal⁹. One reason explaining this occurrence is that many citizens registered to ECC09 just in order to vote for the

⁷ For detail data on proportion of participants per country see Kies and Wojcik (2010).

⁸ We owe this analysis to Romain Badouard (Kies and Wojcik 2010).

⁹ Through this sample we assessed the activity of 2.748 users and 507 were active. The proportion per country is the following: Bulgaria: 15.7%; Ireland 10%; Italy : 16,9% ; Luxembourg : 15,8% ; Malta : 10.9% ; Romania : 42,1% ; UK : 19,7%.

proposals formulated by the organization they belonged to. The prominent influence of interest groups, is for example visible through the most voted proposal in the French website titled “stepping out from nuclear energy for promoting the real energy for the future” that was able to gather the vote of 3000 persons in less than 24 hours. In order to enforce such a massive support, a specific link was posted in different activist websites providing instruction to their members on how to register to the ECC web sites and vote for the proposal. For certain topics, there was even a coordinated action for their promotion on several national web sites. This was the case of the “esperanto” proposal that reached the first position for 11 national web sites and that was generally among the top 10 proposals for the other national web sites (Badouard 2011). The absence of equality in the usage of the online forum was also perceptible among the citizens who participated at the national consultations, for only 39% visited their national online forum and, among them, the passive usage of the forum was largely preferred to an active one.¹⁰

Other deliberative criteria

A debate that is deliberative should not only be inclusive but should also promote an *epistemic* function. This requires that others opinions are taken into consideration (*reflexivity*), that opinions or propositions are justified (*justification*), that participants treat each other with respect and empathy (*respect*) and, obviously, that participants deal with the topic of the consultation (*topicality*) and refer directly or indirectly to the EU (*EU reference*). These criteria were measured (i) through content analysis of all the messages contained in a sample of 11 national web sites which corresponds to a total of 2.951 postings and (ii) through specific questions contained in a survey that was distributed to all the participants at the national consultations.

Table 1: Content analysis of deliberativeness of online forum for 11 countries (in%)

	Threads with msg	Average responses	Reflexivity	Average words	Absence of respect	Irrelevant messages	EU reference
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¹⁰ While 87% read the contributions of other participants only one third voted for proposals (33%), 23% participated in the online discussion, 14% elaborated at least one proposition and 12% initiated a debate.

Austria	81,6	2,2	70,8	116	3,9	62,7	38,7
Cyprus	21,0	0,4	46,5	243	0,0	4,7	62,8
France	46,5	1,5	50,5	105	1,5	38,5	38,7
Germany	55,3	2,3	74,4	117	1,7	25,6	13,2
Greece	22,2	0,4	35,1	219	0,0	2,7	62,8
Ireland	54,1	1,5	59,8	180	0,0	5,4	77,2
Italy	66,7	1,8	65,7	164	1,2	33,9	76,1
Luxembourg	29,6	0,6	40,5	217	0,0	40,5	71,4
Malta	30,8	0,8	45,8	98	8,3	12,5	37,5
Romania	70,0	2,5	35,6	151	6,7	19,2	45,2
UK	62,2	2,2	67,4	146	3,4	13,1	59,7
Average	49,1	1,5	53,8	160	2,4	23,5	53,0

The level of reflexivity of the debates was rather satisfactory for more than half of the messages analyzed (53,8%) referred to a preceding message. The level of reflexivity was generally higher in countries where a large number of messages were posted, such as Germany, Austria, and the United Kingdom, compared to countries where few messages were posted like Romania and Greece. The reflexive character of the debates was also measured by counting the number of messages contained in each thread. Almost half of the threads (49%) received at least one message and the average number of messages contained in the threads was 1,5. These rather positive data on reflexivity are confirmed by the participants to the national consultation: 23% of them considered that the users of the forum ‘took (their) opinions and arguments into account’ while only 9% did not agree with this statement.¹¹ An even more positive result was obtained for the level of respect for only 2% of the messages were coded as non respectful and 74% of the respondents to the survey perceived the debates ‘to be generally respectful’. This particularly good result could be interpreted two different ways. It could suggest that the forum is perceived as a serious and influential discursive locus, and that the topic is not conducive to aggressive debates. On the other side this high rate of respect may also suggest that there was no strong interest for the consultation, for otherwise the discussions would have been more enlivened and rude rough.

¹¹ A large majority (68%) had no opinion because as a limited number for citizens participating at the national consultations visited the ECC web sites (see supra).

