Observation report on the first citizens' assembly of the permanent citizens' dialogue in the German-speaking Community

Rebecca Gebauer, Christoph Niessen, Min Reuchamps

Table of contents

1 Introduction and procedure of the citizens' assembly....2
2 Observation methodology....2
3 Profile of the participants....3
4 Evaluation of the dialogue & citizens' assembly by the participants....4
4.1 Evaluation of the citizens' assembly....4
4.2 Quality of deliberation....6
5 Impact of the dialogue on the participants....7
5.1 Changing personal attitudes....7
5.2 Influence of the corona crisis....13
6 Scientific observation of the citizens' assembly....14
7 Recommendations and conclusions....19
8 Bibliography....22

UCLouvain

Introduction and procedure of the citizens' assembly

The first Citizens' Assembly of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue of the German-speaking Community took place between March 2020 and September 2020. The choice of topics and the general organisation of the Citizens' Assembly is the responsibility of the Citizens' Council, the permanent body of the Citizens' Dialogue. The Citizens' Council chose the topic *"Care concerns us all! How can care conditions for staff and patients be improved?"* from among the suggestions submitted by citizens of East Belgium and supported by at least 100 signatures. The Citizens' Assembly is supported by a permanent secretariat in organising the selection of topics and the Citizens' Assembly.

The draw for participants in the citizens' dialogue took place in December 2019. Initially, three sessions were scheduled on three Saturdays at two-week intervals from 7 March 2020 to 4 April 2020, with two sessions in Eupen in the north of the German-speaking Community and one session in Bütgenbach in the south. However, the coronavirus pandemic has postponed this planning, meaning that the first session on 7 March 2020 was followed by a long interruption. The citizens' assembly was only able to resume its work on 5 September 2020 under strict coronavirus conditions. In September 2020, three sessions were held one week apart, with one session in Bütgenbach and two sessions in Eupen. After the second session, a drafting group was formed on the advice of the moderator and prepared a first draft of the recommendations for further discussion at the third session. The last session on 19 September 2020 ended with the handover of the Citizens' Assembly's recommendations to the politicians of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community.

The general organisation of the Citizens' Assembly was carried out by the permanent secretary of the Citizens' Dialogue, Ms Anna Stuers, and Ms Myriam Pelzer, who is responsible for the Parliament's public relations work. Mr Martin Enderle from IKU was the moderator at all four sessions.

Observation methodology

The observations in this report are based on two different foundations.

1. Data collection during sessions 1-3
   At the beginning of sessions 1-3, all participants present were asked to complete a questionnaire on their general views on democracy and citizen participation.
   The questionnaires also contained specific questions for each day of the session, e.g. the second session asked whether the coronavirus pandemic had influenced the participants' views on the topic of care.

   Completion of the questionnaires was voluntary. At the first session, 26/28 participants completed the questionnaire, at the second 18/19 and at the third 17/18.

2. Observation of all four sessions
   Scientists from UCLouvain were present at all sessions:

   - 1st session (07.03.2020): Rebecca Gebauer & Min Reuchamps
   - 2nd session (05/09/2020): Rebecca Gebauer & Hadrien Macq
   - 3rd session (12/09/2020): Rebecca Gebauer & Christoph Niessen
   - 4th session (19/09/2020): Rebecca Gebauer & Maela Guillaume-Le Gal

In addition to the direct observations of the citizens' assembly, this report also refers to the results of a telephone survey conducted among the population of East Belgium at the beginning of the citizens' assembly in March/April 2020.

Profile of the participants

The first session started with 28 participants. After the coronavirus-related break, the number of participants fell below 20 (19 at the second session, 18 at the third session). This reduction particularly affected the 18-34 and 71+ age groups. At the first session, both age groups were represented by 4 participants each (15.4%); from the second session onwards, only two participants (11%) from the 18-34 age group and one participant (6%) from the 71+ age group were represented. The 35-54 and 55-70 age groups were equally represented at the beginning (30%), but the distribution then fluctuated somewhat over the course of the sessions (day 2: 28% to 44%, day 3: 41% to 31%).

There was an even gender distribution at all four sessions. More than half of the participants have a university degree or a degree in "non-university higher education".

Not all participants provided demographic information in the questionnaires (day 1: 88.2%; day 2: 78.1%; day 3: 94.3%), but the analysis shows that the north of the German-speaking Community and in particular the municipality of Eupen are over-represented. Two-thirds of the participants were born in Belgium, one-third in Germany.

Participants by place of residence							
North (%)	**Day 1**	**Day 2**	**Day 3**	**South (%)**	**Day 1**	**Day 2**	**Day 3**
Eupen	34.6	33.3	41.2	Bütgenbach	-	-	-
Kelmis	11.5	11.2	11.8	Büllingen	3.8	-	5.9
Raeren	11.5	5.6	5.9	Amel	-	5.6	-
Lontzen	11.5	11.2	17.7	Saint Vith	11.5	5.6	5.9
				Burg-Reuland	3.8	5.6	5.9
Total	69.1	61.3	76.6		19.1	16.8	17.7

Population in the DG (Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium 2019)					
North (Canton of Eupen)			**South (Canton St Vith)**		
Lontzen	5695	7.38%	Saint Vith	9682	12.54%
Raeren	10707	13.87%	Bütgenbach	5605	7.26%
Kelmis	11061	14.33%	Amel	5480	7.10%
Eupen	19526	25.30%	Büllingen	5473	7.09%
	46989	**60.88%**	Burg-Reuland	3956	5.13%
				30196	**39.12%**
			Total	**77185**	**100%**

Evaluation of the dialogue & citizens' assembly by the participants

The following evaluation of the citizens' assembly by its participants is based on the questionnaires that were completed on the first three days of the session. The questionnaires contained both closed questions with a predetermined answer scale and open questions.

The general impression of the participants is consistently positive. They have no serious points of criticism, although the selection of experts and the time pressure are repeatedly emphasised. Below is the evaluation in detail.

Evaluation of the citizens' assembly

The participants approach the citizens' assembly with a remarkably positive attitude. They cite "interest in experimenting", curiosity, the desire to influence politics without becoming active in party politics, and generally getting actively involved as their motivation for taking part.

In the first survey, 65% stated that they had *a rather positive* view of the citizens' dialogue so far and 19% had a *very positive* view. In each case, 7% of participants gave no or a neutral response. No participant had a negative impression as a starting point. The participants are generally satisfied with the way in which the participants were selected (88%) and praise the impartial nature of the session.

Almost without exception, participants were positive about the choice of topic (96%) and that the topic is important to them personally. They also agree that the topic is important for the German-speaking Community (100%). Similarly, the organisation was almost unanimously rated positively (96%).

80% of participants think that citizens' dialogue can renew democracy and that it should also be applied at the national level. 88% think that the citizens' dialogue can reduce the distance between citizens and politicians. All participants are prepared to accept an invitation to the citizens' dialogue again in the future and almost all (96%) would like it to continue. However, some participants also point out that the success of this project depends on the implementation of the recommendations by politicians and the vast majority of participants (96%) want to see the recommendations implemented in law.

On the third day of the session, none of the participants rated the citizens' assembly with less than 7 points on a scale from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). The majority of participants awarded 8 points.

Overall satisfaction with the citizens' assembly (Scale 0 dissatisfied - 10 fully satisfied)	**n**	**Percentage**
7	**3**	**17.6%**
8	**7**	**41.2%**
9	**5**	**29.4%**
10	**2**	**11.8%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

In their open comments, the participants criticise the fact that relatively few young participants are involved, that the selection of experts is not ideal (see below) and that the coronavirus restrictions are having a negative impact on the process. At the same time, they see the citizens' assembly as a great opportunity to exchange ideas with other citizens and appreciate the good, friendly working atmosphere and the informal working environment.

The organisation of the citizens' assembly is also rated with no less than 7 points. The majority of participants awarded 9 points.

