



Press Release
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Better outreach to citizens needed to improve effectiveness of European Commission's public consultations, say Auditors

The European Commission's framework for consulting the public during the development and evaluation of EU laws and policies is of a high standard, according to a new report by the European Court of Auditors. The performance of selected recent public consultations by the Commission has been satisfactory overall, say the auditors. However, they recommend that the Commission improve the way it reaches out to citizens to promote greater participation. In addition, it needs to better monitor and assess their contributions to protect against manipulation of results, they say.

The Commission consults citizens and stakeholders in all areas of EU action and throughout the policy cycle. They can also share their views at any stage from the initiation to the evaluation of EU policies through its "Have Your Say" portal. The Commission conducts over 100 public consultations a year.

The auditors assessed whether the Commission's public consultations were effective at reaching out to citizens and stakeholders and making use of their contributions. They examined a selection of recent online consultations, including on seasonal clock changes, migration measures and agricultural policy. The auditors also conducted a perception survey to find out how satisfied participants in consultations actually were.

"Citizen engagement in public consultations is key to maintaining the EU's democratic legitimacy and achieving high-quality laws and policies," said Annemie Turtelboom, the Member of the European Court of Auditors responsible for the report. "The Commission should do more to achieve the goal of public participation with the best possible level of outreach to citizens and inform participants about the outcome of the public consultations."

While the auditors recognise the high standard of the Commission's framework and participants' overall satisfaction with the public consultation process, they found shortcomings in its outreach and feedback activities.

The purpose of this press release is to convey the main messages of the European Court of Auditors' special report. The full report is on eca.europa.eu.

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In 2018, 2 000 citizens on average took part in each consultation. This excludes the “clock change” consultation, which received a record 4.6 million responses – albeit that the vast majority of these came from only one Member State (Germany). However, the auditors also found one public consultation in its sample in which only three people participated. This illustrates that the Commission needs to improve its outreach activities, say the auditors. They recommend that it should better engage with its offices and authorities in the Member States to disseminate more information about consultations and adapt its communication channels to increase the range of potential participants and target any information gaps. According to the auditors, the consultations with the lowest response rates did not use a variety of communication channels to reach their target audiences, unlike those with the highest rates.

Participation was also higher when the survey was made available in all EU official languages. However, the auditors found no clear criteria for deciding whether consultations were in the “broad public interest” and should thus be translated. They call on the Commission to provide key documents for such initiatives, as well as “priority” initiatives, in the EU’s 24 official languages, to enable all citizens to participate easily and effectively. Moreover, the surveys, which were sometimes long and complex, should be more reader-friendly.

Preparatory information about the purpose of a consultation and planned use of its results is very likely to impact favourably on the participation rate and the quality of responses. The auditors noted the Commission had not been systematically preparing and publishing its consultation strategies or other advance information, and ask it to do so in the future.

The auditors also recommend that Commission provide participants with timely information on the consultations’ outcome. They found that feedback to respondents was insufficient: reports on the results were sometimes lacking or were delivered long after the consultations had ended, and often in English only.

Although the Commission’s data analysis was satisfactory overall, the auditors warn that checks regarding the validity of responses are limited. They call for high standards of data processing and security to protect the public consultation process against manipulation of results. They recommend that the Commission also systematically assess whether its public consultations achieve all their objectives.

Notes to Editors

The OECD ranks the Commission in first place among its members on citizen engagement in developing law. In 2018, the European Parliament asked the ECA to evaluate how citizens can directly participate and contribute throughout the EU law-making process.

The ECA presents its special reports to the European Parliament and Council of the EU, as well as to other interested parties such as national parliaments, industry stakeholders and representatives of civil society.

Special report 14/2019 “‘Have your say!’: Commission’s public consultations engage citizens, but fall short of outreach activities” is available on the ECA website (eca.europa.eu) in 23 EU languages. The auditors have previously published related reports on better regulation and putting EU law into practice.

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