



OPEN  
EUROPEAN  
DIALOGUE

# THE OPEN EUROPEAN DIALOGUE DECLARATION: CREATING BETTER POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS

STIFTUNG  
MERCATOR

 King Baudouin  
Foundation  
*Working together for a better society*

 Robert Bosch  
Stiftung

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of the United States  
STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

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## HOW WE WORK

We need to talk! It is our mission to improve the way European policymakers communicate and collaborate. We operate in the field of democratic innovation by experimenting with new ways of meaningfully connecting Europe's policymakers. We help policymakers understand diverse local and political contexts in an increasingly complex environment.

## WHAT WE BELIEVE IN

We believe in collaborative and democratic processes, the value and power of dialogue to address complex political challenges, and the need to keep the political system fit for purpose.

## OUR ORGANIZATION STANDS ON THREE PILLARS



### CUTTING-EDGE EXPERTISE

Leading think tanks across Europe provide our members with top-level policy expertise. An understanding of groundbreaking research on human decision making and political behavior inform our work.



### INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

A hub for practitioners and decision-makers to test new forms of political dialogue and explore innovative methods of democratic governance.



### ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVATION

Bringing together and channeling the power of a diverse network of policymakers, policy thinkers and shapers.

## OUR STORY

In 2015, the Mercator European Dialogue project was launched by the German Marshall Fund of the United States and Stiftung Mercator in cooperation with the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy. At the time, the financial crisis and the sudden influx of people seeking refuge in Europe put a strain on cross-European relations, particularly between those of Germany and Greece. Our partner organizations identified a need for more constructive exchange between policymakers to mitigate political tensions across Europe.

The positive impact produced by the first Mercator European Dialogue – which brought together politicians from across Europe – highlighted a severe and pervasive gap in dialogue among Europe’s policymakers. The crucial role played by national politicians in shaping the European debate emerged clearly. European politics was being decided

as much in the capitals as it was in Brussels. Yet, the effective involvement of national parliaments in the broader European debate remains limited. At the same time, the growing reluctance of one political faction to speak openly to colleagues from across the political and ideological divide, only served to complicate matters further. The need for better channels for meaningful communication and exchange for national and European politicians to come together and openly discuss matters of European political relevance, was clear.

The think tank partners, acting on their mission as non-partisan public policy organizations dedicated to promoting policy debate and cooperation, decided to join forces with Stiftung Mercator and, since 2017, the King Baudouin Foundation. Together, they built up the Mercator European Dialogue as a permanent platform for policymakers across individual European parliaments to connect in an informal and neutral

setting. The project’s motto became: “We need to talk!”

In 2020, the platform was joined by its process partner APROPOS - Advancing Process in Politics and the Robert Bosch Stiftung. In the pursuit of expanding the platform to further activities and exchanges for policymakers, it was renamed to Open European Dialogue.

**Today, the Open European Dialogue is a politically neutral platform that aims to improve European politics by supporting policymakers in better understanding challenges and perspectives from across Europe. We do that by connecting European politicians across parties and countries, providing space for dialogue and promoting innovative political conversations in ways that no one else does.**

# OUR APPROACH IN A NUTSHELL

We change the way European policymakers engage with each other, cultivating mutual understanding of local contexts in Europe. This is our recipe for success:

1

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We apply human-centric and experiential learning approaches to engage policymakers in an open-ended explorative exercise. We focus on the diagnosis of policy problems and provide the tools to improve their understanding of complex policy questions.

We add an often neglected step to policymaking, which is otherwise prone to jumping from posing a question, and thereby defining a problem, to trying to solve it directly.

2

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We maintain a diverse network of policymakers and cultivate active exchange between them to broaden the scope of voices heard at all levels of European policymaking and to connect policymakers beyond their traditional alliances.

We shake up the European political arena in which exchange rarely takes place across party boundaries and national borders.

3

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We use process design and facilitated dialogue to establish a culture of active listening, which allows for meaningful exchange between actors holding competing views.

Rather than listening to reply and convince one's conversation partner, we establish a culture of active listening to foster understanding between participants.

It is in the DNA of our project to remain politically neutral and not to force consensus building. This philosophy shapes our day-to-day operations and dialogues.



# EN ROPEAN ALOGUE



# WE SEE THE NEED FOR MORE EXPLORATIVE POLICYMAKING.

Collective decision-making in Europe would benefit from a stronger focus on the analysis of political and societal problems before jumping to solutions.