Satisfaction with the organisation of the citizens' assembly (Scale 0 dissatisfied - 10 fully satisfied)	**n**	**Per cent**
7	**1**	**5.9%**
8	**4**	**23.5%**
9	**8**	**47.1%**
10	**4**	**23.5%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

The participants value the general approach as a "good system for preparing an important topic apolitically" and find that the sessions are well planned and "perfectly" organised. The main point of criticism is the time pressure, which gives participants the feeling that they have to process too much information in too little time.

The moderator is also rated positively without exception and receives 9 points from the majority and no one receives less than 7 points. The participants appreciate that the moderator "kept an eye on the big picture" and helped them to achieve a targeted result.

Satisfaction with the moderation (Scale 0 dissatisfied - 10 fully satisfied)	**n**	**Percentage**
7	**2**	**11.8%**
8	**3**	**17.6%**
9	**8**	**47.1%**
10	**4**	**23.5%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

Participants are more reserved in their assessment of the selection of experts than for the previously mentioned points. The majority rate them with 7+ points, but there are also participants who award fewer points. However, no participant awarded less than 5 points.

Satisfaction with the selection of experts (Scale 0 dissatisfied - 10 fully satisfied)	**n**	**Percentage**

5	**1**	**5.9%**
6	**1**	**5.9%**
7	**5**	**29.4%**
8	**4**	**23.5%**
9	**4**	**23.5%**
10	**2**	**11.8%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

In their comments, participants criticised the fact that there was too little discussion with staff "at grassroots level", that those affected by care had too little or no say, and that there was no information from the lawmakers, financial regulators, health insurance companies, etc. However, the participants also stated that the experts who were available provided good insights.

Quality of deliberation

The evaluation of the discussions during the citizens' assembly shows a more mixed picture than the general evaluation. 12% of participants did not feel that they were able to gather enough information during the first two sessions to make recommendations, 29% were neutral and 69% felt well informed.

I gathered enough information in the 1st and 2nd sessions to make recommendations on the topic of care. to do. (Scale 1 strongly disagree - 5 strongly agree)	**n**	**Percentage**
1 do not agree at all	**0**	**0%**
2	**2**	**11.8%**
3	**5**	**29.4%**
4	**7**	**41.2%**
5 fully agree	**3**	**17.6%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

The main criticisms of this aspect are the selection of experts and the time pressure.

At the beginning of the citizens' assembly, 65% of the participants stated that they had actively prepared themselves for the topic, e.g. by reading the information material, conversations with people "in the field" and relatives, internet research, and personal reflections. It is possible that these participants later belong to the 68% who felt well informed at the end of the second session.

The vast majority of participants stated that they were able to have a good dialogue with the other participants at the citizens' assembly.

I was able to well with the other members of the citizens' assembly. **(Scale 1 strongly disagree - 5 strongly agree)**	**n**	**Percentage**
1 do not agree at all	**0**	**0**
2	**0**	**0**

3	**2**	**11.8%**
4	**7**	**41.2%**
5 fully agree	**8**	**47.1%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

The participants emphasise the very open and good exchange of ideas between the participants in their comments. They also appreciated the interesting dialogue partners and constructive cooperation. The only points of criticism were the coronavirus restrictions and that "the discussions sometimes went round in circles".

The positive assessment of the course of the citizens' assembly and the discussions is also reflected in the confidence that the participants have in their ability to produce good recommendations. 94.2% of participants think that the citizens' assembly will make good recommendations.

I think that this citizens' assembly will come up with good recommendations. **(Scale 1 strongly disagree - 5 strongly agree)**	**n**	**Percentage**
1 do not agree at all	**0**	**0**
2	**0**	**0**
3	**1**	**5.9%**
4	**8**	**47.1%**
5 fully agree	**8**	**47.1%**
Total	**17**	**100.0%**

Impact of the dialogue on the participants

Meetings such as the citizens' assembly (and also the citizens' council) are generally referred to in the specialist literature as "mini-publics" (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Studies show that the process of a mini-public has a direct impact on participants; they are more likely to change their minds, have respect, empathy, good arguments and a focus on the common good, and show more trust in politicians and institutions as they better understand the policy-making process (Harris 2019; Dalton 2008). In other words, mini-publics improve participants' understanding of politics and strengthen their political interest trust in democracy as a whole (Elstub and Escobar 2019) .

In order to observe this effect that mini-publics have on their participants in the citizens' assembly, the questionnaires at all three sessions repeatedly contain questions on the political attitudes of the participants.

Changing personal attitudes

Political interest and trust in democracy

The majority of participants attend the citizens' assembly with confidence and consider themselves competent to participate in political life and understand the problems that confront society. On a scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), the majority of participants rate themselves as 4+ at the

start, and their rating remains constant in the subsequent sessions. The majority of participants also agree from the outset with the idea that average Belgians are capable of participating in public decision-making and believe that important political decisions should be made by the people rather than by politicians. However, in all sessions, participants are rather cautious about their ability to do as good a job as elected politicians and rate themselves neutrally (3 – neither agree nor disagree).

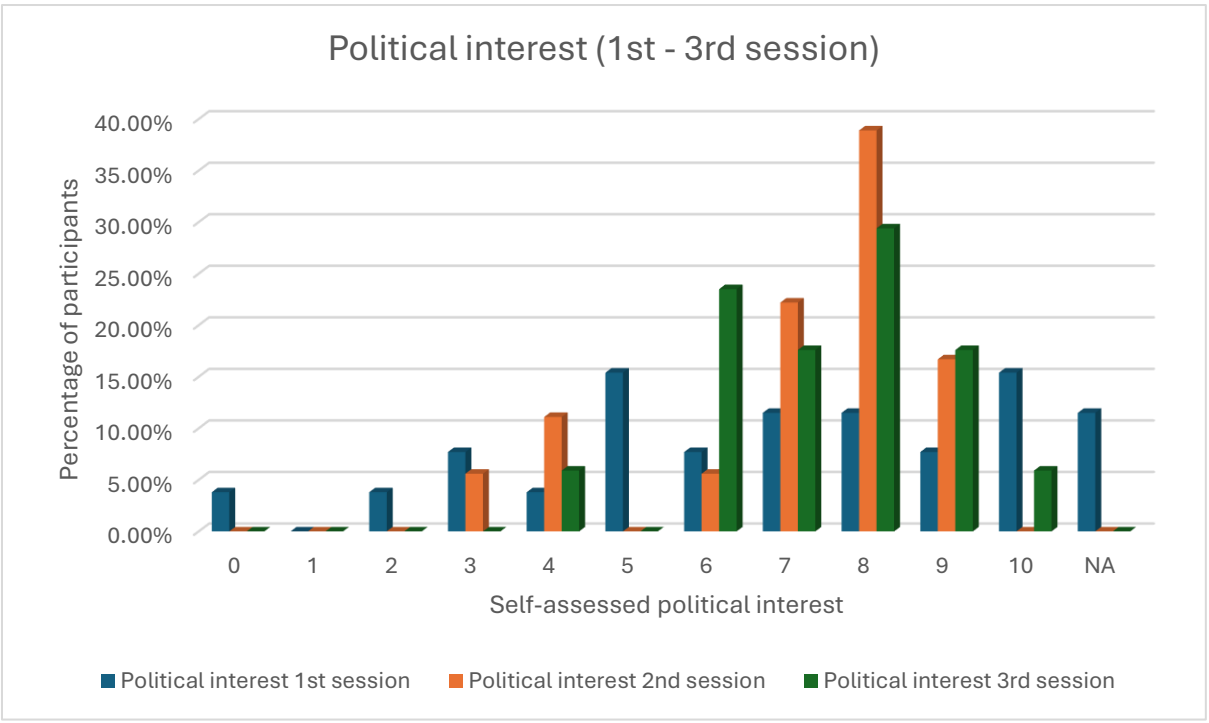
I think I understand the problems that our society is facing. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	0	11.5	3.8	53.8	30.8	-
2. Session	0	0	16.7	72.2	11.1	-
3. Session	0	0	17.6	70.6	11.8	-

