



Article 10

3. Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.



# NEW DIMENSIONS FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

**MODELS TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT  
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**



European Center for  
Not-for-Profit Law

**Lead Authors:** Eszter Hartay and Emina Nuredinoska, with key contribution from Boglárka Szalma

**Other contributors:** Francesca Fanucci, Katerina Hadzi-Miceva Evans, Andrea Judit Toth, Kimberley Ogonda and Berna Keskindemir



European Center for  
Not-for-Profit Law

ECNL is a leading European resource and research centre in the field of policies and laws affecting civil society. ECNL creates knowledge, empowers partners and helps set standards that create, protect, and expand civic freedoms.

Aligned with Article 10(3) of the Treaty on European Union, the ParticipatiON project seeks to empower people and civil society organisations to actively participate in policy processes and identify new opportunities and models that can be applied in EU level policy processes as well as on the national level.

The ParticipatiON project is implemented by ECNL and funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed in this paper are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



**Funded by  
the European Union**

November 2023.

This document is available under the Creative Commons license:  
[CC-BY SA 4.0 Attribution ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II. WHAT IS MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION: OVERVIEW OF THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1. Key safeguards of participation in the European Union: legal and policy framework	9
2.2. Legal and policy framework ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups	12
<b>III. EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS IN PARTICIPATION IN THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1. Online platforms for public participation and advocacy	14
3.1.1. <i>Key characteristics and benefits of online platforms</i>	15
3.1.2. <i>Types of platforms</i>	16
3.1.3. <i>Use of online platforms by the EU institutions</i>	22
3.1.4. <i>Use of online platforms at the national and local level</i>	28
3.2. Gamification and serious games	31
3.2.1. <i>Key characteristics and benefits of gamification</i>	31
3.2.2. <i>Types of games</i>	32
3.2.3. <i>Use of gamification by the EU institutions</i>	37
3.2.4. <i>Use of gamification at the national and local level</i>	38

3.3. Opportunities and considerations related to online platforms and gamification	39
3.3.1. <i>General opportunities and considerations</i>	39
3.3.2. <i>Specific opportunities and considerations</i>	42
3.4. Other tools	44
3.4.1. <i>Facilitation tools</i>	44
3.4.2. <i>University programmes and living labs</i>	46
3.4.3. <i>Social media platforms</i>	50
3.4.4. <i>Hybrid forms of participation</i>	51
<b>IV. WHAT ARE THE EXISTING GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGING CSOS?</b>	<b>52</b>
Engagement in EU policy-making with EU institutions	52
Engagement in EU policy-making at the national level	56
<b>V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>58</b>

# I. INTRODUCTION

*"I alone cannot change the world,  
but I can cast a stone across the waters  
to create many ripples."* – Mother Teresa

Participation in decision-making is the power of people to voice and share expertise and opinions. On the one hand, it provides a possibility for individuals, civil society organisations (CSOs), and other interested parties to influence the development of policies and laws which affect them. On the other hand, it helps global/regional bodies and state institutions to create fair laws and policies reflective of real needs enriched with additional experience and expertise and more forward and outward-looking solutions. It facilitates cross-sector dialogue, helps to reach consensus and builds partnerships. Overall, it increases ownership and ensures the legitimacy of the proposed regulation and compliance with the new rules, which strengthens democracy and increases confidence in public institutions.

CSOs play a twofold role in this process. On the one hand, CSOs are suitable institutional tools which facilitate public participation in public policy. They allow people to organise themselves, express and advocate for their legitimate interests more effectively, and make the entire participation process more transparent. On the other hand, CSOs themselves are also a legitimate party to the participatory process, as some of the human rights that are composite rights to the right of equal public participation are also extended to CSOs.<sup>1</sup>

Public participation evolved throughout history, and today it is safeguarded by numerous standards and rules adopted at international, regional, national and local levels. By now the importance and benefits of participation are widely recognised and acknowledged. Still, with the series of crises that the world and our society have been facing, there is a need for new ways to find common ground and take action. The rapid technological development offers various online tools to connect and shape public positions across borders. Today we can submit and vote on proposals or input to a participatory budgeting process through multilingual online platforms. Automated public hearing processes can convert responses into standardised reports. Gamification and serious games are used to enhance public participation and decision-making processes by making them more informative and inclusive. Living labs and university programmes provide an inspiring space for experimentation. They help empower youth and build a culture of active participation from early age. Social media have been used by governments to gain public opinions, distribute information, and support participation in planning practices. While participation has been increasingly moving to the online space, human interaction and in-person consultation methods remain to be crucial. It is important to exploit the full potential of various participation tools in the European Union and its Member States.

The importance of reaching a diverse and representative range of stakeholders in civil society participation cannot be overstated. While guidelines, policies, and innovative tools aim to promote inclusivity, it is essential to examine who is being reached and ensure that the engagement process encompasses a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences. Democratic engagement should strive for meaningful change and generate fresh insights that reflect the needs and aspirations of the wider society.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Dragan Golubovic, An Enabling Framework for Citizen Participation in Public Policy: An Outline of Some of the Major Issues Involved - International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law, ICNL, Nov 2010, <https://www.icnl.org/resources/research/ijnl/an-enabling-framework-for-citizen-participation-in-public-policy-an-outline-of-some-of-the-major-issues-involved-2>

2 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12754>

The present report was developed by the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) with the purpose to:

- Provide an overview of the key safeguards of participation at the EU level, including the legal and policy framework ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups;
- Present the key characteristics, benefits, advantages and challenges of online platforms and gamification and their use by the EU institutions and at the national and local level;
- Highlights some other examples that can promote citizen participation, including facilitation tools, university programmes and living labs, social media platforms and hybrid forms of participation;
- Identify some of the existing good practices and key gaps for civil society participation;
- Provide recommendations on how to strengthen meaningful participation in decision-making at the EU and national level.

The research is based on the mapping of existing resources of participation both at the EU and the national level. There are several research pieces that provided valuable insights to the paper. For example, the comprehensive study ‘[Under Construction](#)’ developed by the Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung provides an overview of public participation in the European Union, with a special focus of the 7 EU participation instruments. The study ‘[Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue](#)’ developed by Linda Ravo, with inputs from the European Civic Forum group of National Platforms of NGOs and Civil Society Europe working group on civic space describes the gaps and challenges in the EU’s current approach to civil dialogue and put forward recommendations to EU policymakers. The [OECD report](#) on Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions (hereinafter: “OECD report”) discusses the good practice principles for deliberative processes for public decision-making models, then different models of representative deliberative processes and gives an overview of key trends.

