

Dirk Jarré
President of EURAG
Parkstrasse 25 C
D-61476 Kronberg im Taunus
(Germany)
Tel. 0049-1525-319.60.89
Mail: dirkjarre@aol.com

EURAG-EUROPE
www.eurag-europe.net



*The European Federation of
Older Persons*

*Fédération Européenne des
Personnes Agées*

*Bund der älteren Generation
Europas*

*Federazione Europea
delle Persone Anziane*

Conference of EURAG
on
“Participation of Seniors in Decision-making Processes”

Budapest, 17 September 2021

Contribution by Dirk Jarré,
President of the European Federation of Older Persons, EURAG

(As of 10 September 2021)

Honourable Lord Mayor and mayors of Budapest districts,
Representatives of civil society organisations,
Excellencies, honourable guests,
Dear friends and colleagues,

First, I would like to thank all the persons, organisations, and public structures which have so kindly and efficiently prepared and made possible today’s key event – and have offered their admirable and generous hospitality to EURAG and its participating members. In particular, my warm thanks and great appreciation go to the mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, with his colleagues, and to Éva Orsós-Hegyési, President of “Life for Years”, together with her husband – and my long-term friend – Gábor Hegyesi.

It is indeed a great privilege and honour for me – as president of the European Federation of Older Persons, EURAG – to give an introductory contribution to this important conference, organised by the National Association of Seniors and Clubs for the Elderly with the support of the Municipality of Budapest to express some ideas on the topic *“Participation of Seniors in Decision-making Processes”*.



EURAG is a member of the Platform of European Social NGOs (www.socialplatform.org) in Brussels and has Participatory Status with the Council of Europe as well as Consultative Status with the UN

In dealing with this extremely important subject, I have chosen a more general approach and would like to bring to your attention some fundamental considerations and reflections leading to a couple of important intrinsic recommendations – which, I do hope, will be helpful for all of you in your efforts to further develop effective and fair decision-making processes. And then I leave the presentation of specific illustrative cases to my experienced colleagues.

But allow me to present “The European Federation of Older Persons”. This NGO was founded as the very first European organisation of senior citizens in 1962 – almost 60 years ago - by pioneers of so-called “work with the aged” coming from various European countries. The objectives at that time were to provide senior citizens with a common platform for cooperation, for the promotion of their self-identity, for mutual exchange and, most importantly, to give them the opportunity to express themselves with a single voice in the political dialogue and in society at large, particularly at European level.

Today our mission is to promote the improvement of the situation of older persons at societal, economic, social, and political levels by advocating, among others, for the maintenance of an independent life, for the strengthening of elderly people’s participation in decision-making processes, especially when they concern their living conditions, for the improvement of their position and integration in society, and for the prevention of any kind of discrimination on grounds of age.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

When I first considered the title of the conference, I immediately thought about the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which says in its article 25 “*The Union recognises and respects the rights of the elderly to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life.*”

It is clear that the European legislator understood and meant at the same time “*the right to be part of political life through involvement in public decision-making processes*”. Because without this possibility, living in dignity and a meaningful participation in democratic society is simply not thinkable. This is true for all specific groups in society – be they determined by birth or gender, by religion or belief, by socio-economic background, by membership of a

national minority or by age. For all of them the fundamental commandment “*Nothing on us, without us*” should be a non-negotiable principle.

In modern times, wise and forward-looking political philosophers and enlightened strategic thinkers have vigorously argued for an as close as possible relationship between citizens and politicians. This is based on the strong conviction that politics must be about an administration of society that is just, with fair chances for everybody. But politics is also about processes that endeavour to plan a future of society that ensures the enjoyment of fundamental rights for all and offers adequate options for everybody according to needs, aspirations, capabilities, and choices.

This leads to the strong demand that - apart from and as a complement of representative democracy, which finds its expression in our parliamentary systems - advanced democratic governance should strongly aim at expanding citizens’ participation in public affairs through encouraging and effective tools that enable everybody’s involvement in political processes.

The European Union clearly states in its Treaty of Lisbon (valid like a constitution), which has been ratified by all the member states, the following principles regarding the functioning of the Union (in articles 10 & 11):

- ◆ *“Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.”*
- ◆ *“The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action.”*
- ◆ *“The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society.”*

Considering that all EU member states have accepted these binding principles for the Union, they should in their own political systems not lag behind such standards but rigorously apply them for the benefit of their respective societies through an enlarged political empowerment of their citizens.