The average citizen is capable of participating in public decisions. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	0	19.2	15.4	42.3	19.2	-
2. Session	5.6	16.7	22.2	38.9	16.7	-
3. Session	0	11.8	17.6	70.6	0	-

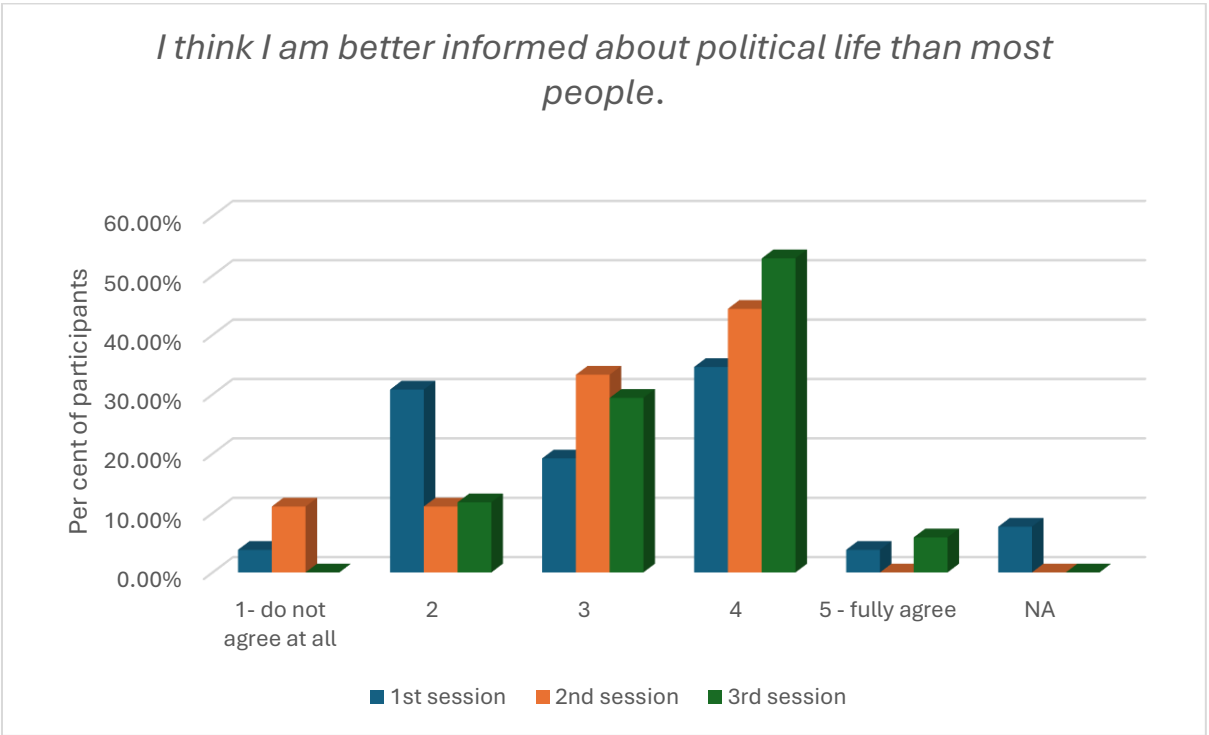
The most important political decisions should be made by the people and not by politicians. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	3.8	15.4	11.5	50	15.4	3.8
2. Session	11.1	33.3	0	44.4	11.1	-
3. Session	0	23.5	17.6	47.1	11.8	-

I think I would do just as good a job as the politicians we elect. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	3.8	23.1	26.9	23.1	15.4	7.7
2. Session	0	22.2	50	27.8	0	-
3. Session	0	23.5	41.2	29.4	5.9	-

At the beginning of the citizens' assembly, the political interest of the participants ranges from 0 (absolutely no interest) to 10 (very high interest). A good third of participants (35%) stated their interest as 8 or more. A telephone survey in the nine municipalities of the German-speaking Community in March/April 2020 shows a similar picture: 33% of respondents showed a high level of interest in politics (8+). At the time of the third session, 53% of participants indicated a high interest in politics (8+). At the same time, no participant rated their interest as less than 4. In conclusion, the citizens' assembly strengthens the political interest of all participants.