While the criteria of *respect* and *reflexivity* were satisfactory many online contributions were not on topic: almost one quarter of the messages (24%) were coded as not related to the social and economic issues and only 53% of the messages referred to the EU. Lastly concerning the criterion of justification we did a preliminary analysis based on the length (in number of words) of the messages. This basic measurement suggests that the messages were quite well justified¹²: for the 11 countries analyzed, the average length of the messages was 160 words, which corresponds to a paragraph of 10-12 lines (in Times New Roman 12). The messages tended to be longer in countries where few messages were posted (Cyprus, Greece, and Luxembourg) and tended to be shorter in countries where the number of messages was higher, such as France, Germany, Romania and United Kingdom. The positive tendency illustrated by this preliminary assessment is confirmed by the survey realized among the participants to national consultation who were a majority (65,5%) to agree that ‘the contributions to the debates were generally insightful and intelligent’.

Analysis of online proposals

A total of 1.142 proposals were elaborated in the 28 ECC web sites. These were unevenly distributed among the countries: six web-sites contained more than 50 proposals¹³; 12 web sites contained between 20 and 50 proposals and 11 web sites had less than 20 proposals. There were also major differences concerning the number of votes that were attributed to different proposals. In France the most voted proposal received 3.829 votes, in Malta only 12. In order to evaluate their deliberative quality a content analysis was carried on for the top 15 proposals in 11 countries¹⁴. Since we were dealing with the top proposals we expected that their rationale would be justified (*justification*), that they would be on topic (*Topicality* and *EU related*) and offer concrete solutions for their application (*Concreteness*). As expected the level of justification was rather high: 72% of the proposals analyzed provided at least one justification of why something should be

¹² An accurate analysis of justification would require that each opinion or proposition is coded on the basis of the *level* and *type* of justification (see Kies, 2010: 46-48).

¹³ France (257), Germany (132), Spain (115), Italy (84) and Portugal (63)

¹⁴ For Malta and Romania there were only respectively 8 and 13 propositions.

done. This result is confirmed by the participants to the national consultations who agreed at a rate of 63% with the statement ‘online proposals were generally insightful and intelligent’. Online proposals were also rather concrete for two third of them (66%) did recommend concrete actions for their realization. A more disappointing finding is that almost one third (32%) was not linked with the topic of the consultation.¹⁵ This limited link with the topic of the consultation is also reflected by the fact that only 42% of the recommendations referred to the EU. Once again, there were important discrepancies among the countries of the sample. In France, only 20% of the most voted proposals mentioned the EU role whereas in Greece or Luxembourg this is the case for 80%. The reasons why so many proposals were off-topic can again be explained by the fact that several organized groups took ECC as an opportunity to express their concern even if this was not related to the topic of the consultation. France is an illuminating example of the presence of these organized groups: among the 15 most voted recommendations three were related to “bullfights”, two concerned the “end of nuclear energy”, and one concerned the “promotion of alternative medicine” and the “legalization of cannabis”.

The fact that the online phases attracted opinions and proposals that were off-topic should not come as a surprise for the online public space were open to everybody and the moderators were generally reluctant to censor for this could discredit the entire process. To some extent the uncontrolled nature of the webforums should be considered as deliberately positive because from the chaos of the free and loosely organized debates can emerge opinions and ideas that otherwise would not be expressed. A question that should be raised for the next generation of ECC is how to equilibrate (but not eliminate) the presence of organized groups.

Evaluation of national consultations

The face-to-face consultations, defined as *the heart of the consultative process*, were an impressive experiment given the large number of people participating in 27 different

¹⁵ Countries where the rate of off topic proposals was the highest were Germany (60%), Austria (53%), France (47%) and Ireland (47%).

countries. In what follows we will investigate the deliberativeness of these face-to-face consultations as well as their impact on its participants and decision makers.

Method

In order to evaluate the face-to-face consultations we first evaluated their *inclusiveness* by assessing whether the participants to the national consultation were representative of the EU population. We analyzed then whether the national consultations were perceived as *fair*. For measuring *fairness* we assessed whether the discursive exchanges were *equal* and whether the organization of the debates was appropriate from the viewpoint of *time for discussion, information provided and procedure followed*. Our third criterion was the *competence* of participants. The competence is measured by evaluating the level of communicative and issue related proficiency. Lastly, we looked at the impact of the national consultations by assessing whether participants changed opinions and preferences after deliberating (*internal impact*), and whether the propositions formulated during the national consultation were taken into account by the decision-makers and the media (*external impact*).