This approach requires, to start with, a full understanding of what civil society is all about and an enhanced recognition of its value and capacities in political processes. Civil society,

especially in its organised forms, is a crucial element in an open democratic society. It defends human rights, it constitutes a motor for participation in the life of the community, it facilitates communication, dialogue, and co-operation, it promotes public awareness, it creates channels for citizens' involvement in public policymaking, and it can enhance transparency and accountability of public authorities.

Civil society, associations and NGOs, representing the needs, the aspirations, the fears and, very importantly, the expertise, capabilities, and imagination of citizens, should be fully recognised, supported, and accepted as “natural partners” by the political bodies and administrative structures at all levels – at local, regional, national, and even global level. By this, the very dangerous growing alienation of citizens from political processes can be avoided and social capital, that is indispensable for social cohesion of society, built up.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

When we talk about citizens' involvement in political decision-making processes, we must clearly distinguish between first, the required conditions for meaningful participation; second, the quality levels of participation; and third, the different phases of the political decision-making process. Let me quickly expand on these three issues.

First aspect: Under the required conditions for meaningful participation, we must consider that participation of the citizen is not just to be tolerated but it must be welcomed and honoured by both sides – the public institutions and by civil society in its various forms. It must be recognised that civil society organisations are free and independent bodies. It must also be clear and evident that their positions are based on the convictions and demands of their members and may be different from the views of the authorities. It must also be fully acknowledged that their contributions represent an added value to an open discourse on important issues and are beneficial for the decision-making processes in terms of quality and implementation perspectives. Furthermore, the process must be based on commonly agreed rules, and it must be open-ended, accessible, transparent, responsible, based on mutual trust, and always consider the public interests.

Second aspect: There are significantly different levels of participation – ranging, to begin with, from simple information, through processes of consultation, via real dialogue processes, to reach, at the highest quality level, a veritable partnership. Each of these distinctive levels is

characterised by specific tools and methodologies that are essential for the success of the possible and agreed cooperation. These tools and methods may include, for example, position papers, hearings, work groups and joint committees. Starting from information, every higher level of cooperation becomes more intense, more understanding and with ever more sophisticated methods of communication, negotiation, and agreement – to cumulate, at the end, in a true partnership. In this process it must always be clearly understood that it is the original role of civil society to be critical, to complain, to demand, to suggest, and thus to express and defend the views of their constituency. However, the final responsibilities and accountable decision-making on policies, strategies, programmes and on finances lies exclusively in the hands of the elected democratic bodies.

Third aspect: The political decision-making process covers seven main and rather distinctive and consecutive phases, in all of which the just mentioned levels of participation are possible and desirable. These phases normally start with (1) the identification of needs of policymaking, followed by (2) the setting of an appropriate agenda that then leads to (3) the drafting of the necessary documents on which (4) the required decision will be taken. Then comes (5) the important stage of the implementation of the decision, accompanied by (6) the monitoring of the effects of the measures and, finally, (7) an assessment of the envisaged success with possible readjustments of the original decision and its implementation. In all these phases of possible participation a great variety of instruments are to be used and trustful division of competences and responsibilities can be applied. The importance is that there is always binding mutual agreement on the objectives, the ways and the means of the cooperation.

To finish with, I would like to mention that most European Union member states have passed specific legislation in this area and created corresponding bodies - either to generally promote civil society involvement in the public decision-making processes or to enhance cooperation with civil society organisations. It is certainly worthwhile to carefully document the different approaches and solutions to benefit from already made experiences and adopt the most suitable concepts for one's own choices to be applied in this key political and societal issue. For this purpose, EURAG's members can be most helpful by providing information and advice. In sum, I wish you all, public authorities as well as civil society, wise decision-making on your future cooperation and a lot of success in your efforts in the building of a "Society for All" – and not least "for All Ages"!

The European Federation of Older Persons would be particularly happy to see that this conference will, in a very near future, lead to tangible and satisfactory effects wherever improvement of participation of seniors in decision-making processes is necessary. This obviously requires strong and franc cooperation between all the stakeholders concerned – the State with its competent institutions as well as civil society with its own sovereign organisations. The challenge lies in creating solid and ongoing trust among the responsible actors and granting mutual support in a common effort to shape a promising future to our society – not only for the generations living today but also for those not yet born. Let me express the conviction that this conference will be judged by all partners as one of the milestones to successfully achieve this ambitious goal.

Many thanks for having so patiently listened to me.

Dirk Jarré, President of EURAG

Bad Ischl, 10 September 2021