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Why Do We Need Open and Informal Dialogues in European Politics? A Conversation with Lolita Čigāne

The Open European Dialogue (OED) spoke to Lolita Čigāne, who joined the network in 2016 and who has served as chair of the European Affairs Committee in the parliament of Latvia

(2014-2018), on her experience with the OED and why a more open and free-flowing dialogue matters in politics.

When the Treaty of Lisbon came into force 11 years ago, national parliaments were, for the first time, given a formal role in the EU decision-making process to strengthen the principle of solidarity and with it democracy and efficiency within the Union. Since then, numerous institutional channels and instruments for cooperation have emerged to promote more dialogue and coordination among national parliaments in the EU. Yet, these suffer from structural weaknesses as rigid protocol can often stifle meaningful exchange and can generate frustration, thereby undermining inter-parliamentary cooperation.

The Open European Dialogue platform works to strengthen inter-parliamentary exchange in the EU by offering a much needed safe space for politicians from across borders and parties to gather in an informal setting, away from business-as-usual political negotiations, to interact with their colleagues on key questions of EU policy. The project was launched in 2015 at the height of the migration crisis, which saw official communication channels between member states paralyzed and bilateral relations deteriorate, with some experts even declaring that European integration is “dead.” Today’s coronavirus pandemic has re-affirmed the importance of informal communication channels. As recent discussions between EU member states have reinforced political stereotypes and have seen a lack of trust that hinder content-based discussions and the ability to forge common ground, the OED continues to facilitate informal dialogues for national parliamentarians to share their perspectives.

Below, Lolita Čigāne, who joined the network in 2016 and who has served as chair of the European Affairs Committee in the parliament of Latvia (2014-2018), shares her experience with the OED on why a more open and free-flowing dialogue matters in politics.

As chair of the European Affairs Committee, did experiencing a different kind of political conversation, more open and less confrontational, influence your work in any way?

Well, the structures in parliament and its committees are wildly different from the informal settings of the OED networks’ inter-parliamentary exchanges. However, I applied parts of the OED method in my committee work when faced with issues that were not extremely divisive. I tasked opposition members to act as rapporteurs, which led to noticeable change from

discussions based on personality to more content-based discussions. People refrained from attacking each other as frequently as they used to.

It also helped to decrease attacks on the chair and the governing party, and it did indeed lead to more constructive engagement, and I felt that it improved the atmosphere and discussion climate in the committee. Every person is a complex set of ideas and values. The way the Open European Dialogue works, it helps to organize communication and helps to create more nuanced views, which can be conducive to finding new avenues for political compromise.

Is there really a need for more informality in political exchanges in Europe today?

In my opinion, there are enough institutional interparliamentary formats and there is no need for another official format. However, parliamentarians that are part of the opposition or those who are not in high positions cannot take part in official meetings. These are usually restricted to parliamentarians from governing parties.

What made the Open European Dialogue interesting to me is the unofficial format of the workshops. At institutional interparliamentary conferences, parliamentarians from different countries stick together and meet in their little circles. I was interested in the more open, free-flowing format and saw it as an opportunity for networking with parliamentarians from across the EU—including from opposition parties.

Parliamentarians, and I cannot exempt myself from this, tend to hold strong convictions and tend to stick to these. Engaging in these 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. For example, I attended a field trip of the OED at the height of the migration crisis in Europe. The input of the Greek parliamentarians was immensely valuable, especially as they shared with us very different attitudes and angles compared to what I had heard previously through the media or otherwise.

In what ways did these experiences provide value to your political work in Latvia?

In a number of ways. I was able to deepen my working relationship with an Estonian parliamentarian whom I already knew. This proved valuable during the time of the Estonian EU presidency as we cooperated through the former Latvian presidency on the increased involvement of national parliaments in EU policymaking, and we used our connection to work together on this issue. Or, in a different instance, a

Scottish parliamentarian whom I met at a OED workshop proved instrumental to further my understanding of the Scottish situation regarding Brexit.

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