



CITIES AS ARENAS OF POLITICAL INNOVATION
IN THE STRENGTHENING OF DELIBERATIVE AND
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

INSIGHT BRIEFING 2

**Pan-European experiences of democracy
and visions for the future**

NOVEMBER 2022

EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.



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Table of contents	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
Experiences of democracy	4
Võru, Estonia: Insights from the citizen stories	4
Gdańsk, Poland: Insights from the citizen stories	5
Reggio Emilia, Italy: Insights from the citizen stories	6
What we learned	7
Democracy now – What does it look like?	8
Democracy in the future – What would we like it to be?	8
Democracy in transit – How do we reach our vision?	8
Key Learning & Recommendations	8
Method	10
Citizen Groups	10

“LISTEN AND LEARN FROM THE DAILY STORIES OF PEOPLE, STARTING FROM THE REALITY.”

Pan-European experiences of democracy and visions for the future

Executive Summary

This briefing provides an overview of the key learning from a series of storytelling and future thinking workshops, focusing on the future of democracy across Europe, carried out as part of **EUARENAS**. The insights are based on 33 citizen stories and three future-thinking workshops that took place in Gdańsk, Poland, Võru, Estonia and Reggio Emilia, Italy.

It highlights key challenges in present day European democracies such as the lack of engagement of specific demographics including young people and migrant communities, and how the potential of technology to democratise decision-making and support citizen participation is not fully being realised. Future visions of democracy include bringing voices on the margins into the mainstream, and creating more human connections between people in positions of power and the communities they serve. To achieve this, education, collaboration and pro-active approaches to achieving equity are needed.

Introduction

This briefing provides an overview of the key learning from a series of storytelling and future thinking workshops, focusing on the future of democracy across Europe, carried out as part of **EUARENAS**.

EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that includes more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.

Research was conducted by municipalities in Gdańsk, Poland, Võru, Estonia and Reggio Emilia, Italy. 33 citizen stories were gathered from a diverse range of people including young people, migrant communities and local volunteers. These stories were used to create horizon maps for the future of democracy in their geographic area. Citizen lived experience stories are useful in future thinking activities as they help identify current perceptions and experiences of democracy, which in turn helps to identify signals for the future.

This briefing presents the insights from these activities in relation to participatory and deliberative democracies, shedding light on current challenges such as under-representation of marginalised groups, the lack of understanding of local government ways of working, and lack of professional and monetary investment into improving engagement in democracy.

Experiences of democracy

Võru, Estonia: Insights from the citizen stories

In Võru, Estonia, The Development Centre of Võru County worked with young people from the local area to explore their experiences of and visions for democracy.

The stories demonstrate that the young people participate in a number of different activities and initiatives which have allowed them to express their opinions and engage with democracy.

“I am very active in youth movements. I would like to encourage people to be more open-minded, to listen more and to feel free, to be innovative, but also keep our traditions.”

Regular youth cafés are places where young people can discuss and highlight interests and concerns. Each year, a larger participatory café is held for young people in Võru County, where they talk about democracy, elections to European Parliament, deliberative democracy and people's voices. The student government is another platform which has provided young people with the means of having their say. Võru City Council has also formed a youth committee at the city council.

“We have mostly elderly people doing politics, they don't want to invite young people to speak and young people do not go to speak with them.”



Citizen Storytelling and Future Thinking Workshop in Voru, Estonia

From the stories, it is clear that young people are keen to be initiators of new ideas and want to be heard as opposed to being labelled or denigrated. The stories show that young people are keen to discuss and provide input on the field of education and have a curiosity in being involved in the preparation of community events. Young people also spoke about how they want to understand more about how local government works and get involved in community activities. They also emphasised the desire for support and understanding from older members of the community and decision-makers while maintaining their own level of autonomy.

Gdańsk, Poland: Insights from the citizen stories



Citizen Storytelling and Future Thinking Workshop in Gdansk, Poland

In Gdańsk, Poland, the City of Gdańsk worked with a diverse group of adults to examine how they engage with democracy and how this could be improved with the area. They expressed how the meeting for some of them provided an opportunity to express themselves for the first time about democracy and its role in their lives.

“I saw that my decisions, i.e. [my involvement in] the so-called grassroots initiatives, means that I can also make a difference.”

The participants' discussion explored different themes of democracy, the main focus being on equal access to democratic tools and being treated equitably and fairly. The participants spoke about their own willingness to be involved in democratic processes and emphasised the importance of other citizens also being included. The participants also discussed the conditions that must be met by a democratic system in order for it to be accessible to all citizens, taking into account the rights of minoritized groups. The group highlighted how the tools of participatory and deliberative democracy should cater to everyone's needs, taking into account their particular educational, social, and cognitive needs to ensure that everyone is heard and receives true representation.