With the present research we aimed to complement rather than replicate the existing resources on participation. Besides relying on desktop research, we conducted 17 interviews with the representatives of diverse groups of stakeholders, including European CSOs, national organisations and advocacy networks, EU institutions, companies and universities. The aim of the interviews was to get more in-depth information from people directly involved in supporting, promoting, and practising public participation in public decision-making, as well as to identify successes and challenges in using the models and conditions needed for success. We also organised a webinar in September 2023 to present the prefinal version of the research and exchange experiences about the use of participation methods and opportunities for reform.<sup>3</sup>

One can find inspirational tools and ideas everywhere across the EU and beyond. Our research highlights examples from at least 12 countries, including Portugal, Hungary, Finland, the Netherlands, Latvia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Spain, Kosovo, the United Kingdom, Belgium and the United States. It does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather, to showcase how emerging tools can be used to enhance public engagement. We hope that these experiences and the recommendations will facilitate further discussions and lead to more inclusive decision-making in the European Union and beyond.

---

3 <https://ecnl.org/news/empowering-civil-society-voices-leveraging-potential-participatory-tools-eu>

# II. WHAT IS MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION: OVERVIEW OF THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE

The meaningful participation of civil society in public policy-making has been widely considered as an important indicator of the maturity of modern democracies, but also as a valuable tool for improving the quality of design and implementation of policies. It is also a pre-condition for building and maintaining the trust of citizens in the work of public institutions. Over the past two decades, there has been an ever-growing interest of key global and regional international organisations in exploring governance innovations and testing new models of structured dialogue with CSOs, as pre-dominant intermediaries between members of society and public authorities, but also in setting minimum standards of engaging civil society in decision-making processes.<sup>4</sup>

Meaningful participation for members of society, including CSOs, **needs to be based on principles and elements that will be applied during the entire process of public consultations.** Some of the principles/elements are well structured in the OECD report:

- **Purpose:** The objective should be outlined as a clear task and is linked to a defined public problem;
- **Transparency:** The deliberative process should be announced publicly before it begins. The process design and all materials should be available to the public in a timely manner. The funding source should be disclosed;
- **Inclusiveness:** Inclusion should be achieved by considering how to involve underrepresented groups;
- **Representativeness:** The participants should be a microcosm of the general public. Everyone should have an equal opportunity to be selected as a participant;
- **Information:** Participants should have access to a wide range of accurate, relevant, and accessible evidence and expertise, etc.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the above mentioned, there are also other relevant elements that support public participation to be meaningful:

- **Reporting and Feedback:** It is important to share the outcomes of public participation efforts with the participants and the wider public, as well as to respond to each individual contribution and provide feedback and arguments if some proposal is not accepted. Transparency about how public input has influenced decisions helps build trust and accountability.

4 Igor Vidacak, Tools and methods of CSO participation in public policy making: Overview of good practices in Croatia, Estonia and France, TUSEV, 2020

5 <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf>

- **Evaluation:** Continuously assessing the effectiveness of the participation process and making adjustments based on lessons learned is also crucial for the effectiveness of public participation in general. This supports better use of methods and proposes the most suitable and relevant approaches for future actions.
- **Capacity Building and Awareness Raising:** The entire process of public consultations provides possibilities for citizens to enhance their understanding of the issues, develop skills for effective engagement, and become more informed and active participants.

When it comes to meaningful participation for organised civil society, the first and most important precondition is the enabling environment. Such an enabling environment rests on the existence of strong democratic infrastructures ensuring the respect and protection of the basic values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights (Article 2 TEU). These values also encompass an open and free civic space.<sup>6</sup>

In general, **four aspects are considered to be essential for an enabling environment:**

1. Favourable political, cultural, and socio-economic landscape shaping the public understanding of the role, activities, and values of civil society and influencing public trust and support;
2. Respect of fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and supportive legal and regulatory framework enabling free and autonomous operations of CSOs, including rights of CSOs to formalised, transparent, and non-discriminatory registration procedures, and the absence of disproportionate or unwarranted state interference;
3. Supportive framework for CSOs' financial viability and sustainability, particularly a supportive legislation on funding of CSOs, including international and domestic, public and private sources of funding. It also entails the availability of resources: either through direct grants, indirect funding or through favourable tax rules for private donations, membership fees and philanthropy. All this allows for civil society capacity-building, long-term programming and delivery of activities.
4. The existence of policies and structures that enable dialogue between CSOs and public authorities, as well as narratives and discourses empowering the engagement of CSOs and citizens in public policy development.<sup>7</sup>

All this means that establishing structures of cooperation, new online platforms for public consultations or tools of e-participation are not effective without favourable conditions for individuals and CSOs to fully play their role in a democratic society by openly sharing their concerns and acting to influence and shape the policy making.<sup>8</sup>

6 <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

7 Igor Vidacak, Tools and methods of CSO participation in public policy making: Overview of good practices in Croatia, Estonia and France, TUSEV, 2020

8 Ibid



## 2.1. Key safeguards of participation in the European Union: legal and policy framework

The right of every citizen to participate in the democratic life of the European Union and the expression “bringing the Union closer to its citizens” was coined by the European Council in the midst of the Treaty of the European Union (“TEU”) ratification crisis of 1992 – i.e., of a crisis that signalled, for the first time, “a deep sense of malaise and public disaffection with the European construct.” Thus, the need for “closer-to-citizens” institutions has been mentioned in most of the analyses and recommendations for the reform of the Union, and most specifically in 2001 when the European Commission developed the [White Paper on European Governance](#), which, among others, aimed to reinforce the culture of consultation and dialogue at the EU level and thereby increase the legitimacy of the decisions. The paper highlights five principles of ‘good governance’: openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence, which not only underpin democracy and the rule of law in the Member States, but they apply to all levels of government – global, European, national, regional and local. The White Paper recommended changes in several areas and obliged the European Commission to undertake action to implement them. As a result, in 2002, the European Commission adopted the [General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties by the Commission](#)<sup>9</sup> (EC Principles and Minimum Standards). It emphasises the importance of providing clear consultation documents, consulting all relevant target groups, leaving sufficient time for participation, publishing results, and providing feedback.

However, the milestone of the “Citizens’ Europe” and the possibility for participation in policy-making at the EU level and in the Member States was enshrined in the TEU, in force from 2009, in **section/title 2 – Provisions on democratic principles**, specifically in **articles 10 and 11**. Namely, [Article 10](#) prescribes that every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union, and decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen.

**General meaning of participation: Paragraph 1 of Article 11.** From the perspective of citizens’ and CSOs’ participation the most important is [Article 11](#), which introduces for the first time an element of obligation and a legal basis for participation, which were undertaken voluntarily with the documents before the EU treaty reforms of 2007. Namely, according to Article 11, the institutions shall, by appropriate means, allow **citizens and associations** to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action (paragraph 1). This first paragraph acknowledges the general opportunity of any citizen and CSO to express their opinion on any matter and action of the Union and the impact of the actions and decisions in the daily life of the citizens. This paragraph also means that the citizens and CSOs will have suitable mechanisms for raising their voices on the relevant issues and topics they are interested in.