These data were gathered essentially through surveys that were sent to the participants to the national consultations. The surveys we refer to were distributed at three stages of the national consultation (at the beginning, at the end and three months later). Unfortunately, complementary research about the behaviour of the participants - i.e. through observations by trained observers, or content analysis – could not be conducted because of human and financial restrictions. The data available should, therefore, be considered as the subjective judgments of the participants themselves.

Findings

Inclusiveness of national consultations

As already indicated for the online phase, the criterion of inclusion requests that all relevant and affected groups in the population have an equal opportunity to participate in the process. In other words it requires that all opinions, preferences and arguments that are related to the topic of the consultation are laid on the table. For approximating the level of inclusion of the national consultations we observed to what extent the sampling procedures applied by ECC were successful for obtaining a representative sample of citizens. In order to obtain such a sample, the agencies that were responsible for the recruitment of the participants were requested to take into account quotas for gender, age, professional status and region. On the basis of these characteristics it seems that for most countries a sufficient demographic diversity was obtained. For the whole of EU, 49% of the participants were female and 51% male. The age distribution for all countries over five categories was: 18-29 years (20%), 30-39 years (17%), 40-49 years (20%), 50-59 years (20%), 60 years and older (23%). The survey however revealed, as this is common in such types of event, that people participating at the national consultations were compared to the EU average better educated, more interested in politics and more favourable to EU integration. As far as education is concerned, 54% positioned themselves above the average, while 33% of the citizens indicated that they consider themselves highly educated.¹⁶ Concerning the political involvement, 61.4% were *quite* or *very* interested in politics in general (while only 4.4% are *hardly* or *not at all* interested) and more than half of them (51.4%) were *quite* or *very* interested in EU politics (versus 7.4% who are *hardly* or *not at all* interested). The bias is even higher for the positioning on EU integration because more than three quarter of them (78.6%) considered that the membership of their country to the EU is a good thing (EU average is 53% [EB. 71, 2009: 91]) and 82.8% plan to participate to the next EP elections, a level that is almost the double of the effective turnout at the 2009 EP election (43%).

¹⁶ Countries with higher than average percentages of the highest educated were France (55%), Latvia (50%), Malta (54%), the UK (50%).

Fairness

The criterion of fairness demands that the process offer *fair conditions* to all participants. In this section, we will therefore concentrate on aspects of the procedures, and evaluate the conditions and constraints of the process, the rules and provisions regulating the dialogue, and the development of agreement. More specifically: was there a permissive atmosphere? Were there equal opportunities for everyone to express their opinions and arguments? And did the participants listen to each others' arguments? Overall, the events provided fair conditions and equal opportunities for the participants. In more detail, let us begin with the role of the *facilitator*, the person ultimately responsible for the fairness of the process. In 14% of the answers were respondents less than completely satisfied, saying that the facilitator sometimes or rarely managed to give everyone a chance to speak. Concerning the perception of the quality of debates among the participants values were generally very satisfactory: 93% (fully) agree that participants the participants had *equal speaking opportunities*, some two-thirds of the respondents (69%) said that often *disagreement in the group was allowed* (only 5% said rarely or never), 64% said that often *participants accepted different opinions as part of the debates* (only 6% said rarely or never). The item that mostly divided the respondents concerned the question of *whether some participants dominated the debates*: 49% (fully) agree, while 51% (fully) disagree. The perception of dominations seems to be very much country-related.¹⁷

Table 2: Fairness of national consultations (in %)

	Fully disagree	Disagree	Agree	Fully agree
During the discussion all participants had equal speaking opportunities	2	5	45	48
Some participants dominated the discussions	5	43	35	14
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
All participants were given equal opportunities to shape our final recommendations	1	1	24	74
We were able to disagree openly in the group	1	4	26	69

¹⁷ The phenomenon of domination that is typical of political debates was clearly an issue for the Czech Republic (92%), Lithuania (68%), Luxembourg (63%) and Romania (60%). On the other hand, people in Malta (90%), Greece (73%) and Poland (75%) (fully) disagreed with the statement that some participants dominated the debate.