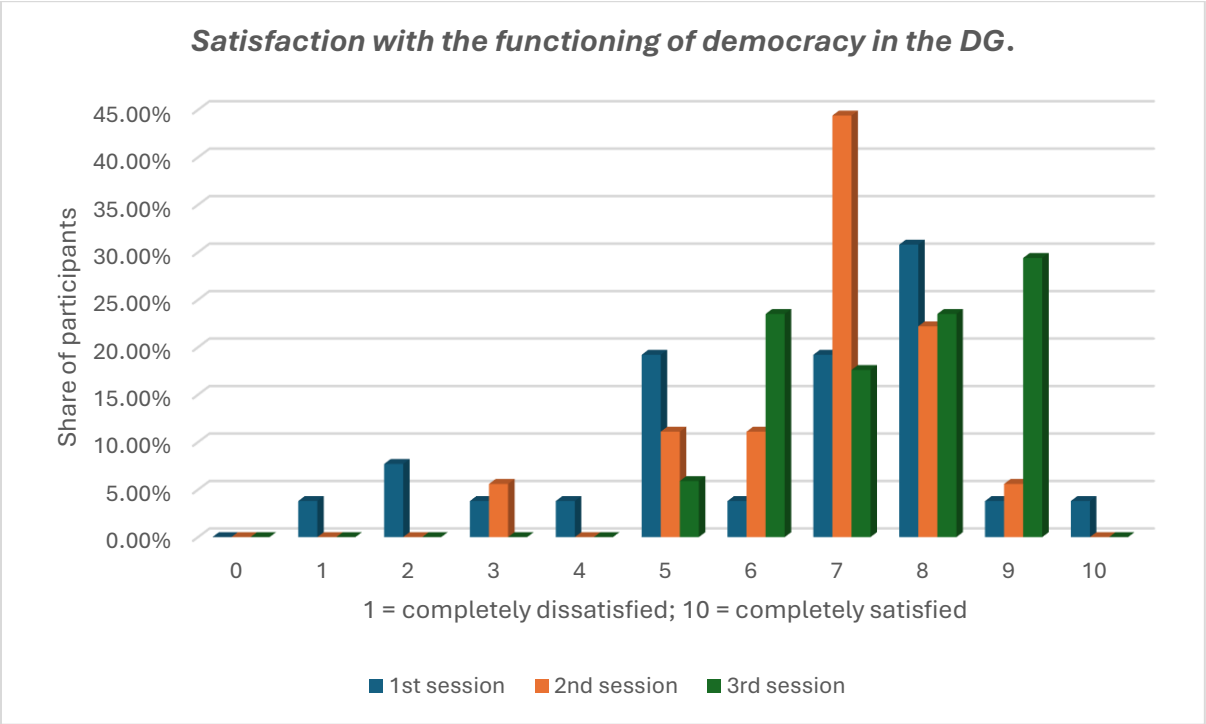


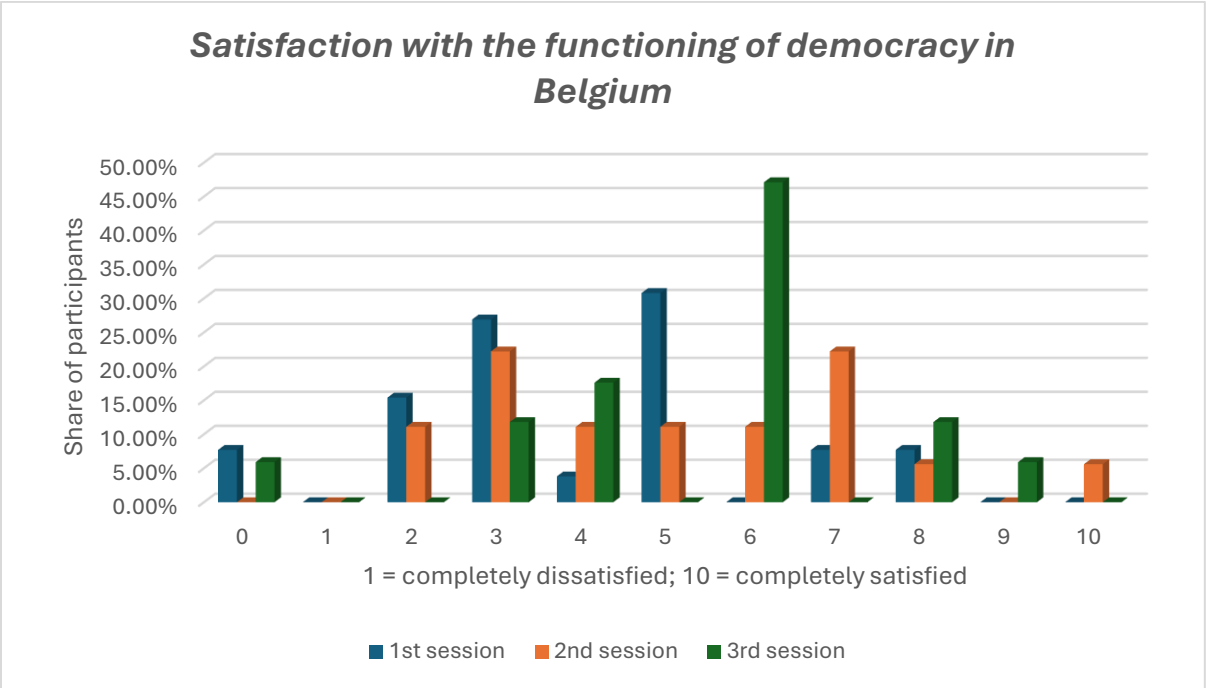
In line with the increased political interest, the participants' self-confidence with regard to their political knowledge also increases. At the beginning of the citizens' assembly, 38% of participants think that they are better informed about politics than other citizens; by the third session, this figure rises to 59%.



When it comes to trust in democracy, there is a strong difference between trust in democracy in the German-speaking Community and trust in democracy in Belgium as a whole, but both scores improve over the course of the citizens' assembly. At the first session, 58% of participants rate their trust in democracy in the German-speaking Community as 7 or higher on a scale of 0-10. However, 19% give a score of 4 or lower. By the third session, the number of participants who rate democracy in the German-

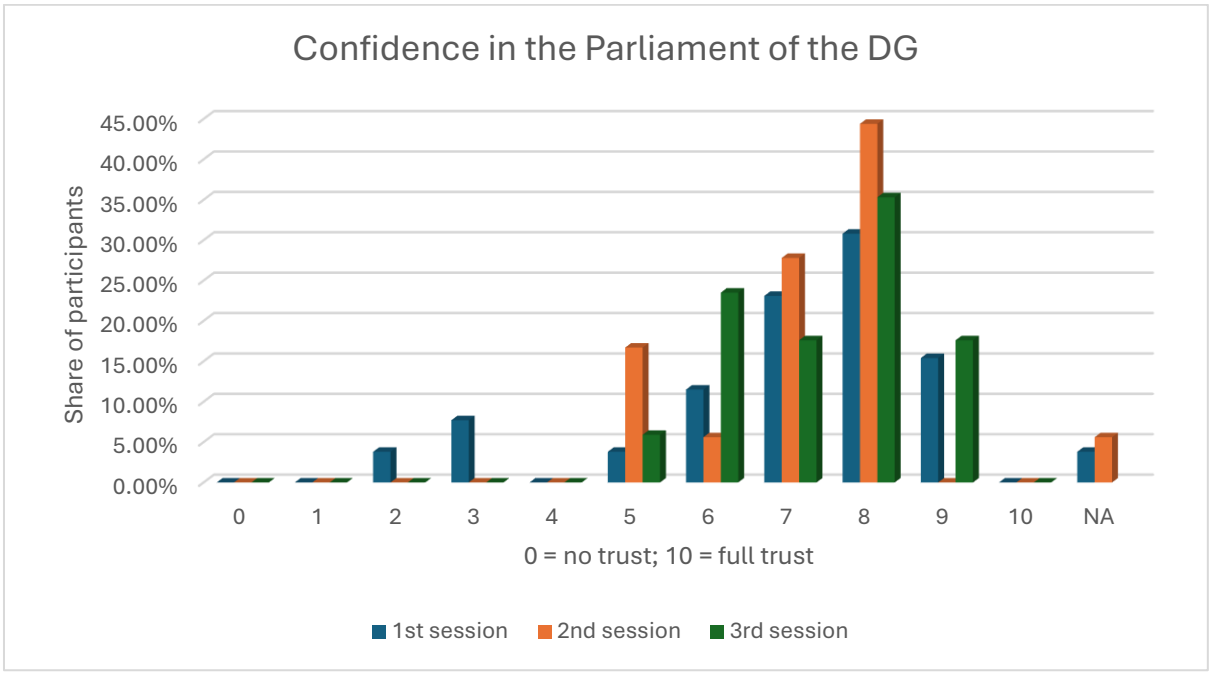
speaking Community as 7+ rises to 70%, while no participant rates their confidence as 4 or lower. On the other hand, participants have a more critical view of democracy in Belgium as a whole. The number of participants who rate their trust as 7+ increases only slightly from 15% to 18% from session 1 to 3. However, the number of those who rate their trust in democracy in Belgium as 4 or less falls in parallel from 54% to 35%. The assumption that mini-publics can strengthen trust in democracy is therefore confirmed.