**Civil dialogue: Paragraphs 2 and 3 of Article 11.** For organised civil society (CSOs), the most important are paragraphs 2 and 3 of Article 11. Although the Treaty does not provide for a definition of EU civil dialogue and rules on its functioning for the purpose of the implementation of Article 11(2), key standards can be derived from an interpretation of the concept of civil dialogue anchored on EU fundamental rights and values, as enshrined in Article 2 and in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR), interpreted in light of relevant regional and international standards.<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 2 envisages direct and regular communication between the institutions and civil society, and the dialogue between

<sup>9</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2002:0704:FIN:en:PDF>

<sup>10</sup> Linda Ravo, CSF/CSE paper on “Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue” April 2021. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

the institutions and the citizenry is essentially entrusted to the facilitation of CSOs. Paragraph 2 says, “the institutions shall maintain an **open, transparent, and regular dialogue** with representative **associations and civil society**.” In addition, the **European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with the parties** concerned to ensure that the Union’s actions are coherent and transparent (paragraph 3). These provisions envisage an advanced participation model with an obligation for the EU institutions to have a joint responsibility to ensure that an organised civil society, which embodies the aspirations and interests of the citizens of Europe, is actively involved in formulating European policies and processes. Following intense advocacy and mobilisation of civic organisations across Europe, the implementation of civil dialogue was, for the first time, explicitly included within the mandate of a European Commission Vice-President in 2019.<sup>11</sup>



**European Citizens Initiative (ECI): Paragraph 4 of Article 11.** Paragraph 4 of Article 11 envisages the **European Citizens Initiative (ECI)**. It is the possibility for not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States to take the initiative of inviting the European Commission within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required to implement the Treaties (paragraph 4).

Article 11 (4) is not self-executing; it must be considered in connection with Article 24, paragraph 1, and Article 227 from the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union. Thus, its implementation required the preparation of a Regulation (211/2011) adopted on February 16, 2011, and started to be applicable from 1 April 2012. However, this Regulation was replaced with a new one – Regulation 2019/788 and the initiatives that were registered until 31 December 2019 are still partly governed by the old rules. The new Regulation requires a review by 1 January 2024 and every three years thereafter. In the review process, the Commission presents a report on the implementation of the ECI regulation with a view to its possible revision, to which the European Parliament reacts in a report with further recommendations.<sup>12</sup>

The effect of a valid ECI is to invite the Commission to submit a proposal, which means that the ECI is not binding on the Commission. The Commission has full discretion in deciding whether and how to adopt a follow-up proposal. (More information about practising ECI can be found below in section 3.1.2)

11 Linda Ravo, CSF/CSE paper on “Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue” April 2021. <https://civil-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

12 All steps for ECI can be find here: <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/how-it-works>

**Better Regulation Guidelines.** In addition to the general rules laid out in the treaties, the [Better Regulation Guidelines](#) set out the principles that the European Commission follows when preparing new initiatives and proposals and when managing and evaluating existing legislation. The [Better Regulation Toolbox](#) complements the Guidelines and presents guidance, tips and best practice.

These guidelines build on the key aspects of the [Better Regulation Communication](#). They explain what ‘better regulation’ is and how it applies to the day-to-day practices of Commission officials preparing new initiatives and proposals or managing existing policies and legislation. The ‘better regulation’ toolbox, in turn, provides operational and detailed guidance on specific aspects. ‘Better regulation’ refers to the Commission’s regulatory policy, whereby it seeks to design and prepare EU policies and laws in such a way that they achieve their objectives in the most efficient way. ‘Better regulation’ is not about regulating or deregulating. It is a way of working that allows political decisions to be prepared in an open and transparent manner, informed by the best available evidence.

One of the key instruments of the ‘better regulation’ is stakeholder **consultation**. It is considered as an essential element of policy preparation and review and confirms that good policy development is built on openness and participation. According to this document, the stakeholders provide contributions to support evaluations, impact assessments, and the preparation of initiatives and political decisions. It is good practice to plan consultations using a simple, concise strategy that identifies relevant stakeholders and targets them with a range of activities, in order to gather all relevant evidence (data, other information and views). The recommendation is that for maximum usefulness and inclusivity, it is important to consult as **widely as possible** (while avoiding ‘consultation fatigue’), giving all interested parties the opportunity to contribute to the timely evaluation or development of effective policies. All relevant stakeholders should have a **reasonable period**, in which to make informed and effective contributions. Subsequently, the respondents should **receive feedback** on how their contributions have been used. Public consultation is an essential element of impact assessments; it can also be useful for many evaluations and fitness checks.<sup>13</sup>

Further, it is explained that stakeholder consultation is a formal process, by which the Commission collects information and views from stakeholders about its policies. In these guidelines, stakeholder consultation **covers all consultations (public consultations or targeted consultations)** with stakeholders in the process of preparing a policy initiative or evaluating an existing intervention, where relevant.

According to the document, stakeholders should normally be consulted when preparing an initiative accompanied by an impact assessment. For evaluations of policies and programmes of broad public interest and for fitness checks, a public consultation is highly recommended. For very technical initiatives of limited interest for the general public, a targeted consultation of stakeholders is a more suitable means of collecting the necessary evidence.

Also, an important element of any consultation strategy is to identify and **map the stakeholder groups that should be consulted**. This will help determine the most appropriate consultation methods and tools. The basic rule is to consult broadly and transparently among stakeholders, who might be concerned by the initiative, seeking a whole spectrum of views in order to avoid bias or skewed conclusions promoted by specific constituencies (‘regulatory capture’). **Successful stakeholder mapping involves:** (i) identifying stakeholder categories relevant for or interested in the policy area(s) in question; and (ii) prioritising stakeholder categories to engage with according to their level of interest in, expertise about, or influence on the initiative. One important category

---

13 [https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/swd2021\\_305\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/swd2021_305_en.pdf)

of stakeholders is the research community that can provide evidence based on rigorous scientific methods and peer review processes, and that might need to be specifically targeted.

Consultations may also be public or targeted. Public consultations can foster transparency and accountability and ensure the broadest public validation and support for an initiative. However, the respondents are self-selecting and therefore not representative. Targeted consultations allow more focused interaction or dialogue and may tap expertise more efficiently, in particular, when dealing with a very specific or technical subject. One should avoid granting privileged access to some stakeholders. The selected method should reflect the consultation objectives and the target group(s) identified through the stakeholder mapping. For some initiatives, a public consultation is mandatory.

The choice of consultation method will **determine the tools** to use. The most commonly used tools are consultation documents, questionnaires (for written consultations), and direct interactions with stakeholders via interviews, meetings, conferences, hearings or other events.

**Informing about the consultations – summary report.** Within eight weeks of the closure of the public consultation, it is mandatory to publish on the consultation website a short factual summary of the key issues raised in the public consultation. It is also a good practice to publish on the consultation website a short factual summary on the key issues raised in each of the targeted consultation activities envisaged in the consultation strategy (e.g., an informal report, minutes of a stakeholder meeting, and/or a list or table of contributions).