Participants accepted different opinions as part of the deliberations	1	5	30	64
The facilitator managed to give everyone a chance to speak	0	3	11	86

Another issue related to fairness concerned the time for to debate. This problem is not new for already in 2007, one-fifth of the citizens participating at the European Citizens' Consultation expressed a preference for having more time to elaborate the results, and thereby enhance the opportunity to communicate effectively. For ECC09, one quarter of the citizens (25%) considered time for debating was insufficient.¹⁸ All together, the available time was more or less a problem in 15 countries but not in all countries related to the same individual characteristics¹⁹. The other criteria related to the organisational fairness of the consultation appeared unproblematic: available information on the procedures were perceived as satisfying for 91% of citizens and the *complexity* of the process was not a (big) problem for 88% of the respondents. In sum the consultation processes can be characterised as *fair*. With the exception of available time and perception of domination of debates, positive judgments of 85% and higher on the indicators are impressive enough. One can wonder in how far the high level of satisfaction is caused by the fact that the samples were biased toward higher educated citizens. The capacity to handle information under a time constraint in a somewhat complex situation with more or less strict rules, could be a characteristic of the higher educated in particular. However, most aspects are only very weakly (though significantly) related to education. In itself this is a reassuring conclusion: it could mean that the process is efficient for all citizens and that problem are country related.

Competence of citizens

The competence of citizens relates to a sufficient level of communicative and issue-related proficiency. Competent citizens should be able to assess the consequences of their preferences with respect to different options and measures. Competence also includes the

¹⁸ 21% *fully* agreed that the *time for discussion* was adequate and slightly more than half of the participants (53%) agreed that the time was sufficient.

¹⁹ In eight countries there is a significant negative relation with age, which means that younger participants were more bothered by the time limits than older ones. In three other countries we find a negative correlation with education, according to which the higher educated citizens more often found that the time for discussion was not adequate.

ability to communicate and to exchange norms, values or emotional expressions. Overall, 85% of the respondents indicated that they (fully) agreed with the statement that their *knowledge was sufficient* to participate in the discussions. Such a knowledge level is surprisingly high, given the complexity of topics to be discussed. Fundamental to the deliberative process is that participants are able both to express their opinions and to formulate arguments. With regard to the ability to *express one's opinions and arguments adequately*, we notice again a very high level of agreement with the statement: a third fully agreed and another 62% agreed while only 6% disagreed. The last aspect of competence is people's ability to participate in a deliberative process. Are they inclined to agree with the majority and do they have problems not to conform to the general opinions of the group? With regard to the problems people experienced over *expressing opinions that differed from the general view of the group*, the percentages show that participants were not meek followers: 80% said that they never or rarely hesitated to follow their own views and only 3% often hesitated. A closely related indicator is how compliant participants were in *following the common opinion*. Only a small group (11%) often 'jumped on the bandwagon' and so did sometimes more than a third. This means that the other half of the respondents (52%) rarely or never agreed on a certain point just because the majority did so. It is interesting to note that the fact sheets that were sent out some time before the national consultations also contributed to increase the competence. To the question "Did you feel more competent than before to discuss the issues introduced in the fact sheet?" very few participants (6%) felt *much more* competent after reading it, but about half of the citizens felt *more* competent having read it while for 41%, reading the fact sheet did not make any difference.

Impact

The impact criterion refers, on the one hand, to *internal impact* that measures the extent to which the participation to ECC influenced the knowledge and support for the European Union and, on the other hand, to the *external impact*, that measures the perception of ECC participants concerning the potential impact of ECC on public opinion and decision-makers. The potential impact on decision-making was assessed just at the beginning of the national consultations for all the participants and three months after the consultation

for the participants of eight countries.²⁰ The first evaluation reveals that the expectations concerning the impact were rather low given that less than one in three participants (29%) took part at the consultation in order to influence the decision-making. This was well behind the motivation based on interest regarding the experience (66%), the willingness to learn more about the topic (56%) or a desire to express personal views (47%).²¹ A reason why many participants did not invoke the influence on decision-making is probably because they considered ECC09 would have marginal impact. In fact only 14,1% considered that their participation could have a *strong* or *very strong* impact. Most respondents considered that the impact of ECC could be *intermediary* (51.1%), *low* (24%) or *completely inexistent* (4.7%). In line with the expectations, the second measurement of the external impact (three months after the national consultations) reveals that participants considered that the impact of their propositions was rather low: only one third (32.1%) of the respondents (fully) agreed that they had a chance to influence the decision makers. The perception of the lack of impact concerned the media: 78.2% of the respondents were (more or less) disappointed with the lack of interest in the ECC shown by European and national media.²² It concerned also the European candidates with whom they were offered the opportunity to discuss at the end of the national consultations: only one quarter of them (27%) believed that they would act on the recommendations in the European Parliament. Such a scepticism is confirmed by the research conducted by Karlsson (2011) who looked at whether the EP candidates participating at the national consultations were influenced by the propositions elaborated by citizens: only 11 out of 97 candidates that he approached agreed to respond the questionnaire and, among them, just a minority expressed a satisfaction with the outcomes of the debates: two of the eleven responding candidates said they altered their own view in connection to the citizens' proposals, and none of them thought either that the proposals would have a significant impact on EU-politics or that the ECC was generally known among MEPs.