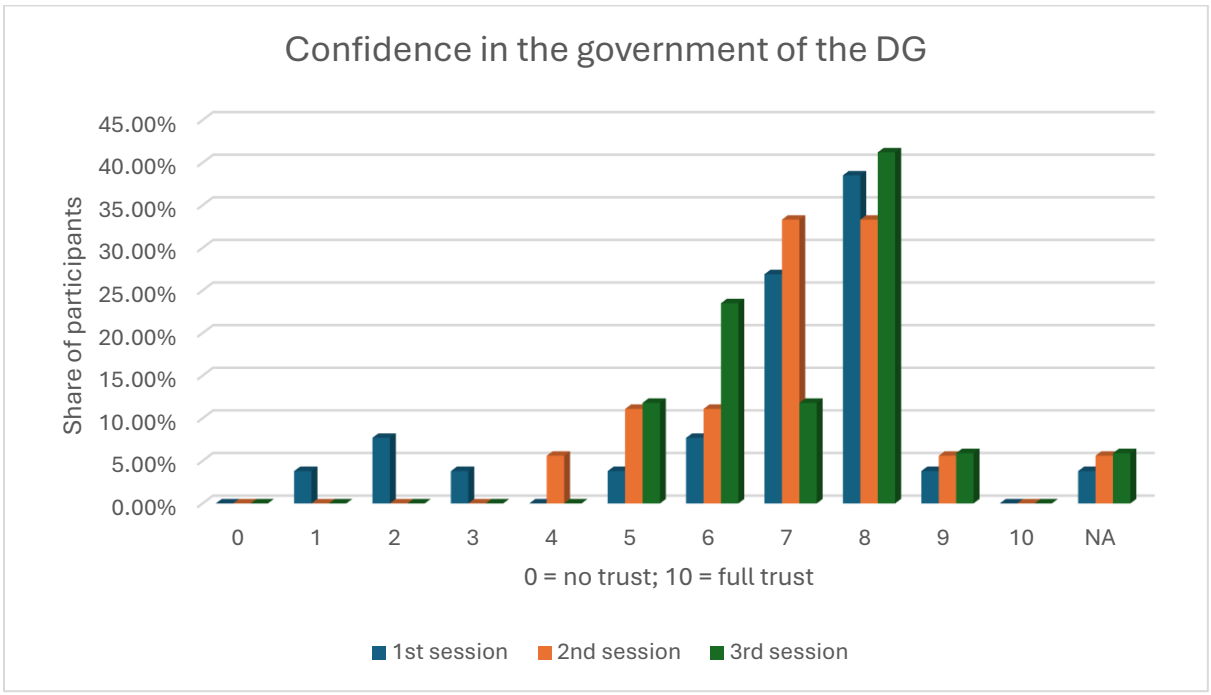


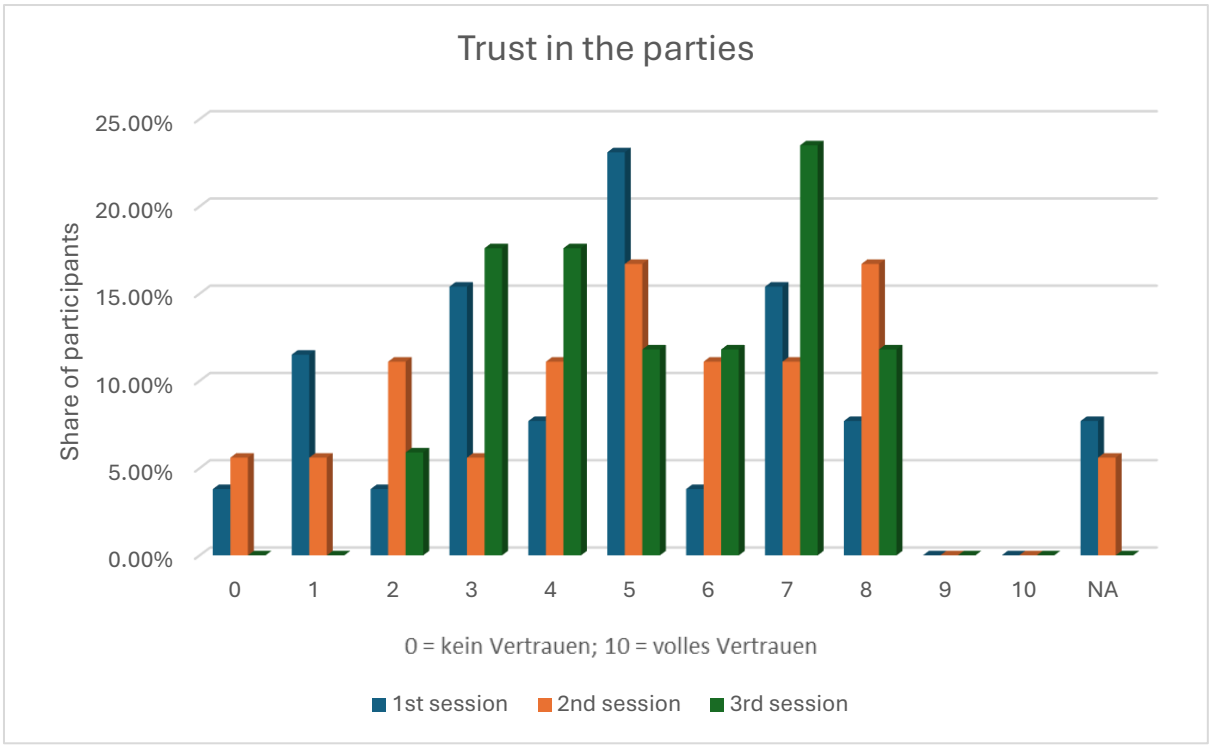


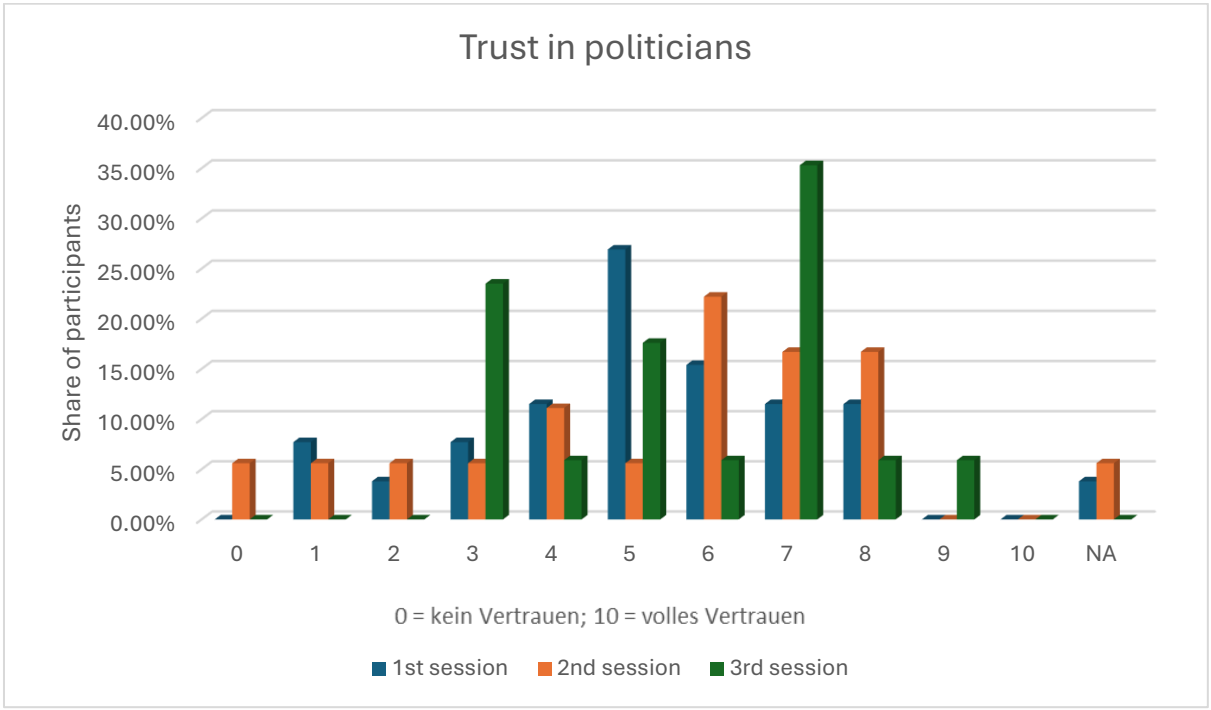
In terms of trust in institutions, there are different results depending on the institution. There is no change in trust in the police or the judiciary. The parliament of the German-speaking Community enjoys a majority of trust from the outset (7+ on a scale of 0-10), although 12% of participants rate their trust in

the parliament as 4 or less at the first session. The picture is similar for the government of the German-speaking Community. From the second session onwards, the rating does not fall below 5. Among the parties, the number of participants expressing a high level of trust (7+) rises from 25% in the first session to 35% in the third session. At the same time, the number of participants who distrust the parties (2 or less) falls from 21% to 6%. In the case of trust in politicians, the number of participants with high trust (7+) increases from 24% to 47%, but at the beginning 12% of participants rate their trust in politicians as less than 2. By the third session, the lowest rating is 3. This shows that mini-publics do not automatically lead citizens to rate institutions favourably, but citizens do soften their critical views.









Although trust in institutions is increasing, participants are disillusioned with some aspects of the political process. For example, in all three sessions, the majority of participants neither agree nor disagree that politicians listen to the opinions of citizens. However, at the beginning of the citizens' assembly, 73% of participants agree that politicians listen to the opinions of associations. This could represent a negative view of lobbying. By the third session, this figure drops to 59%. At the same time, 62% initially do not think that average citizens have any real influence on politics. By the third session, this figure drops to 53%. From the beginning, the majority of participants (62%) think that the political differences between politicians and citizens are greater than those between citizens themselves. This

figure rises to 71% by session 3. In line with this, the number of participants who think that politicians talk too much and do too little rises from 42% to 65%.