**Providing feedback.** The contributions received through the various consultations carried out in the context of the consultation strategy feed into further work on the policy initiative. It is up to the lead DG to provide information on the **outcome of the overall consultation work**, possible conclusions and any other related issues. Beyond the factual summary, stakeholders should receive adequate and thorough feedback through a synopsis report, prepared at the end of the consultation activities. It is critical for respondents **to know how, and to what extent, their input has been taken into account** and to understand why certain suggestions have not been taken up. Providing effective feedback will contribute to the overall transparency of the Commission’s policy-making, enhance its accountability and credibility, and potentially lead to better responses to future consultations.

## 2.2. Legal and policy framework ensuring the inclusion of marginalised groups

Civil dialogue must be consistent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (“CFR”). This translates into an obligation to ensure inclusiveness and equal participation in the dialogue of CSOs representing and channelling the voices of all diverse groups within society (Art 20 CFR). Particular attention must be paid to ensuring equality between women and men (Art 23 CFR) and non-discrimination of groups of people who have been historically marginalised and systematically excluded from decision-making processes. (Article 21 CFR) It also refers to the obligation to respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity (Art 22 CFR) and to ensure reasonable accommodation for the needs of persons with disabilities. (Art 26 CFR/ UNCRPD). The practical implementation of this obligation may also require appropriate positive action aimed at adapting the means and methods of dialogue to the different represented groups.

Furthermore, the European Commission closely aligns its consultation practices with international standards and guidelines, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Web Accessibility Directive ([Directive \(EU\) 2016/2102](#)). These standards emphasise the importance of accessibility, non-discrimination, and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.<sup>14</sup>

Policies, such as the [EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027](#), the [Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), the [EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025](#), the [EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation](#), the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy [LGBTIQ Equality Strategy](#), and the forthcoming Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, should be considered when striving for meaningful participation of civil society and the individuals they represent.

The European Commission's [General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties 2002](#) makes it clear that in determining the relevant parties for consultation, adequate coverage of “wider constituencies (e.g., churches and religious communities) and specific target groups (e.g., women, the elderly, the unemployed, or ethnic minorities)” shall be ensured.<sup>15</sup>

---

14 “The rules laid down in the Web Access Directive reflect the Commission’s ongoing work to build a social and inclusive European ‘Union of equality’, where all Europeans can play a full and active part in the digital economy and society”.  
<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/web-accessibility>

15 “General principles and minimum standards for consultation of interested parties 2002”, Page 19

# III. EXPLORING NEW HORIZONS IN PARTICIPATION IN THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES

Public participation has been shaped by the use of technologies, the spread of electronic games, social media and many other online possibilities. Online platforms and gamification provide further opportunities to engage individuals and organised civil society in shaping public policies. It is crucial to empower youth and build the culture of active participation from an early age: living labs and university programmes provide an inspiring space for experimentation. While some of these tools are used by some EU institutions, state institutions and local governments they have more potential that could be further exploited. The present section provides an overview of the key characteristics, benefits, advantages and challenges of online platforms and gamification and their use by the EU institutions and at the national and local level. In addition, it highlights some other examples that can promote public participation, including facilitation tools, living labs and university projects. It aims to highlight some good practices to inspire EU institutions, authorities, academia and civil society to make the most of using these tools to promote public participation across the EU and its Member States.

The database of Democracy Technology provides further examples of digital tools for public participation, i-voting, and political parties.<sup>16</sup> One can search based on the main functions of the tools, including encrypted e-voting, simple voting, surveys and polls, idea collection, dialogue / co-creation, petitions, participatory budgeting, campaigning and voting advice application. Some of the tools are open source,<sup>17</sup> partially open source and closed source.

## 3.1. Online platforms for public participation and advocacy

Digital platforms, such as citizen/community engagement platforms, online advocacy websites and social media campaigns, have become powerful tools for civil society organisations to raise awareness, mobilise support, and advocate for causes, including gender equality and inclusion. These platforms may provide access to some marginalised voices<sup>18</sup> to be heard and contribute to policy discussions. Globally, there are numerous digital platforms and tools that facilitate public participation in various aspects of

16 <https://democracy-technologies.org/database/>

17 Open source refers to any programme whose source code is made available for use or modification as users or other developers see fit. <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/open-source>

18 Example 1: An example of a digital tool for diversity participation in civil society is the “Decidim” platform used by the city of Barcelona in Spain, among others. The platform incorporates features that promote inclusivity and diversity, such as multilingual support, accessibility options, and the ability to submit inputs anonymously. It allows individuals from different backgrounds and communities to express their opinions, propose ideas, and participate in online consultations and deliberative processes.

Example 2: Citizens’ assemblies often incorporate CSOs to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives and expertise. Citizens’ assemblies are a participatory democracy model that brings together a diverse group of individuals to deliberate on specific issues. These assemblies ensure the inclusion of underrepresented voices by randomly selecting participants from the population, ensuring a diverse representation of age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. They can be organised physically, but after the pandemic period, more often, online assemblies took place. There are several advantages and disadvantages mentioned by participants. (<https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/citizens-assemblies-go-online/>)

governance, policy-making, and decision-making processes. These platforms aim to engage individuals, CSOs, and different stakeholders in meaningful ways, allowing them to voice their opinions, provide feedback, and contribute to important issues of public interest.

### **3.1.1. Key characteristics and benefits of online platforms**

If they are set up carefully and considering the needs of various groups, digital platforms can offer numerous advantages as tools for public participation in decision-making processes.

- Reaching a wider population by having a global spread of the internet and social media. They also enable many individuals to submit proposals and participate in discussions, consultations, and campaigns. This broader outreach allows for a more diverse range of perspectives and insights.
- Accessibility is also an advantage of digital platforms because they can allow members of society from diverse locations to participate without requiring physical presence.
- Online platforms are more inclusive because they can be designed to be accessible to individuals with disabilities, ensuring that their voices are included in public participation processes.
- Digital platforms can contribute to increased participation and engagement and attract individuals who might be hesitant to participate through traditional means. They provide interactive and engaging experiences that can stimulate interest and encourage active involvement.
- Digital platforms facilitate real-time interactions between members of society, stakeholders, and decision-makers. If adequately maintained, they can provide instant responses, feedback, and updates, leading to more dynamic and responsive public participation processes that are transparent and traceable.
- They are also more cost-effective compared to the usual methods of public participation, saving on travel costs and meeting expenses.
- Digital platforms offer a range of participation methods, such as consultations, surveys, polls, petitions, elections, participatory budgeting, meetings and open-ended discussions. This flexibility allows participants to choose the format that best suits their preferences and comfort levels.