“There is a lack of empathy, lack of conversation, lack of cooperation between institutions. This is something that doesn't work. A system is totally failing, which instead of helping it does harm.”

The stories show that more work needs to be done to increase collaboration between different institutions and the people they serve. At the moment the lack of cooperation is contributing to harm being done to citizens. Additionally, it was mentioned that the role of education in encouraging engagement in democracy should be explored further. One storyteller shared their feelings of disappointment when partaking in traditional methods of democracy, such as local elections, and explained how this can result in disappointment due to a feeling of lack of influence. Conversely it was also explored how getting involved with grassroots and community initiatives and staying up to date through podcasts and other accessible media formats offers an alternative route to engaging with democracy.

“I did not participate in the second election because I felt that I had put a cross [on the ballot paper] and what next? And for me, the first encounter with democracy was disappointing in the long run. In fact, I felt that nothing was going on with my actions. That as a society we have little influence and it hurt a bit.”

Reggio Emilia, Italy: Insights from the citizen stories

In Reggio Emilia, Italy, CRE (Comune Di Reggio Emilia) delivered an online workshop with citizens currently involved in voluntary associations and who are active in their communities. From the stories it is clear that group members engage in democratic processes on a neighbourhood scale, promoting communities of practice and displaying a constructive and critical way of thinking.

“We need IT tools, technology and people to empower citizens, we need to create containers in which, through technology and the will of the people, we can involve them in decision-making.”

One theme which emerged was how technology could be harnessed as a tool for engaging more citizens. One storyteller highlights how there is a need for tech to be used to empower more citizens and, if this were to happen, people who have the will to engage, but maybe not the means, could be more involved with decision-making. They also mention that improving work around inclusion within democratic strategy would allow the skills and contributions of citizens to be fully realised. The main point was that people have the experience and desire to be involved in political processes, however barriers in the form of disempowerment and the exclusive nature of democracy in its current state deters and prevents people from doing so.

Another conversation which emerged from the stories was around the complexity of democracy and how much energy it takes to understand how it works and engage with processes, which, in turn, leads to disengagement.

“Democracy is not grasped by citizens. Citizens do not grasp it out of tiredness and indifference. It is difficult to participate. The great difficulty is to pierce indifference, we have to break this self-perpetuating circle”

The complex and bureaucratic nature of democracy means that citizens often find it difficult to fully understand the processes involved. Attempting to understand not only requires large amounts of time and energy, but without formal education around democracy, it is difficult to know where to start. Furthermore, the lack of inclusion and sense of change contributes to indifference and leads people to question the influence their role has within democratic systems. What one storyteller believes is that more work should be done to break these negative cycles of complacency in order to encourage more people to actively take on their role as engaged citizens within the current democratic system.

Difficulties in voting eligibility is another topic which was discussed in the stories. Specifically the fact that

someone may be a resident of a community, but if they do not have Italian citizenship they cannot participate in elections and voting processes.

“Many foreign people in our area do not participate [in elections] except through their associations, so they are not represented, and we should open up to them as well.”

The group was conscious of people within their community who lacked citizenship, who also lacked a voice in political processes and democratic arenas. The storytellers were keen to open up processes and provide migrants and non-nationals with representation, as they contribute to the community similarly to how someone with citizenship would and so deserve to have their voices heard. People who are nationals of other countries are involved through associations so the desire to have a say is present, but the means are not provided.

“To be effective, the councils must be representative of all contexts. The risk is that we just represent ourselves.”

On a general scale there is a need for true representation of diverse communities in local councils, and from people in positions of power. In the current climate, the same type of people consistently put themselves forward and are successful in securing roles within the democratic system. People who have had negative experiences of engaging with democracy in the past, or have lost faith in the processes which exist, struggle to re-engage in organising and participating. Marginalised groups and citizens who encounter barriers to engagement need to be supported in order to effectively engage with processes and have their voices heard.

What we learned

- **Young people aren't being listened to:** There is a significant number of young people who are passionate about democracy and want to have their voices heard, but more needs to be done to ensure they have access to opportunities for meaningful engagement and chances to influence change. There should also be more work carried out in schools and within the education system to educate young people on democratic process as well as methods of engaging them through grassroots initiatives. Older members of society should acknowledge the important role young people play within the democratic system and be open to sharing power and influence to ensure equal representation.
- **People who do not have 'citizenship' are usually excluded from formal democratic processes:** Municipalities should look at how these people can be more active and involved in local decision-making in order to create communities in which all people feel as if they belong and are stakeholders.
- **There is a gap in communication and connection between different sections of society:** In order for power and responsibility to be shared and better representation to be achieved, more should be done to develop connections and increase collaboration between formal institutions, grassroots initiatives and citizens not currently engaged in democracy.
- **Technology isn't currently being used to its full potential:** There was little mention of how technology is currently being used to improve democratic inclusion. People highlighted that research into how tech could be used as a tool for positive change is needed and could potentially result in a more accessible democratic processes.