Politicians listen to and respect the opinions of citizens. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	7.7	15.4	42.3	26.9	3.8	3.8
2. Session	11.1	33.3	38.9	11.1	5.6	-
3. Session	0	29.4	52.9	17.6	0	-

Politicians listen and pay attention to the opinions of associations (lobbies, trade unions, etc.) (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	0	7.7	11.5	61.5	11.5	7.7
2. Session	0	16.7	0	72.2	11.1	-
3. Session	0	11.8	29.4	52.9	5.9	-

The political differences between politicians and citizens are greater than those between citizens themselves. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	3.8	15.4	11.5	50	11.5	7.7
2. Session	0	22.2	22.2	33.3	22.2	-
3. Session	0	17.6	11.8	47.1	23.5	-

Politicians talk too much and do too little. (Percentage of participants)	1 (do not agree at all)	2	3	4	5 (fully agree)	NA
1. Session	0	19.2	30.8	30.8	11.5	7.7
2. Session	5.6	16.7	22.2	44.4	11.1	-
3. Session	0	17.6	17.6	52.9	11.8	-

Influence of the corona crisis

The interruption of the Citizens' Assembly for six months (March to September 2020) and the direct relevance of the coronavirus crisis for the care sector posed a challenge when the sessions resumed.

At the beginning of the second session, half of the participants stated that the coronavirus crisis had changed their view of the topic of "care". This is reflected in a greater respect for the nursing profession and its importance.

89% of participants consider it unproblematic to resume work where it was interrupted in March. 67% prepared for the resumption by reading and collecting articles on the subject of "care", reading the report of the first session, watching specific documentaries on the subject on television, paying attention to the demands of the trade unions and seeking discussions with those affected.

Scientific observation of the citizens' assembly

Scientists from UCLouvain are present at all four sessions. The general impression is positive. The atmosphere in the citizens' assembly is consistently positive and the organisation is well thought out. When participants criticise the organisation (e.g. with regard to the acoustics during the walkway in the first session), this is immediately addressed by the PDG staff and rectified as soon as possible.

The majority of the sessions take place in the Parliament of the German-speaking Community in Eupen. During the first session, the citizens' assembly meets in the bright and spacious foyer on the ground floor of the parliament. The room is large enough for the 28 participants to sit in a circle of chairs. This immediately creates a communal atmosphere. In the following sessions, the corona restrictions complicate the seating arrangements and a kind of classroom dynamic is created in which the participants' attention is focussed on the moderator or the experts being heard and there is little communication between the citizens outside the working groups. This is the case at the second session in the Mozart Hall of the cultural centre in Bütgenbach as well as at the following sessions, which mainly take place in the plenary hall of the parliament.

As described above, half of the participants are male and half are female, and middle-aged participants make up the largest group. During one of the familiarisation games at the beginning of the first session, the participants discover that the majority live within a radius of 15 km from the parliament. This impression is confirmed in the data from the questionnaires (see above). There are some strong characters in the group, but they do not develop an undue dominance throughout the sessions. All participants show commitment and some of them even conduct independent research on the topic. At all sessions, all participants speak up at least once and in the working groups on the second day, all participants contribute well.

The moderator plays a central role in the course of the citizens' assembly. He enables focussed and efficient work and ensures that no participant can push themselves to the fore. The moderator also helps to condense the points raised by experts and summarise them for the citizens' assembly. The participants in the citizens' assembly visibly feel comfortable under the moderator's guidance, but his highly structured working method sets very tight limits on the creativity of the citizens. This becomes clear in the following description of the evolution of the citizens' recommendations from session to session.

1. **Session**

   The morning of the first session is used for the participants to get to know each other and for an initial brainstorming session on the topic of care. The participants bring a variety of experience with the topic. There is a nursing student, several (exclusively female) participants who have professional experience as carers, parents of people in care professions, participants whose parents are in need of care, and older participants who receive care themselves or assume that they will soon need it. One participant is particularly concerned about the working conditions for carers from Eastern Europe.

   After the introductory round, the moderator asks the participants to write their vision for care in 10 years' time on cardboard cards (which are later attached to a flipchart). The following focal points crystallise:

   - Practical care reforms
   - Financing and affordability of care
   - Responsibilities for care

- Recognising that care is time-consuming
- Education and training for young professionals
- Respect for human dignity

In the discussion on these points, the topics of home care/assisted living and the psychological needs of those being cared for (especially in care homes) also come up and, more generally, the question of how to "age well". The participants also discussed whether the care of young people should also be included in the considerations.

The afternoon is used for an initial round of information in the form of a walking tour (5 stations with various presentations are set up in the foyer and the participants move from station to station in small groups). There will be insights into the political responsibilities, the various training professions and the existing care services in the German-speaking Community. After the walk, the Minister for Health and Social Affairs, Antonios Antoniadis, will address the citizens' assembly and then, together with the presenters of the walk, will answer questions from the citizens' assembly in a round table discussion.

The participants are very engaged during the walk, but criticise the loud atmosphere, which makes it difficult to follow the presentations in detail. During the Q&A session, questions arose in particular about cross-border care insurance. The participants were also impressed by the complexity of the topic and thought that the training structure was problematic. One participant asks the Minister what solutions politicians have already developed. The minister rejects this, "because this is the task of the citizens' assembly". The participant disagrees and thinks that the citizens' assembly should have all the information it needs to work efficiently. Other participants agree. The day ends with a gathering of the first impressions of the participants (again written down on cardboard cards) and the collection of questions for practitioners in the care sector, as the organisers have scheduled the hearing of these for the next session. The questions focus on working conditions and the problems that carers see.

2. Session

The second session begins with a reflection on the question: "I associate the topic of corona with...". As in the first session, the participants write their thoughts on cardboard cards, which are then collated and hung up. The moderator highlights a few contributions , but then moves on to the next item on the agenda. There is no dialogue between the participants.

The moderator then offers a review of the first session and takes the questions that were collected at the end of the session as the starting point for today's session. He also notes that 19 September will definitely be the last session and that there is therefore a certain pressure to achieve results. He invites the participants to make comments on the progress so far and to ask any further questions.

One participant, who is a pensioner himself, asks whether there is a better way to prepare people for retirement. Other participants are concerned about the stress that carers experience in their day-to-day work. One participant wonders why there are different salary structures for the same work within the German-speaking Community. One of the experts already present offers to answer this question, but the moderator denies this. The affordability and funding of care is also brought up again and the participants note that there is no expert on home care/assisted living present today. Throughout the discussion, the dynamic is that individual participants address their questions or comments to the moderator and he responds to them. Sometimes the participants refer to each other

in their questions, but always with a focus on the moderator. There is very little interaction between the participants.

After hearing from experts on nursing home and hospital care, the experts take questions from the participants. One participant asks about the involvement of relatives in the processes in care homes, to which the expert refers to voluntary work. Another participant asks whether it would not be possible to introduce an insurance policy that could be used to secure a place in a care home of one's choice. The expert rejects this as not feasible for the small German-speaking Community. The participants also ask whether voluntary work could be extended to home care, but the experts judge this to be very difficult. Once again, a dynamic is created in which individual participants interact with the experts, but not the participants with each other. In some moments, the moderator takes over the dialogue with the experts and the participants are merely listeners. The moderator continuously takes notes on a flip chart, but with a focus on the points raised by the experts. Interjections from the participants are actively filtered by the moderator and not always noted down (e.g. the importance of human dignity or that a higher salary is synonymous with better recognition of the nursing professions).

In the afternoon, there will once again be a walking tour with presentations by active carers in hospitals, nursing homes and mobile care, as well as information on training for nurses and nursing assistants. There will also be a reading stand on home care, but this will be used by small groups to talk about what they have learnt. This stand is the only time since the start of the Citizens' Assembly that the participants have a chance to talk to each other. The walkway ends again with a round table discussion and again the dynamics are very similar to a classroom.

The day ends with preparations for the next session. The moderator asks whether the participants have gathered enough information and the general impression is that there was sufficient information. However, some participants note that there are still sides that have not been heard. For example, carers or the institutions responsible for funding (e.g. health insurance companies). However, the moderator is not prepared to address these comments and says that "you can't open another can of worms". Instead, he now presents his "road map" for the next steps and proposes that an drafting group be formed to make an initial attempt to translate the information received into recommendations over the coming week. Nine volunteers come forward. The moderator also suggested that the "final product" of the citizens' assembly should be scrutinised again by the experts before being submitted to parliament. The citizens' assembly agrees.