A common understanding is that digital platforms offer a transformative approach to public participation by leveraging technology to engage members of society and stakeholders in decisions and policy-making processes. However, **it is important to address the potential obstacles, including internet access, digital literacy (including tools to counter disinformation), content curation and moderation policies in place, privacy and data protection (e.g., is data used for a purpose rather than another, how long they are held, where), cybersecurity, protection of human dignity** to ensure that these platforms remain inclusive, safe and effective for all participants and at the same time do not reduce other viable alternatives for meaningful in-person exchanges. It is also important to widely publicise the existence of these platforms and the ongoing consultation opportunities through various channels, including websites, social media and direct outreach to civil society in order to exploit the full potential of these tools.

### 3.1.2. Types of platforms

There are numerous types of digital platforms available for those institutions that are willing to promote participation and capitalise on the above benefits in their policy-making processes. These tools allow members of society to stay engaged in ongoing community actions, legislative decisions, and available resources. They can be categorised into several groups of platforms, some more used and more efficient than others. In practice, there is no clear division between the different types as one digital platform can be very comprehensive and provide many different possibilities for online engagement, and some can be focused on one specific tool/function.

- **Community/citizen engagement platforms and software:** Community and citizen engagement platforms are the most commonly used digital tool for engaging individuals and groups in policy-making at national and local levels. These platforms connect public institutions with individuals to share important information, ask for feedback, and promote transparency in their work and decisions. In one sentence, a community platform is a software that enables institutions to have interactive public participation processes. Community engagement platforms are mainly used on local/city levels. Public institutions, through these platforms can also announce events such as digital town halls, online meetings, budget planning, etc.
- **Online advocacy websites:** Online advocacy enables policy-oriented organisations to affect the policy process through collective civic engagement. This means that advocacy websites are tools available for organised civil society to influence public policies. The term, “*digital advocacy*”, broadly encompasses all online activities conducted by members of society directed towards influencing legislation or legislators. Mobile and web-based political advocacy initiatives are changing the way that public affairs practitioners, lobbyists and association professionals perform their traditional job roles. A recent study by the Public Affairs Council found that [89% of public affairs professionals utilised digital advocacy tools](#). The increasing adoption of technology tools in the government relations space illustrates how much value these technology tools bring to the advocacy profession, and the political arena in general.<sup>19</sup>
- **Online petition platforms:** Online campaigning platform refers to software and hardware used to collect political support from members of society online – e.g., signing a petition. However, these platforms are much more than simply IT tools. The online campaigning platforms that host petitions or initiatives are usually launched by individuals or civil society organisations. They may be informal or part of legal procedures. Online platforms create an additional channel through which members of society can express their views on policy options. From the perspective of the institutions or public and elected officials petitions platforms allow them to hear from both a larger number and a greater diversity of people expressing more varied opinions than in the past. In theory, online initiatives could significantly strengthen democracy by allowing members of society to directly influence policy – either through agenda-setting or putting a policy to a direct popular vote.<sup>20</sup>
- **Digital tools that support local/community engagement:** Many of digital tools for public participation are created to support local community engagement. Several software providers offer tailored and interactive tools such as: Civic

19 <https://www.billtrack50.com/blog/tips-and-tricks/advocacy/what-is-digital-advocacy/>

20 <https://publicinput.com/wp/online-town-hall/>



engagement apps, interactive maps, online town halls, etc. For example, most of the digital software for public participation offers online town halls as a possible tool for engagement. Usually, town halls are considered one of the most direct ways for institutions to interact with citizens and to provide space to give public input. The purpose of town halls and public meetings is to hear directly from residents in person. Virtual town halls still allow for this to happen while using technology to make them more engaging or to provide other opportunities for engaging.<sup>21</sup>

Below we provide the case study of Decidim, which is an open-source web-based software and [online platform](#) used by hundreds of entities, including some EU institutions, governments and local authorities to promote participation. We also provide the case study of Maptionnaire, which is another platform and online software to design and manage public engagement with the use of spatial data.

---

21 <https://www.citizensforeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/European-Online-Campaigning-Platforms.-A-Comparative-Overview-.pdf>

# CASE STUDY: DECIDIM

Decidim is a free/libre and open-source web-based software maintained by an extensive and active community. Decidim can be used by a public or private organisation with hundreds or thousands of potential participants, such as a city council, a university, a civil society organisation (e.g., neighbourhood association), a trade union, or a cooperative. Decidim can provide space for participation (initiatives, assemblies, processes, or consultations) and enrich them through the multiple available components (face-to-face meetings, surveys, proposals, voting, follow-up of results, comments and many more).

The project was launched by the Barcelona City Council in 2016 when Barcelona City Council wanted to create a participatory platform to deploy the participatory processes. The idea was to establish an open-source platform for the purposes of the city of Barcelona, but also to create a whole project around the software with possibilities to make it available not just for the City Council but also for other interested stakeholders. Based on this idea the Free Software Association (FSA) was established as an independent actor, that is nowadays responsible for the maintenance and management of the platform. In 2022 the Council of the City of Barcelona adopted the Citizen Participation Regulation, including the principles, procedures, methods and channels for citizens participation. Chapter 8 is dedicated to digital platforms and regulates what should be the characteristics of the digital platform for participation, the use of free and accessible software and open content, what is the minimum contents of the digital participation platform, and access to the digital platform.<sup>22</sup>

Decidim is Barcelona's first digital democracy tool, where citizens can participate in municipality budgeting. The participatory budgeting (PB) process in Barcelona started in 2020 and is hosted by Decidim's online platform. Citizens can decide on how up to 75 million euros of the municipal budget will be spent (5% of the overall budget) between 2020 and 2023. The Barcelona PB process via an online platform is particularly significant for two reasons. Firstly, Barcelona has been referred to as a "magnet for technology", standing as the Mobile World Capital until 2023, and the 2014 European Capital of Innovation. It has been coined as ideal for start-ups, hosting high tech companies and technology parks. Secondly, the city's Democratic Innovation (DI)<sup>23</sup> strategy is emerging and integrates the two areas of democracy and technology.<sup>24</sup> Barcelona was also designated as the first European capital of Democracy.<sup>25</sup>

One good example for participatory budgeting at the Barcelona City Council which also promotes the inclusiveness of marginalised groups, was a proposal by a group of young girls from the Pakistani community in Barcelona to build a cricket field to practice cricket. In their proposal they wrote that the team members and those who lead the project are all girls: "Training is for us a space of safety and female empowerment where we can develop our skills freely. On the other hand, this team emerged with the aim of forming the Catalan women's 11 cricket team". Cricket is the sport that they play most but there are no cricket fields in

---

22 Citizen Participation Regulation. [https://media-edg.barcelona.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/29080440/REGLAMENTO\\_2022-web.pdf](https://media-edg.barcelona.cat/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/29080440/REGLAMENTO_2022-web.pdf)

23 All documentation of the Democratic Innovation area are available here: [https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/basic-search?query=innovaci%C3%B3+democr%C3%A0tica&field\\_search\\_scope=metadata&filtertype=contains&sort\\_by=score&order=desc](https://bcnroc.ajuntament.barcelona.cat/jspui/basic-search?query=innovaci%C3%B3+democr%C3%A0tica&field_search_scope=metadata&filtertype=contains&sort_by=score&order=desc)

24 <https://participedia.net/case/7425>

25 <https://capitalofdemocracy.eu/introducing-the-first-european-capital-of-democracy/>

Barcelona, except for the Camp Julià de Capmany in the Sants-Montjuic district, where the conditions are not suitable for the practice of sport. They proposed a comprehensive reform of the field, adapting the space to the needs of Barcelona residents who practice minority sports.<sup>26</sup> In the last phase of the participatory budgeting the proposal was one of the most voted in their district and the cricket field is becoming a reality.