Exploring policy problems by taking into consideration a number of different perspectives improves the quality and diversity of available information, as well as the very way information is processed by decision-makers. It creates a clearer picture of a problem, leads policy actors to explore root causes and not only the symptoms of a problem, encourages them to investigate multiple aspects, and question predefined assumptions and beliefs toward a given policy challenge.

However, policymaking tends to skip over the exploration and diagnostic step of the policy process. Instead, it jumps quickly from posing a question, and thereby defining a problem, to trying to solve it. As a result, from the offset, policy responses do not give diverse perspectives and additional information

on the nature of a problem the appropriate consideration.<sup>1</sup> This rush to solutions creates a policymaking process that neglects new and alternative approaches while favoring familiar solutions based on (often falsifiable) assumptions and predefined beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

## WHY IS POLICYMAKING RARELY EXPLORATIVE? WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE THAT?

The misconception that policymaking is a mere problem-solving exercise plagues the field.<sup>3</sup> This understanding assumes that there is a univocal definition of a problem and that the best solution only needs to be found. Yet with complex problems and multiple interest groups holding diverging perspectives and values, this is often not the case. Problem-solving “shifts the focus from debating the meaning of a problem to confirming the solution”<sup>4</sup> without taking the time to take diverse perspectives on it into consideration.

Like anyone else, politicians are

prone to confirmation biases, which influence the way new information and evidence is interpreted, remembered, or judged.<sup>5</sup> Research has shown how politicians use information supporting their biases and preexisting attitudes to further consolidate these. And while it is sometimes assumed that information contradicting predefined positions cause a reevaluation of one’s judgment, it does not. Instead, such information is often disregarded in favor of preestablished attitudes.<sup>6</sup> Explorative policymaking tries to break this habit.

# HOW DO WE SUPPORT EXPLORATIVE POLICYMAKING?

We apply human-centric and experiential learning approaches to influence the way information is interpreted, remembered, or judged.

**We design dialogue processes that focus on defining the problem and facilitating the spirit of enquiry and understanding.**

We bring diverse parliamentarians from across the European political landscape to the table to share their experiences, concerns, and outlooks. Our dialogues focus on understanding the other's position rather than imposing one's own. We do not need to see agreement in the room.

**We steer away from prescriptive solutions and panel-style debates.**

We recognize that simply providing politicians with evidence may not lead to evidence-based policies. We thus engage policymakers in formats that allow them to explore policy problems in depth and to question their own beliefs and assumptions. Our formats never promote one particular point

of view and consequently do not aim to encourage any specific change of perspective.

**We ensure respect toward diverse views and are careful not to polarize or alienate anyone's political view.**

Dialogues are a neutral space protecting everyone's right to speak their mind freely. The combination of experienced dialogue facilitators, process design, and the room's physical set-up fosters content-based discussions and diffuses tensions between policymakers from different ideological camps.



**"More discussions like these are needed, so we can explore our weaknesses, what we misunderstand, where the misconceptions are. This can help us find solutions for our countries and solutions for Europe."**

– Member of Parliament from Hungary

## RECOMMENDATION #1

**Spend more time on the diagnosis and analysis of a problem—asking “Why and How”—rather than trying to seek a solution.**

For policy thinkers and policymakers, this means working to broaden the understanding of a given policy challenge rather than spending all energies on pitting one solution against another. This means taking the time to consult others on what the nature of the problem seems to be and what it may represent from the viewpoint of different stakeholders.



# WE NEED TO BROADEN THE SCOPE OF VOICES IN POLICYMAKING.

Decision-making at the European level routinely runs into blockages over divergent world views and an unwillingness to yield control to others.

To achieve and accept political compromise, it is vital to understand the underlying motivations behind diverging political preferences. Only through exposure and engagement with different ways of thinking can policymakers make sense of others' preferences and understand how values and direct experience influence these. Hence, more policymakers need to engage in exchanges outside their political echo-chambers. For Europe, this means rooting political strategies in an understanding and active dialogue with political actors from all governance levels and political backgrounds.