The second session ends without the participants being able to discuss what they have heard or prioritise the recommendations together.

2.1. Drafting group

The drafting group will meet on Wednesday (09/09) without the moderator. Myriam Pelzer is also present and takes on the role of moderator during the session. Seven of the original nine volunteers are present. One of the participants has prepared a summary of the most important points (from his point of view) and presents them to the rest of the group in a talk lasting about half an hour. After the presentation, there is some confusion among the members of the group as to what exactly the moderator expects of them and what they should prepare for the session on Saturday. Mrs Pelzer reminds the group of the objectives set by the moderator. Finally, the group agrees to jointly identify the most important areas for recommendations and then work in pairs to develop proposals for these areas. The areas are:

I. Education
II. Volunteering
III. IT solutions
IV. Overarching recommendations

The session will not be minuted, but the groups of two will each draw up an overview of their topic area.

3. Session

The third session is dedicated to drafting the recommendations. Before the drafting group presents its topics and proposals, the moderator makes it clear that "today is not a day for new ideas". The topics defined by the drafting group are therefore accepted as given and not discussed further.

The drafting group has prepared handouts that are more or less detailed. The handouts form the basis for the presentation of the subject areas by the two groups that have developed them. The authors of the second section have now dropped the term "volunteering" and are focussing entirely on the right of relatives to have a say and quality control in care homes. There are comments from the other participants, but the priorities that have now been established are not questioned.

The participants are now asked to work in small groups. They can choose their own group. The moderator provides a "chapter structure" for this part. The participants should follow the following structure:

I. Diagnosis/findings
II. What do we want to improve specifically
III. Recommendations...

The working groups record their thoughts on flip charts. The fact that the participants choose their own groups contributes to the harmonious atmosphere in the small groups, although this also leaves little potential for controversial discussions.

In the afternoon, the groups present their results to the other participants. For the Volunteering, Training and IT groups, the same participants as before are again responsible for the presentation. Only one participant who was not a member of the drafting group presented the overarching recommendations. The question of home care comes up again and the participants realise that this aspect does not fit into any of the areas. However, the moderator asks the participants to "keep the discussions in check" and to concentrate on "what is editorially feasible". As the discussion progresses, the moderator is also very focussed on the form and structure of the existing recommendations and many suggestions for changes come directly from him.

At the end of the day, it is decided that one participant from each working group will formulate the recommendations. The authors are those who have also given the presentations.

4. Session

The fourth session is used to finalise the recommendations. This was sent to two experts in advance, who now give their feedback on the recommendations. They are impressed, agree with the recommendations overall and mainly make formulation suggestions. In the area of training, however, they note that implementing the recommendations could be difficult. However, the author of the recommendations is strongly in favour of the recommendations and they remain unchanged.

The question of young people with care needs is coming up again. The experts sympathise with the idea, but also make it clear that the need for special services for young people in need of care is too small to justify the costs involved. The moderator suggests leaving this idea out, but some participants are against it. The moderator then suggests including a needs analysis for such cases in part four of the recommendations. This is accepted by the participants.

The final recommendations are divided into the following sections:

I. Training as a nursing assistant and as a healthcare and nursing assistant
II. Self-determination, co-determination and quality of life in the WPZS
III. Standardised IT solutions for the care sector
IV. Comprehensive measures

Summary of the observations

The first citizens' assembly of the permanent citizens' dialogue can be described as a success. Despite the difficult conditions caused by coronavirus, the participants came together in a positive and productive atmosphere. The recommendations are clearly structured and well thought out. The positive experience is also reflected in the great willingness of the participants to continue their involvement in the Citizens' Council.

The description of the sessions focussing on the ideas that emerged shows that the ideas from the first session are only reflected to a limited extent in the final recommendations. For example, the affordability of care and home care are repeatedly addressed, but as the moderator focuses on the experts present and information provided from the second session onwards, this aspect is not developed further. Creative ideas, such as the question of ageing well, are lost in the format defined by the moderator.

The creation of the drafting group is a good idea in itself and contributes to the efficient running of the citizens' assembly. However, it places the members of this group in a leadership role that is not really intended. Ideally, the filtering of the large amount of information into priorities should have taken place jointly. Alternatively, the citizens' assembly should have discussed the drafting group's selection and, if necessary, amended it before formulating concrete recommendations. This was not possible because, on the one hand, the moderator conducted the citizens' assembly in a very results-orientated and time-conscious manner and, on the other hand, was very focused on the experts' contributions. In addition, the coronavirus restrictions severely limited informal dialogue between the participants, e.g. during lunch.

Joint meetings with the parliamentary committees

The engagement of the citizens' assembly with the parliamentary committees is part of the citizens' dialogue and three joint public meetings are planned:

I. Presentation of the recommendations of the citizens' assembly (by the participants)
II. Initial reaction of the committees and presentation of possible approaches
III. Presentation of the results (by the committees)

At the time of this report, the first two meetings have taken place and have been observed by our team.

The first joint meeting is very positive. The citizens' assembly participants, who are also the authors of the recommendations, present them to the parliamentarians, who respond positively to them and the citizens' dialogue process as a whole. The citizens' assembly participants speak with impressive

confidence and clearly feel comfortable in their role. This may be due to the fact that they are very familiar with the material they are presenting and with the plenary chamber itself.

The second joint meeting is slower. On the one hand, some of the committees' responses to the recommendations are very technical and difficult for the layperson to follow. Secondly, the citizens' assembly participants had little time to deal with the committees' responses and can only respond to questions to a limited extent. Topic area four (overarching measures) even remains completely uncommented on by the citizens' assembly as the authors of the recommendations are not present. Perhaps the lack of debate during the citizens' assembly also contributes to this problem, as the recommendation areas were effectively defined by a sub-group of the citizens' assembly under some time pressure. After the formal presentation of the committees' response, a citizens' assembly participant makes an intervention and mentions the issue of Eastern European carers again.

Recommendations and conclusions

The first citizens' assembly represents a positive start for the permanent citizens' dialogue. The participants in the citizens' assembly felt comfortable with the process, which is reflected not only in their assessments of the various aspects, but also in the fact that the majority of participants (16) were willing to continue their involvement in the citizens' council. Despite the difficult conditions caused by coronavirus, the organisation was also perceived positively across the board.

From an academic point of view, mini-publics can be assessed according to three aspects: Input, Throughput, and Output. Put simply, these three elements relate to the time leading up to a citizens' assembly (e.g. recruitment), the process of the assembly, and the outcome of the mini-public.

Input

The quality of the input is primarily determined by two things: a socio-demographically diverse composition of the citizens' group and the extent to which the participants are able to express their opinions and ideas openly.

Diversified composition of the citizens' group

The ideal of a mini-public is to represent society as well as possible in socio-demographic terms, depending on the number of participants. The age structure is good at the beginning of the first citizens' assembly, but it is mainly young participants who drop out after the coronavirus-related break. Furthermore, the north of the German-speaking Community is overrepresented. This was also recognised by the participants themselves. This is not only problematic in terms of representativeness per se, but also in terms of the different character of the two regions of the German-speaking Community. Of course, the composition of the citizens' assembly depends on the available pool of citizens who have made themselves available to participate and sometimes the ideal cannot be achieved. In the first citizens' assembly, participants belonging to the under-represented groups (age under 34, living in the south of the German-speaking Community) seem to have dropped out after the break. It would be helpful to record the reasons for dropping out and, if these are related to the organisation, to include them in the planning of future citizens' assemblies.