Since Decidim was established as a tool to support the City Council of Barcelona in its efforts to increase citizens' involvement in decision-making, it has been supporting more than 400 municipalities, institutions, organisations, etc., that today use Decidim as a main platform for consultation.

The platform offers interaction and involvement of the citizens in several ways:

- Decidim Barcelona is a digital platform, allowing citizens to participate in discussions and voting from the comfort of their homes or any location with internet access. This convenience can help to increase the overall participation rate.
- Citizens can submit proposals for projects, policies, or ideas important for the city's future. These proposals can cover a wide range of topics, such as urban planning, transportation to social services, environmental initiatives, etc.
- The platform facilitates discussions around proposals, allowing citizens to engage in conversations, provide feedback, ask questions, and refine ideas collaboratively.
- Registered users can vote on proposals to indicate their support or opposition. This voting process helps to prioritise which proposals should be given more consideration and potentially implemented.
- It aims to enhance transparency by making information about proposals, discussions, and voting outcomes easily accessible to the public. This transparency fosters trust between citizens and the local government.
- The platform intends to give citizens a more direct role in shaping city policies and initiatives. While not all proposals may lead to immediate action, the engagement process allows policymakers to consider citizen input when making decisions.

One potential risk that may arise related to open-source platforms is governments using them for 'participatory washing' purposes and creating participatory processes that are not really well-designed. For example, the Chilean government deployed the platform during the protests that took place in 2019 for participatory washing. Decidim wrote a communication and published it on their website.<sup>27</sup>

---

26 <https://www.decidim.barcelona/processes/PressupostosParticipatius/f/4422/proposals/29142>

27 Sources of the case study: Interview and website of Decidim: <https://decidim.org/>  
See the discussion around the use of Decidim by the Chilean Government on 2019: <https://meta.decidim.org/processes/roadmap/f/122/proposals/14933#comments-for-Proposal-14933> and the official statement: <https://decidim.org/blog/2019-12-20-not-with-decidim-support/>

# CASE STUDY: MAPTIONNAIRE

Maptionnaire is another platform and online software to design and manage citizen engagement. It was born when a group of urban planning researchers and professionals based in Helsinki discovered an emerging problem: there was an increasing need for cities and urban planners to engage the public and to get real input from local residents. The company, Mapita, was founded in 2011 to provide a solution for anyone to create their own map-based questionnaires. Since then, Maptionnaire has developed from a map-based survey tool to an entire platform for community engagement.

The use of spatial Geographic Information System (GIS) data is the core to the platform that is easy to analyse and combine with other datasets. In 2023, Maptionnaire was recognised as the Geospatial Innovator of the Year by Geospatial World.

Maptionnaire allows the users to collect data, communicate plans, decide together, analyse results and do interactive mapping. It aims to make the planning process more inclusive and engaging. The data collection methods can be tailored to the users' needs, including multiple choice questions, map-based surveys, online polls or prioritising budget spending. Citizens can respond when it suits them best and they don't have to download a separate application. Maptionnaire gamified surveys are visual, fun, and spatial. The automate public hearing process converts responses into standardised reports. A PDF copy of each answer can be sent directly to the respondent and the city hall. It is possible to set up the fields in the form to follow the legislation standards.

The digital formats allow broader groups to participate and get a wider set of voices heard. It is important that the engagement happens in the early phases of the planning process and there is targeted outreach to the most vulnerable groups of population. Maptionnaire's admin interface is available in 5 languages (English, Finnish, Swedish, German, and Dutch). The users can translate the webpages and surveys that they create in Maptionnaire into more than 40 languages. In case the target language is not available, Maptionnaire can add it to the service.

The platform can be used by anyone from the private or public sector who is working with citizen engagement and the built environment. The platform has been used in a variety of projects, such as neighbourhood development, green energy transition, masterplanning, and participatory budgeting. There is no limit to the number of participants in Maptionnaire. Some of their clients engaged more than 40.000 people, while projects from small rural communities have engaged around a couple hundred people.<sup>28</sup> Maptionnaire helps the users with the onboarding, provides them an initial training and supports them with technical questions.

For example, Vantaa has been the first Finnish city to adopt Maptionnaire Community Engagement Platform on a city-wide level and across the various departments. Community engagement in Vantaa covers both face-to-face and digital methods. They transferred several resident meetings and workshops to their online service [osallistuvavantaa.fi](https://osallistuvavantaa.fi), which they have built with the help of the new Maptionnaire service. They conducted pilot projects where the different departments within the city were introduced to the use

---

28 You can read customer stories of Maptionnaire here: [Customer Stories | Maptionnaire](#)

of Maptionnaire and to the practices of community engagement. The aim was to use innovative examples to encourage both the city's specialists and also residents to participate. Pilot projects can also be used to develop operating methods and improve the service further based on the received feedback.<sup>29</sup>

The City of Cardiff also applied Maptionnaire to engage the youth and better understand how locals perceive their living environments.<sup>30</sup>

In Peja municipality in Kosovo, a spatial and land management project used Maptionnaire to boost public engagement in local spatial planning processes. The online map-based surveys attracted a high number of participants and ensured gender equality. Contrary to conventional public engagement processes, 45% of Peja's Maptionnaire survey respondents were women. This is a significant improvement compared to the 5% share of women taking part in the face-to-face meetings.<sup>31</sup>

The City of Espoo in Finland used the Automized Public Hearing function of Maptionnaire. Respondents can mark their feedback on a digital map which planners receive in GIS format. It removes the burden of manually sending individual feedbacks to the registry and saves a lot of time while remaining in compliance with legal requirements.<sup>32, 33</sup>



29 <https://www.maptionnaire.com/customer-stories/vantaa-digitalizes-community-engagement>

30 [Cllr De'Ath Statement - 21st July 2022 \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

31 <https://www.maptionnaire.com/customer-stories/public-engagement-method>

32 <https://www.maptionnaire.com/customer-stories/espoo-saves-time-and-money-with-automized-public-hearing>