Yet, the current scope and range of voices in the European debate is limited. This leads to groupthink, which tends to exclude opposing perceptions and experiences to the ones of the group as

invalid or irrelevant. This prevents the emergence of political compromises<sup>7</sup> and alternative or new approaches to policy questions.<sup>8</sup>

## **WHY DO ECHO-CHAMBERS PREVAIL IN EUROPE? WHAT CAN WE DO TO BREAK WITH THEM?**

Several institutional and structural barriers hinder an inclusive political debate and policymaking process in Europe. Party families being the predominant communication channel of Europe's political arena unwittingly results in policymakers rarely engaging in exchange across ideological party boundaries. Political minorities or opposition parties face structural barriers and cannot draw on a well-connected network of European contacts.<sup>9</sup> In fact, official interparliamentary exchanges are usually restricted to parliamentarians from governing parties or those in high positions.<sup>10</sup>

The process design of interparliamentary conferences—the place for Europe's different voices to come together—does not sufficiently allow for genuine exchange. Meetings usually occur in large plenaries, which revolve around a tightly packed agenda, jumping from one topic to another. Sessions mainly feature the reading of previously prepared statements by different representatives. Even if diverging political views do spark a discussion, the plenary size and tight schedule do not allow discussing an issue, let alone for the majority to get the chance to speak.<sup>11</sup>

# HOW CAN WE CONTRIBUTE TO BROADENING THE SCOPE OF VOICES IN EUROPEAN POLICYMAKING?

We are a cross-party network that connects policymakers from all political families in Europe.

We actively engage policymakers from smaller parties and fringe voices to avoid reproducing known debates. Our dialogues ensure active engagement between parliamentarians who are not usual political allies.

Our network and dialogues are informal and participatory.

We do not facilitate any two-way panel-style discussion at our convenings. There are no pre-written speeches, but rather honest and informal engagement between everyone in the room. The interests and needs of participants guide the process and discussions at our dialogues, in which everyone is an active participant.

We foster cross-border and cross-party initiatives to help national policymakers practice their European role.

We actively support the realization of dialogues and field trips initiated by

our members to explore policy issues with their European counterparts. Our members suggest topics for activities, task our expert network with research, initiate petitions or collaborations, and visit their peers for field trips on specific issues of their interest.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

Seek to engage with diverse and niche views, paying attention not only to different political ideology, but also different levels of governance.

Engaging more proactively with a more diverse set of stakeholders can enormously enrich our understanding of policy challenges, avoid dangerous blind spots caused by groupthink, and ultimately strengthen our ability to contribute to striking political compromises.



"It sounds very simple these times to get in touch with fellow MPs from other countries to work on policy issues—but it is not! It is completely different when you have a colleague from Spain or Greece sitting next to you and learning what their view on your home country is."

– Member of Parliament from Germany

# WE SEE THE OPPORTUNITY FOR MORE ACTIVE LISTENING IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING.

Active listening, paying attention to what is being said verbally and non-verbally, allows for meaningful exchange and fruitful outcomes between actors holding competing views.

Political debates rarely feature much listening. Rather, they are characterized by actors with different or opposing views competing over speaking time and the superiority of their opinions.<sup>12</sup> Talking against and not with each other results in debates that lack constructiveness and do not challenge anyone's views. This only reinforces predefined opinions and does not allow for mutual understanding and learning.<sup>13</sup>

## WHY DO THESE STRUCTURES PREVAIL, AND HOW CAN WE CONTRIBUTE TO ENGAGING EUROPEAN POLICYMAKERS IN MEANINGFUL EXCHANGES?

Experts including policymakers are “rewarded for knowing the answer rather than asking better questions.”<sup>14</sup> This means that there is not much incentive to investigate a question thoroughly before answering it or to listen to diverse perspectives. However, there is an incentive for being the first one to answer and to frame the debate.

(Not) listening is a power game in political debates. Listening to one's counterpart includes granting them the power of speaking and of asserting presence.<sup>15</sup> This can be seen as a disadvantage in politics where setting the frame and agenda, leading the debate, and providing the “correct” interpretation of an event is needed to win votes.



**"Parliamentarians, and I cannot exempt myself from this, tend to hold strong convictions and tend to stick to these. Engaging in [the OED's] informal conversations allowed me to hear opinions and perspectives in a way that institutional exchanges don't quite encourage, making it easier for me to question my own positions."**

– former Member of Parliament from Latvia

# HOW DO WE CONTRIBUTE TO MORE ACTIVE LISTENING IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING?

We use process design and facilitated dialogue to establish a culture of active listening between European policymakers at our convenings.