Democracy now – What does it look like?

“The people who put themselves forward are often ‘the same’, those who are already active in the area. Somehow those who have lost faith in associations or the administration find it hard to get back to participating, organising and doing things.”

- Poor representation within democratic institutions and processes;
- Loss of faith in the system;
- Lack of energy and resources to commit to democratic participation and organisation;
- Minimal support for the participation of marginalised groups;
- Failure to utilise technology as a tool for improving democratic engagement.

Democracy in the future – What would we like it to be?

“[There is] an opportunity because they reduce the gap between the community and the municipality.”

- Effective human connection between people in positions of power within formal democratic institutions and the communities and neighbourhoods;
- Opportunities for dialogue to occur between residents and decision makers leading to informed change;
- An acknowledgement of the experiences and values of migrant communities and ways for them to be involved in democratic processes outside of associations.

Democracy in transit – How do we reach our vision?

“There is a gap in our society between the ages of 25 and 45 with young people and adults who do not participate. We need an opportunity to attract families. The councils can have this function and attract people.”

- Education, encouragement and support for people between the ages of 25 and 45 to become interested and involved in democracy;
- Opportunities for young people and migrant communities to have their voices heard and participate in democracy;
- Support to help families engage in a way that suits their needs, availability and commitment levels;
- Acknowledgement that engaging with democracy can be a difficult, time consuming and take up lots of energy;
- Research into how technology could be used as a tool to increase public engagement in democratic processes and influence in decision-making arenas.

Key Learning & Recommendations

From the stories it is clear that citizens are aware that work needs to be done in order to improve the state of participatory democracy. There were a number of key themes that consistently emerged from the stories which are displayed in the table below (Table 1). From these themes we have produced a set of suggested

actions which could help combat some of these challenges, also listed below.

Table 1: Themes and actions

Challenges & Issues	Proposed Actions
Lack of collaboration between grassroots initiatives, formal democratic institutions and people not currently engaged in democracy.	Formalised collaboration between grassroots initiatives working in the field of democracy, formal democratic institutions and communities.
Lack of opportunities for young people to have their voices heard and be involved in political processes.	Education around grassroots democracy and less traditional methods of participation to increase awareness of how these can influence change.
Lack of opportunities for migrant and non-citizen communities to have their voices heard and be involved in political processes.	Funding for initiatives that provide a platform for minoritized groups (e.g., migrant communities), to have their voices listened to and acted upon.
The level of energy and commitment required to understand and engage with democracy and politics is often overlooked.	Investment in technology, as well as research into how this can be used as a tool for increasing participation in democracy and decision-making by enabling people to participate at times suitable for them.

Method

The methods used in the workshops were Community Reporting and Future Thinking. Community Reporting is a specific approach to digital storytelling that has been developed by People's Voice Media across Europe as a tool for achieving social justice. Community Reporting is a mixed methodological approach for enhancing citizen participation in research, policymaking, service development, and decision-making processes. Community Reporting purports the validity of lived experience and knowledge-based practice in these fields. It uses digital, portable technologies to support people to tell their own stories, in their own ways via peer-to-peer approaches. Community Reporting provides an analysis process through which people, communities and institutions can identify the insights from stories - transforming experiential knowledge into a form of 'data' in its own right. It then connects these stories with the people, groups and organisations who are in a position to use the learning within them to make positive social change.

Foresight - or future thinking - is another method which was used in the workshops and provides scope for people to think about the future and use this to model and respond to potential prospective circumstances. In an ever-changing world, it asks us to think about our future, what challenges are on the horizon and how we can address them to achieve shared outcomes. Foresight provides participatory methods that support people and organisations - from citizens to policy makers - to gather intelligence that can support the building of medium-to-long-term scenarios about the future and develop plans for how these can be created.

Citizen Groups

33 citizens shared their lived experience stories as part of this work. This included:

- Gdańsk, Poland: 10 citizens (5 men, 5 women) with an age range of 26-79. They brought different lived experiences into the session which ranged from people with experience of addiction, people with experience of the prison system, single parents, people with mental health issues, people engaged in community projects and support work and people who have retired.
- Võru, Estonia: 10 young people.
- Reggio Emilia, Italy: 13 citizens (7 men, 6 women) currently involved in participatory democracy and voluntary associations.