33 Sources of the case study: Interview and website of Maptionnaire

### 3.1.3. Use of online platforms by the EU institutions

The European Union makes efforts to enhance public participation and engagement through various online platforms. As elsewhere, these platforms are designed to allow individuals to have their voices heard, share their opinions, and contribute to the policy-making process at the EU level. The EU institutions have been continuously working on improving and expanding online platforms for public participation. Some of the most common digital platforms and online methods for public participation used by the EU institutions are the following:

The [European Parliament's Petitions Web Portal](#) is an online platform that allows citizens, residents, and organisations from EU Member States to submit petitions to the European Parliament. The primary purpose of the portal is to provide a direct link between EU citizens and the European Parliament, enabling citizens to exercise their right to petition the Parliament. **Petitions can address a wide range of topics**, such as environmental issues, human rights, consumer protection, regional development, and more. To submit a petition, **the petitioner must be a citizen of an EU member state**, a resident of an EU Member State, or an organisation with its headquarters in an EU Member State. The petitioner must create an account on the portal and **provide details about the petition**, including the subject matter, the problem identified, and the desired outcome. The petitions submitted through the portal are reviewed and processed by the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions. The committee evaluates the admissibility and relevance of each petition and decides whether it falls within the scope of the European Union's activities. Petitions submitted through the portal are **accessible to the public**, allowing **transparency and open access** to the issues raised by citizens. The petitioner receives acknowledgement of receipt, and if the petition is admissible, **the petitioner may be invited to present the petition** to the Petitions Committee. The Committee can request additional information from the petitioner and may hold hearings on specific petitions. The European Parliament then provides a response to the petitioner, outlining the committee's position on the matter and any actions that may be taken.

According to the statistics, the European Parliament received 1,392 petitions in 2021 which represents a decrease by 11.5% compared to the 1,573 petitions submitted in 2020 and an increase by 2.5% compared to the 1,357 petitions registered in 2019. Users of the Petitions Web Portal have the possibility to support petitions. In 2021, 209,272 users acted as supporters as compared to 48,882 in 2020. It follows, that in 2021, the number of users supporting petitions in the web portal increased considerably in comparison with the previous year. In 2021, 21 petitions were co-signed by more than one citizen. Of the 21 petitions signed by more than one citizen, only three were signed by more than 100 citizens; out of the three, only one was signed by more than 1,000 citizens and zero by more than 10,000 citizens. In 2021, almost 79% of the petitions were submitted via the Petitions Web Portal, while 21% of petitions were submitted by post.<sup>34</sup>

---

34 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0271\\_EN.html#\\_section4](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0271_EN.html#_section4)

2021			2020		
Outcome of petitions	Number	%	Outcome of petitions	Number	%
Admissible and Closed	573	41.16%	Admissible and Closed	478	30.4%
Admissible and Open	434	31.18%	Admissible and Open	652	41.45%
Inadmissible	36	26.5%	Inadmissible	392	24.9%
Withdrawn	17	1.22%	Withdrawn	51	3.3%
Sent to EC for opinion	554	44.90%	Sent to EC for opinion	794	52.90%
Sent for opinion to other bodies	33	2.67%	Sent for opinion to other bodies	44	2.93%
Sent for information to other bodies	647	43.37%	Sent for information to other bodies	663	44.17%

The tables show that the percentage of petitions declared inadmissible in 2021 is slightly higher than the percentage of petitions which were declared inadmissible in 2020. The percentage of admissible petitions (41.16 %), which were closed immediately by providing information to the petitioner in 2021 is higher as compared to the 30.4 % in 2020. The petitions that have been kept open in 2021 (31.18%) are significantly decreased than in 2020 (41.45%). It is also to be noted that in 2021, less than half of the admissible petitions were sent to the Commission for opinion.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, it can be concluded that fundamental rights, health and the environment ranked high in both 2021 and 2020. However, in 2021 the number of petitions raising concerns over the environment and health had a relevant increase, while petitions on constitutional affairs have decreased significantly. In particular, in the framework of the environment theme, the protection, and preservation of the biodiversity and nature had an important role. It is also interesting to note that in 2021 an important number of petitions (139) registered under the theme of fundamental rights raise concerns over the impact of national COVID-19-related emergency measures on fundamental rights and freedoms, including the freedom of movement, the right to work, the right of access to information and the right to education.<sup>36</sup>

While there has been an increase in the number of supporters of the petitions, civil society raised some concerns related to the lack of representativeness of petitions. As the study ‘Under Construction’<sup>37</sup> pointed out, most EU participation instruments are not very representative, partly because most instruments do not even aim to be representative. The petitions focus on individual complaints or requests rather than the concerns of the wider population.

The **European Citizens’ Initiative** is a European Union mechanism aimed at increasing direct democracy by enabling “EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies”. It is envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty in Article 11 and allows EU citizens to propose new legislation or call for changes to existing laws. It is the possibility for not less than

35 Ibid

36 Ibid

37 Dominik Hierlemann, Stefan Roch, Paul Butcher, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Corina Stratulat, Maarten de Groot: Under Construction. Citizen Participation in the European Union. Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022. [https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2022/Study\\_Under\\_construction.pdf](https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2022/Study_Under_construction.pdf)

one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States to take the initiative of inviting the European Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required to implement the Treaties (paragraph 4). The entire procedure can be done online. The platform aims to facilitate the process and ensure accessibility to citizens across the EU. The online platform for the European Citizens' Initiative<sup>38</sup> plays a crucial role in facilitating the entire process, from the initiation of an ECI to the collection of signatures and the submission of the proposal to the European Commission. It ensures transparency, accessibility, and inclusiveness in the ECI process, enabling citizens from across the EU to participate in shaping EU policies and legislation directly.

The effect of a valid ECI is to invite the Commission to submit a proposal, which means that the ECI is not binding on the Commission. The Commission has complete discretion in deciding whether and how to adopt a follow-up proposal. So far, nine citizens' initiatives have been answered by the European Commission.<sup>39</sup>

---

38 <https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/select-language?destination=/node/494>

39 **Right2Water:** On 21 March 2013, [Right2Water](#) became the first ECI to collect more than a million signatures and it reached the minimum quota of signatures in seven countries on 7 May 2013. It stopped collecting signatures on 7 September 2013, with a total of 1,857,605 signatures. After several undertaken steps in December 2020, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the revised Directive, which entered into force in January 2021.

**One of us:** On 28 February 2014, One of Us was submitted to the commission as an ECI, having gathered 1,896,852 signatures. The initiative sought that the EU “establish a ban and end the financing of activities which presuppose the destruction of human embryos, in particular in the areas of research, development aid and public health. The commission decided not to submit a legislative proposal since it considered the existing legal framework, as decided by Member States and the European Parliament only a few months before the submission of the ECI, as appropriate. In its Communication, it explained extensively why it considers that there is no need to modify the legal framework.