Open presentation of opinions and ideas

The Citizens' Assembly was organised by the Citizens' Council. The Council was also involved in the selection of the experts consulted. This means that there was no direct political influence on the course

of the citizens' assembly. The citizens were able to express their ideas openly and freely. However, some ideas were lost in the course of the citizens' assembly. This was partly due to the corona break and the resulting time pressure to finalise recommendations before the government statement, but also to the moderator's style of conducting the session, as described in detail. While the moderator took on a very leading role during the sessions, we should work together to emphasise a mediating role in the future. This requires that enough space is created in the organisation of the sessions in which the participants can exchange ideas with each other in order to collect and discuss different opinions, views and priorities and then develop recommendations by consensus. In this space, participants must also be allowed to be creative and at least explore unconventional ideas. This also means that the citizens' assembly should be given the freedom to invite experts in addition to those invited by the citizens' council. The creative process should then be followed by a joint filtering process to prioritise the recommendations. Afterwards, working in small groups to precisely formulate the recommendations is entirely appropriate.

Throughput

The throughput of a mini-public includes contextual independence, the involvement of all participants and consensus-orientated decision-making.

Contextual independence

On the one hand, the moderator's leadership was very good, as the citizens' assembly worked in a results-orientated manner and within the schedule, and the participants clearly felt comfortable. However, as already indicated, his leadership style limited the creativity with which the participants could approach the topic. The range of possible recommendation areas was also limited by the selection of experts. Effectively, three groups of experts were consulted: carer trainers, people actively involved in the care profession and managers of care companies. All of these groups are already involved with the political process through professional organisations, for example. This means that they already have a certain amount of influence and can extend this by participating in the citizens' dialogue if they are given too much space. This is the case if the moderator places a strong focus on expert opinions and gives them a lot of space (e.g. by noting them down while participants' comments are not recorded). This limits the creativity of the citizens' assembly, as only ideas "verified" by experts are taken forward.[1]

Involvement of all participants

One of the moderator's strengths was that he did not allow anyone to take centre stage. All participants contributed to the process, albeit to varying degrees. The moderator rarely tried to involve the quieter participants more actively. By setting up the drafting group, some participants were also put in a leading position. This could have been avoided if the citizens' assembly had set clear parameters for the drafting group to fulfil its task or if the priorities developed by the drafting group had later been thoroughly discussed by the entire citizens' assembly.

Consensus-orientated decision-making

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, which are partly due to the coronavirus context and partly due to the style of moderation, the participants came to their decisions collectively and the recommendations represent a consensus in this sense. However, the recommendations are not the end product of a thorough assessment of all the ideas put forward and therefore do not represent the full potential of the citizens' assembly. In future, the facilitator should respond to all participant contributions and, as a next step,

[1] This point of criticism is also raised later in the citizens' assembly. The moderator was invited to lead the meeting to narrow down the topic for the second citizens' assembly. Afterwards, the Citizens' Assembly members felt that the moderator had narrowed down the topic and did not address all of the citizens' points equally.

help participants to use the insights and information provided by experts to jointly evaluate the ideas and then either develop them further or drop them.

Output

For the evaluation of the output, the answers to the questions, the involvement of the public and the political uptake of the results are important.

Answering the question

The question for the citizens' assembly was "Care concerns us all! How can care conditions be improved for staff and those affected?". This is a very broad task for a citizens' assembly with a limited working period. The participants at the end of the first session also realise the breadth of the topic. However, they do not take any steps to strategically narrow down the topic. This situation can be avoided by either asking the citizens' council to narrow down the topics of future citizens' assemblies in advance or by making the narrowing down part of the first session of a citizens' assembly. In the case of this citizens' assembly, the restrictions were (unintentionally) imposed by the coronavirus restrictions. The regulations make it impossible, for example, to visit a residential and care centre or to invite care recipients. The citizens' assembly therefore had to draw up its recommendations based on the information and interactions that were possible. They answer the question posed clearly, but with a focus on organisational aspects from practice. As carers/affected persons could not be consulted, there are no recommendations that relate directly to them. However, all recommendations have at least indirect positive effects for those affected. Future citizens' assemblies will hopefully take place with fewer restrictions so that it is possible to listen to a wider range of people on a given topic. A moderator-led analysis of the issue and identification of the stakeholders involved could also be helpful.

Involving the public

The public was involved in identifying topics and the citizens' dialogue attracted lively media interest. A journalist from Der Spiegel was present at the second session and the first and last sessions included press interviews and the citizens' dialogue is also present on Facebook. The local television station BRF was also present at the first and last sessions and recorded short contributions from participants. There is constant reporting in the widely read daily newspaper GrenzEcho, although this is almost exclusively in the form of short reports and rarely in the form of commentaries or background reports. The website of the citizens' dialogue is informative and interested readers can find all relevant information there (e.g. explanations of the process or minutes of the results). It remains to be seen whether all these information flows are actually perceived by the population as a whole. It is also important not only to present the process of the citizens' assembly and the resulting recommendations to the public, but also to justify them. The aim is to give those who were unable to attend the session the opportunity to understand the work of the citizens' assembly and its arguments. This could be achieved, for example, through videos that reflect the experiences of the participants and explain the recommendations in detail.

Taking up the results politically

What is unique about the citizens' dialogue is that engagement with politicians is part of the formal process and there are joint public meetings with the parliamentary committees. This means that politicians cannot avoid dealing with the recommendations and must address the issues raised. However, implementation of the recommendations is not mandatory. The parliamentary committees can also make amendments or reject ideas altogether, but these steps must be justified. The decree that defines the citizens' dialogue provides for at least three joint meetings: the presentation of the recommendations by participants in the citizens' assembly, an initial assessment by the committees concerned (and the opportunity for participants to respond), and finally the presentation of the implementation or

justifications for amendments or even rejection of the recommendations (no later than one year after the second session).

The first joint meeting showed positive engagement of the politicians with the proposals of the citizens' assembly and general recognition that these were achieved under difficult conditions. However, this first meeting was largely symbolic in nature and did not yet have any political consequences. The second session showed the possibilities and difficulties for politicians to engage with the recommendations. The committees analysed the status quo and partly came to the conclusion that the proposals of the citizens' assembly are already part of existing legislation and that there is either no need for action or that only the implementation of the laws needs to be better monitored. In the committees' view, this is the case for proposals relating to quality control and complaints management in residential and care centres and for the recommendation on greater transparency of patient data. In the area of training, the responsible committee doubts whether the proposals of the citizens' assembly are expedient and recommends more consultation with the institutions concerned. In general, only recommendations on topics in which the government is already active are received unreservedly in favour. This is the case with the recommendations on the digitalisation of care and proposals to improve working conditions. The participants in the Citizens' Assembly, who are present at during the presentation by the committees, find it difficult to get to grips with the committees' highly technical analyses in a short space of time. However, the Citizens' Assembly can make it its task to continue to engage with the committees as the recommendations progress. It will be important to discuss the implementation of the recommendations transparently with the citizens' assembly in a year's time. In addition, future citizens' assemblies should endeavour to provide citizens with the committees' response in good time before the second meeting so that they can consider it. This should help to ensure that there is also a real discussion at the second joint committee meeting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dalton, RJ. (2008). Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation. Political Studies 56 (1), 76-98.

Elstub, Stephen/Escobar, Oliver (eds.) (2019). Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing.

Harris, C. (2019). Mini-publics: design choices and legitimacy. In: Stephen Elstub/Oliver Escobar (eds.). Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar Publishing.

Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (ed.) (2019). East Belgium in figures. Available online at http://www.ostbelgienstatistik.be/PortalData/22/Resources/downloads/studien_und_analysen/publikationen/Ostbelgien_Statistik_2019_DE.PDF (accessed on 11.01.2021).

Parliament of the German-speaking Community (2021). Citizens' dialogue in East Belgium. Available online at https://www.buergerdialog.be/ (accessed on 12.01.2021).

Reuchamps, Min/Niessen, Christoph (2019). The permanent citizens' dialogue in the German-speaking Community. Courrier hebdomadaire / Centre de Recherche et d'Information Socio-Politiques 21 (no2426-EN), 5-40.