²⁰ France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands and Sweden.

²¹ Note that while all the countries were generally rather negative concerning the potential impact of ECC, important differences could nevertheless be observed among the countries. For instance Luxembourg and Hungary only one in ten (10%) participated to influence the decision makers. While for in others countries these was a reason for participating for more people: Austria (55%), Germany (43%), Denmark (42%).

²² For an in depth analysis of the presence of ECC on the media see Freudenberger (2010).

Concerning the impact on participants, we obtained much more positive results. For instance, all respondents (99%) found the ECC an *interesting experience* and 91% *learned more* about how the European Union functions. It is also relevant to note that 96% said their opinion about the European Union was *changed* by the ECC and 81% felt *more European* after having participated in the ECC. To sum up, ECC was particularly efficient to promote its educative and integrative missions but failed to become a tool influencing the decision-makers and the mass media. This is probably the reason why not all participants (62%) to the national consultations responded to the last wave of questionnaire considered that this *kind of European Citizens' Consultations should be organized more often*.

In conclusion of this analysis of the face-to-face consultations it should be noted that the findings presented here are mainly based on the aggregate level of all 27 countries. But merging the data for all 27 countries can be misleading as it can direct to the so called *fallacy of division*. This occurs when one argues logically that something that is true for the overall part (the merger of 27 countries) must also be true for each (or several) of the parts (the individual countries). A more detailed country-specific analysis reveals that the 27 countries cannot be considered as a homogeneous set: on the contrary (Leyenaar and Niemoller 2011).

Conclusion

The 2009 European Citizens' Consultation is without any doubt a valuable experience for researchers and practitioners who envisage to introducing deliberative procedures within the EU decision-making process. One of the major lessons that can be drawn from this experience is that it is possible by using different techniques to organize a consultation that involves a large number of citizens from different nationalities, cultures and languages. In this chapter we observed that this consultation was generally well organized and complied to many of the common deliberative standards. There are

however some important shortcomings that should be faced if ECC were to become a legitimate and influential participative instrument.

From the viewpoint of the structure, ECC09 presented an important risk of “loss of plurality”, by which we mean that many of the ideas and propositions that were expressed during the different phases of the consultation did not appear in the final recommendations. Such a loss is inevitable in any consultation aiming at reaching a limited number of propositions, but in the case of ECC09 the proportion of the loss is too important. In the future a balance needs to be found between the requirement of consensus and the one of inclusion.

Concerning the deliberativeness of the debates and proposals, we observed that the newly introduced national web-forums, has attracted many citizens and organized groups that are already involved and/or interested in EU affairs. This over-representation of organized groups implied that many online debates were dominated by their often unique and off-topic concerns and that many of their proposals were among the first in almost all the countries. As far as the face-to-face national forums are concerned, we observed that these did not guarantee the presence of a sufficient level of diversity on the topic of the consultation. While the representativeness was satisfactory concerning the common quotas (age, gender, nationality), there was an over-representation of highly educated, politically interested, and pro-EU citizens. This absence of statistical representation increases the risk that not all the concerns on the topic could be expressed - in particular the ones that are more critical about the EU. This risk is however dampened by the fact that a large majority of participants considered to have good opportunity to express their opinions and did not feel dominated by others.

The last aspect analyzed is whether ECC09 had a concrete impact. The answer to this question is obviously fundamental to determine whether such types of procedures should be pursued. Concerning the external impact, we observed that the media covered just superficially the event and, more fundamentally, that politicians did not consider seriously the citizens' propositions. On the opposite the consultation had a very positive

impact on the participants themselves for a large majority declared to have become more informed and confident towards the EU. In other words ECC09 was a successful civic instrument but not a convincing policy instrument.

If ECC ambitions to become in a near future an effective deliberative instrument, it will have to face three major challenges. The first is to ensure that its recommendations will be sufficiently representative of the opinions and proposals expressed during the different phases of the consultative process. The second is to broaden its educative and civic effects to the public that did not directly participate in the national events. And, the third will be to find a way to increase the external impact (on media and decision makers) of the proposals elaborated by the citizens. We suggest that a major step in the right direction would be to resolutely restrict the topic of the consultation. If this were the case, (i) the diversity of the opinions related to the topic could be better identified and therefore promoted, (ii) the recommendations would probably be less numerous but more concrete and (iii), as a consequence of these premises, proposals would be more seriously considered by both the media and the decision-makers.

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