

## German-speaking Community

### **Parliament votes for the introduction of a permanent citizen involvement in the policy-making of the German-speaking community**

**During the plenary session taking place on 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2019, the Parliament of Belgium's German-speaking Community voted in favour of a decree regarding the introduction of a permanent citizen involvement in the German-speaking Community. Thereby the parliament is establishing a basis for the setting up of a permanent participatory democracy process. A first round of dialogue is expected to take place in early 2020.**

This decision was taken based on a model developed specifically for the German-speaking Community by a group of Belgian and international experts.

Through this initiative, the parliament intends to achieve the following three objectives:

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

Citizens' participation in policy-making is ensured through a range of bodies and processes: a citizen assembly will take up different themes proposed by the citizens themselves and adopt recommendations. Afterwards, the assembly will discuss on par with the members of parliament and the government on whether and how these recommendations will be implemented. At the end of this process, a kind of "agreement" between politicians and citizens will be set to define what is going to be implemented and what is not.

Through these assemblies, citizens will be given a deeper insight into the work of a politician: they will 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.

## **The pillars of the permanent citizen involvement**

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

Stability: Citizens will be regularly called to meetings to discuss certain topics and make recommendations. A citizen council will organise these meetings and oversee the implementation.

Representativity: 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 dialogue: Citizens must be well prepared, informed and supervised, in order to be able to formulate their recommendations with full knowledge of the facts.

## **The organisation of the permanent citizen involvement**

The permanent citizen involvement is based on three bodies:

- a citizen council made up of 24 citizens;
- citizen assemblies with 25-50 members;
- a permanent secretary.

The heart of the citizen involvement is the assembly. During these assemblies, topics will be discussed, and recommendations will be formulated. These citizen assemblies will take place between one and three times a year. Between 25 and 50 people will take part in these assemblies. Attendance will be voluntary. The participants will be randomly selected amongst the citizens who are at least 16 years old and have their main residence in the German-speaking area. Ideally, the participants should be a representative cross section of the population. People who perform certain mandates, hold public offices or functions will be excluded in order to avoid any conflict of interest.

The topics will be defined by a citizen council made up of 24 people. Ideally, these people will already have participated in a previous citizen assembly. These 24 people will also be selected by lot. Their term of office will be limited to 18 months. Every six months, a third of the citizen council will be substituted. The citizen council will meet on a regular basis. Its role is to prepare, organise and follow-up the citizen assembly. In addition, the citizen council will be tasked to evaluate the citizen assemblies that have already been held in order to draw conclusions for future panels. Finally, the citizen council will be monitoring the implementation of the recommendations.

The citizen council will be assisted by a permanent secretary. The secretary will take on the daily management of the permanent citizen involvement. He or she will prepare 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 moderator, the selection of information and experts, the external communication, the management of the budget and all the logistical aspects such as making room reservations, the catering, etc. The permanent secretary is part of the parliamentary administration and will be designated by the secretary general.

### **The proceeding of the permanent citizen involvement**

The citizen council will determine 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 shall be 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 will be 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. However, in a bid to limit the latter's influence, the number of proposals is limited to three per calendar year. In addition, citizens from the German-speaking Community may also submit proposals. In order to guarantee a certain representativeness, these proposals will have to be supported by at least 100 citizens. Ultimately, the citizen council will decide completely freely on the topics that will be addressed by the citizen assembly.

As soon as the topic is set, the citizen assembly will convene. Citizens will then need an estimated 2-3 days to discuss the topic presented.

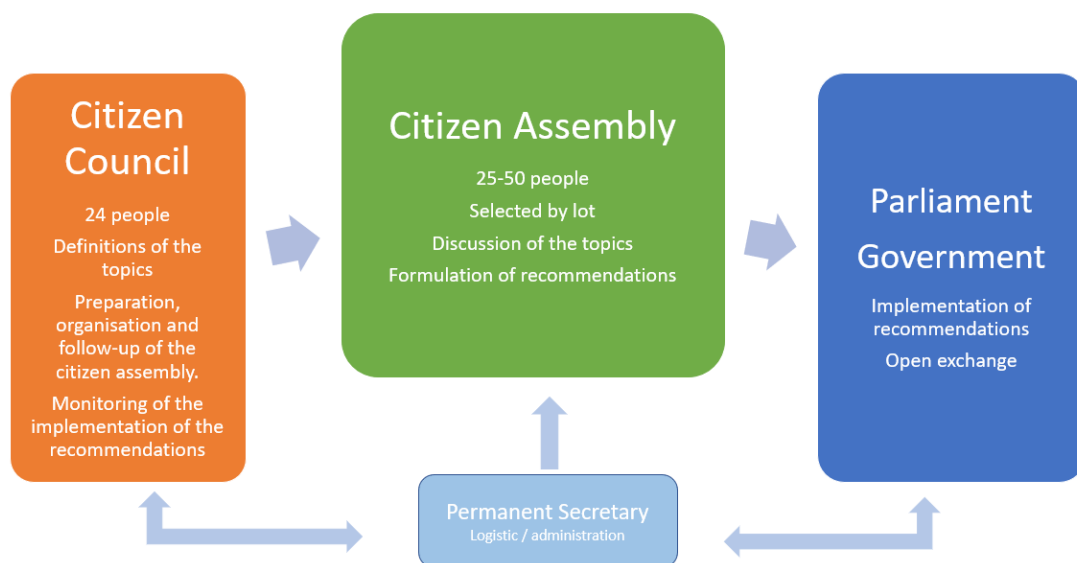
In order to decide in full knowledge of the facts, an information package will be compiled, various experts and stakeholders will be consulted, and in-depth discussions will take place. The whole process will be supervised by a qualified moderator. Finally, the citizen assembly will adopt, ideally by 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 will be presented in a public committee session and debated jointly. Subsequently, the members of the responsible committee and the relevant minister will meet to formulate a report on the recommendations. This report will describe 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 will meet again to discuss the report.

This doesn't mean that the permanent citizen involvement is completed just yet.

Indeed, the citizen council will follow the implementation of the recommendations.

An additional public committee meeting will be held within one year during which the participants from the citizen assembly will be informed about the implementation of the recommendations. Other meetings can be convened if needed.



### The allocated funds

The citizen council will adopt an annual budget which must be submitted for approval to the parliament's bureau. Upon approval, appropriate funds will be provided for in the budget of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

The funds will be used to cover the permanent secretary, the compensation of citizens participating in the citizens council and citizen assemblies, organisational and logistical expenses, the fees of the experts and the moderator, the costs occasioned by the lottery and much more.

The total amount of money needed will depend essentially on the number, size and extent of citizen assemblies. Experts have estimated the total cost at around 140,000 € per year for two citizens assemblies and ten citizen council meetings per year.