



Prime Minister's Office

Report on Swedish efforts related to the initiative on citizens' consultations

Background

In early 2016, the inquiry report "The EU in Sweden" (Swedish Government Official Reports 2016:10) showed that individuals and organisations have poorer prospects of accessing and influencing political issues decided at the EU level compared to issues not connected to the EU. Furthermore, it showed that there is a widespread lack of knowledge in Sweden about the relationship between the national democratic system and the EU. As a response, the Swedish Government launched several initiatives to strengthen participation, knowledge and engagement in EU affairs.

Efforts

The Government's long-term goal is that citizens' ability to access and participate in decisions at the EU level should be as good as at the local, regional and national level. Efforts have therefore been widespread and aimed to meet the challenges pointed out in "The EU in Sweden".

Increased knowledge and better access to information

Strengthening knowledge about how the EU operates is an important part of the efforts to increase participation in issues decided at the EU level. The Government has thus initiated activities aimed at increasing knowledge about the EU among key actors.

EU courses are offered to teachers, whom can become EU school ambassadors, by the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) together with the Commission and European Parliament offices in Sweden. With increased means for this initiative, the number of EU school ambassadors

educated each year can double. To increase participation among students, UHR also arranged a video contest, “the EU minute”, in the spring of 2018. EU courses are offered to journalists by the Fojo Media Institute, and by the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (Sieps) to elected representatives and employees in municipalities and regions.

The Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) has also been tasked with increasing knowledge and participation in EU-related issues among youth and groups with limited resources.

To improve citizen’s access to relevant information, the Government is working to improve EU-related information available on its official website and social media channels. Furthermore, Sieps has been tasked with making the results of its research more accessible.

Improved channels of influence

The Government is working to strengthen consultation procedures on issues decided at the EU level. To do this, a working method called EU thematic consultation forums has been introduced. By inviting civil society organisations and relevant actors to a dialogue, the Government can broaden and deepen the basis for its decision-making on a specific issue. The EU thematic consultation forums help provide structured feedback and increased transparency. So far, 20 forums have been held. Besides these, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven has also invited the social partners to EU consultations twice a year to discuss current EU issues. In February 2017 the Government decided to make EU thematic consultation forums a permanent part of the Government’s methods to consult civil society and other relevant organisations on EU proposals.

Furthermore, the Government is conducting a dialogue with public authorities regarding their role in consultations and information on EU affairs. By improving National Government Agencies’ EU-related information and encouraging structured dialogue with other stakeholders, agencies can help improve individual’s and organised interests’ possibilities to access and influence national experts as well as policies at the EU level.

Enhanced engagement

To engage a variety of actors in the work to strengthen EU participation and stimulate a debate about the EU, the Minister for EU Affairs and Trade Ann Linde has initiated so called ‘EU handshakes’. In an EU handshake parties

commit, on a voluntary basis, to do their part in strengthening EU knowledge and opportunities to influence decision-making. The commitments vary in ambition and focus depending on each actor's context and resources. However, an EU handshake always entails an increased level of ambition in the EU-related work of each actor.

In total 77 actors, representing thousands of people across the country, have entered an EU handshake. These include civil society organisations, social partners, universities, municipalities, regions, and other key actors at the local and regional level.

Most of the actors participating in the EU handshake have committed to increase knowledge about the EU inside and outside their own organisation. Many have committed to offer courses or seminars to elected representatives, employees or members. Several of the actors also work to increase participation in EU decisions and participate more actively in the formation of Swedish positions in EU negotiations. Additionally, more than half of the actors will work to increase voter turnout in the European Parliament elections in 2019.

On 8 May 2018, all actors that had entered an EU handshake were invited to an EU forum. At the forum, the actors were able to present their work, exchange experiences, discuss challenges as well as the future of Europe.

Inclusive debate on the future of Europe

The Government is working to stimulate a broad debate about EU related affairs among citizens and organised interests. One important part of this work is to encourage an inclusive debate on the future of Europe.

In 2017, the Government organised EU thematic consultation forums on all five reflection papers linked to the White Paper on the Future of Europe as well as a final forum in 2018. These forums have given civil society and other actors an opportunity to contribute with their views on the future development of the EU.

A Government assignment has been given to Sieps, to spread the discussion about the future of Europe. As a result, Sieps conducts a "tour" of discussion seminars to provide an overview of the challenges and possibilities the EU is facing. These seminars, which have been given to decision makers, representatives, and the public at the local and regional

level, have so far been held in 15 places around Sweden, and will continue until the end of the year.

Main themes and concerns raised in discussions on the future of Europe

Overall, Swedes are positive about the EU being the main forum to deal with the challenges that Europe is facing. This has been clear in EU thematic consultation forums. Some have been concerned about increased protectionism in the world and the risks this might bring. There have also been mixed views on deepening the eurozone and to what degree social issues should be on the EU agenda.

Sieps has in its discussion tour so far found a large interest for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Brexit, regional policies, the rule of law and solidarity between Member States.

The Parlemeter¹ from October 2018, showed that 77% of Swedish respondents answered that Sweden's membership in the EU generally is a good thing, which is an increase from 68% in April. In addition, 90% of Swedish respondents answered that they think their voice counts in the EU. This is also an increase, from 80% in April. Sweden thus had the largest improvement in favourability towards the EU among all Member States.

Migration

A prominent theme is migration, which has been highlighted by participants in EU thematic consultation forums as an important issue for the EU member states to tackle together. Sieps has found that citizens' discussions about migration often are coupled with concerns about solidarity between Member States. The March 2018 Eurobarometer (Public Opinion in the European Union)² also shows that Swedes consider migration to be the biggest challenge facing the EU at the moment.

Climate change and the environment

In several EU thematic consultation forums, with varying themes, participants brought up climate change and/or the environment. Participants

¹ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>

²

<https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2180>

have thought that the sustainability goals for the new common agricultural policy (CAP) proposal are important, and others that a larger part of the next MFF should be dedicated to climate actions. At the final EU thematic consultation forum on the future of Europe, environment and climate were brought up as the most important issues for the EU, together with security, migration, equality, trade and the four freedoms.

Swedish citizens' concern for the climate and environment can also be seen in the March 2018 Eurobarometer (Public Opinion in the European Union), where Swedes were the most worried of all Member States' citizens. Climate change was also seen as the second biggest challenge facing the EU.

Subsidiarity and what the EU should do

Another reoccurring theme in EU thematic consultation forums are subsidiarity and what tasks the EU should carry out. Participants have been positive regarding increased subsidiarity and self-determination for Member States within the CAP. Subsidiarity was also raised by several participants in the final consultation forum on the future of Europe. Here, as well as in consultation forums regarding future EU finances and the MFF, the importance of the EU focusing on things creating added value was highlighted. Some areas where participants thought the EU should take charge were trade, the internal market, competition and growth.

The functioning of the EU

In Sieps' discussion seminars about the future of Europe, concerns and dissatisfaction about solidarity and fairness between the Member States have been expressed related to migration, but also related to the rule of law. Participants have also brought up concerns about unity within the union related to these ongoing issues.

At the final EU thematic consultation forum on the future of Europe, several participants pointed out the importance of the Commission being the guardian of the treaties and that there must be high standards when it comes to Member States' compliance to common commitments and rules. Some also saw a risk with a Commission that is too politicized. Several participants stated the importance of a continued push for improvements in human rights, the rule of law, as well as democratic and sustainable development.