**We change the format of interaction from debates to informal dialogues.**

Facilitators support participants at the conversation table. They guide the process, steer group dynamics and engagement toward active listening, equal participation, and a balance of voices. They nudge participants toward an explorative exchange and to learn from each other's first-hand experience. They prevent the premature development of solutions-oriented thinking. We ask not for solutions but for shared observations from the conversations. These can later form the basis for further constructive exchange.

**We create a trustful environment for open and honest conversations.**

Participants agree on ground rules to guide their interaction at each dialogue, while the Chatham House Rule always

applies. A significant part of the conversation focuses on participants' shared experiences, regardless of their political colors, in their role as national representatives in a European context or in their daily exposure to public pressure. This helps establish a connection on a human level before we delve into policy questions.

**We reframe topics to cause the light discomfort of not quite knowing what the answer is.**

Where unidirectional input is provided, we keep it short, non-prescriptive, and thoughtfully provocative. We steer clear of ready-made answers and lure policymakers away from the comfort of standard replies or solutions.

Nonetheless, we provide all necessary briefing materials supported by hard facts to substantiate a discussion.

Top-tier experts are at the disposal of participants at the conversation table. This practice allows participants to reevaluate and spin around topics without losing touch with reality.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

**Policymakers and policy thinkers should engage in active listening by setting aside the answers or solutions they think they have for a genuine spirit of enquiry while engaging with the political other.**

Making an effort to truly listen, in order not to counter-react but to understand, is a severely underused tool in policymaking. The deeper one can dig into why a certain policy actor holds a certain position, the more likely it is that one can identify an overlap in values or, at least, interests.

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## JOINING FORCES IN THE OPEN EUROPEAN DIALOGUE



Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting science and the humanities. Stiftung Mercator symbolizes the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. One of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.



The King Baudouin Foundation's mission is to contribute to a better society. The Foundation is an actor for change and innovation, serving the public interest and increasing social cohesion in Belgium and Europe. We seek to maximize our impact by strengthening the capacity of organizations and individuals. We also stimulate effective philanthropy by individuals and corporations. The Foundation's key values are integrity, transparency, pluralism, independence, respect for diversity, and promoting solidarity. The Foundation's current areas of activity are poverty and social justice, philanthropy, health, civic engagement, developing talents, democracy, European integration, heritage and development cooperation. The King Baudouin Foundation is a public benefit foundation. The Foundation was set up in 1976 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of King Baudouin's reign.



The Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH is one of the major German foundations associated with a private company in Europe. It works in the areas of health, education, and global issues. With its charitable activities, it contributes to the development of viable solutions to social challenges. For this purpose, the Foundation implements its own projects, enters into alliances with partners, and supports third-party initiatives. Since it was established in 1964, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has invested around 1.8 billion euros in charitable work.



The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF contributes research and analysis and convenes leaders on transatlantic issues relevant to policymakers. GMF offers rising leaders opportunities to develop their skills and networks through transatlantic exchange, and supports civil society in the Balkans and Black Sea regions by fostering democratic initiatives, rule of law, and regional cooperation. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. IAI is part of a vast international network, and interacts and cooperates with the Italian government and its ministries, European and international institutions, universities, major national economic actors, the media and the most authoritative international think tanks.



The Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) is an independent and plural think tank based in Barcelona, dedicated to the study, research and analysis of international affairs. Created in 1973 as an International Documentation Centre of Barcelona, it is a private foundation since 1979. CIDOB promotes global governance and good practices – based on local, national and European democratic government – to ensure that people possess the basic elements to live their lives free from fear and in liberty, by facilitating a dialogue that includes all diversities and which actively defends human rights and gender equality. CIDOB is a dynamic community of analytics that works to produce and offer to all political actors – from individual citizens to international organizations – information and ideas to formulate and promote policies for a more secure, free and fair world for everyone.



ELIAMEP is an independent, non-profit and policy-oriented research and training institute. It neither expresses, nor represents, any specific political party view. It is only devoted to the right of free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP's mission is to provide a forum for public debate on issues of European integration and international relations to conduct scientific research that contributes to a better informed and documented knowledge of the European and international environment.



To work together well, we need to understand and respect each other despite our differences. Democracies listen. To build respect and understanding in politics, APROPOS combines research with experimentation and decades worth of practical experience in designing deliberative decision-making processes and unique political dialogues. We design and carry out meetings with policymakers, facilitate conversations, train practitioners, and publish research on political process to advance the dialogue and collaborative capacities that will be vital for the decades of comprehensive societal changes ahead of us.





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