**Stop Vivisection:** On 3 March 2015, the third European Citizens' Initiative to gather the required number of signatories. The campaign collected 1,326,807 signatures. On 3 June 2015, the European Commission adopted the Communication on the European Citizens' Initiative “Stop Vivisection”-proposing a series of non-legislative follow-up actions. Ban glyphosate and protect people and the environment from toxic pesticides: The initiative was submitted to the commission on 6 October 2017. By that date, 1,070,865 signatures from 22 Member States had been checked and validated. The commission adopted a communication on 12 December 2017, setting out the actions it intends to take in response to the initiative. On 11 April 2018, the commission adopted a proposal for a Regulation on transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain. The new legislation started applying on 27 March 2021.

**Minority Safepack:** A package of 9 proposals aiming “to improve the protection of persons belonging to national and linguistic minorities and strengthen cultural and linguistic diversity”, and submitted to the commission on 10 January 2020. On 14 January 2021 the Commission responded by referring to a series of non-legislative follow-up actions.

**End the Cage Age:** Many scientists, companies and more than 170 NGOs supported the ECI, aiming at a phase-out of caged farming in the European Union. They succeeded in collecting almost 1.4 million signatures, by emphasising the need for a prohibition of cages for farmed rabbits, pullets, broiler breeders, quail, ducks and geese. Almost 1.4 million signatures have been gathered, as certified in October 2020. On 15 April 2021, the AGRI Committee, with the association of the PETI Committee, held a Public Hearing.

**Save bees and farmers!** Towards a bee-friendly agriculture for a healthy environment' The initiative collected 1.054.973 signatures requesting Commission to propose legal acts to phase out synthetic pesticides by 2035, to restore biodiversity, and to support farmers in the transition. In its reply, the Commission underlined that rather than proposing new legislative acts, the priority is to ensure that the proposals currently being negotiated by the co-legislators are timely adopted and then implemented, together with an effective implementation of the CAP.

**Stop Finning – Stop the trade'** initiative was submitted to the Commission on 11 January 2023, after having gathered 1,119,996 verified statements of support. Start without delay preparatory work with a view to launch, by the end of 2023, an impact assessment on the environmental, social and economic consequences of applying the “fins naturally attached” policy to the placing on the EU market of sharks, whether within the EU or for international trade (imports and exports). By the end 2024, provide more detailed EU import and export information to improve statistics on trade in shark products.

The '**Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics - Commit to a Europe Without Animal Testing'** initiative was submitted to the Commission on 25 January 2023, after having gathered 1,217,916 verified statements of support. The Commission outlines the following actions to further reduce animal testing in response to specific objectives of the European citizens' initiative: Protect and strengthen the cosmetics animal testing ban; Transform EU chemicals legislation; Modernise science in the EU.



The steps for initiating an ECI are the following:

- **Starting the process and registration:** The process begins with the creation of the organisers account, which means obligatory registration of the initiative on the European Commission's online platform to begin the process officially. At this stage, the organisers should provide a description of the initiative in one of the official EU languages, as well as details and relevant documents on the group of organisers should be presented.
- **Review of the initiative (admissibility):** Once registered, the proposed ECI undergoes an admissibility check by the European Commission in a period of two to four months. The Commission is not obliged to register all initiatives. It only registers initiatives that meet the criteria, including relevance to EU policies and respect for the EU's values.
- **Collection of signatures:** If the ECI passes the admissibility check, it is made public on the online platform. Organisers can then start collecting signatures electronically from EU citizens who support the initiative. The platform offers a user-friendly interface for signatories to express their support securely. As stated above, to be considered by the European Commission, an ECI must gather a minimum of 1 million signatures from a minimum of seven countries. The signatures can be collected online (using the Central Online Collection System) or on paper (pre-filled forms, downloadable from your organiser account). Through the Central Online Collection System, the European Commission offers to organisers of initiatives a central system for collecting statements of support with several advantages: minimum preparation (turnkey solution); free of charge for organisers; no approval required (the system already complies with technical and security standards – to use the system, you just sign an agreement with the Commission); quick setup (to use the system, organisers can simply inform the Commission 10 working days before starting the collection, via organiser account); in some countries, supporters of the initiative can use e-identification to sign; the system is fully accessible for people with disabilities; organisers can also use the system to contact supporters by e-mail (for ongoing communication with them about the initiative).
- **Verification of the statements:** After the signatures are collected, the relevant national authorities in each Member State, in the period of three months, verify the authenticity and validity of the signatures. This verification process ensures that the ECI complies with the signature threshold requirements.
- **Submission to the European Commission:** Once the required number of verified signatures is reached, the organisers officially submit the ECI to the European Commission.
- **European Commission's Response:** The European Commission is obliged to examine the proposal and provide an official response within a few months after receiving the ECI: (i) Within one month, the organisers meet with representatives of the Commission so they can explain the issues raised in their initiative in detail; (ii) within three months there will be the opportunity for the organisers to present the initiative at a public hearing at the European Parliament. The Parliament may also hold a debate in a full (plenary) session, which could

lead to it adopting a resolution related to the issue; (iii) The Commission will spell out what action it will propose in response to the initiative (if any), and its reasons for taking (or not taking) action. This response will be in the form of a communication formally adopted by the Commissioners and published in all official EU languages. The Commission may choose to accept the proposed legislation, reject it, or propose an alternative course of action.<sup>40</sup>

The [EU Survey platform](#) provides EU institutions with the ability to conduct surveys and gather opinions from people on various topics related to EU policies, initiatives, and programmes and can be an essential part of shaping EU policies and actions. The platform is used to conduct both **internal surveys** among EU officials and staff and **public consultations**, which makes it accessible to a wide range of participants, including individuals, experts, professionals, and representatives from various sectors and industries. Surveys conducted on the platform cover a **broad spectrum of subjects**, ranging from economic policies and environmental issues to social issues, education, health, and more. The data collected through the EU Survey is analysed and used to evaluate public opinions, identify trends, and better understand **individuals' views on EU policies** and actions. Like almost all EU methods for public consultations the EU Survey is available in all EU official languages to accommodate participants from different Member States. The outcomes and results of public consultations and surveys are often **published and made available to the public**, promoting transparency in the EU's decision-making processes.

The [“Have Your Say” portal](#) is a European Commission **online platform established in 2017** as a part of Better Regulation that invites all citizens (including businesses and non-governmental organisations) to share their views on Commission initiatives at crucial stages in the legislative process and to contribute online to EU law and policy-making. Namely, the European Commission launched the Better Regulation Agenda in 2015 to improve policy-making and simplify laws. Public consultation is part of the broader agenda to improve the transparency and accountability of EU activities. Since 2020, the new version has been in function, which makes it easier for the public to find on the portal the Commission initiative they are most interested in, thanks to improved search functionalities. The portal is more user-friendly, so the public can share their views by directly accessing the newest consultations of high interest on the home page. Through the “Have Your Say” portal, individuals and organisations can give feedback on roadmaps or impact assessments of upcoming legislation. They can also **take part in 12-week public consultations on initiatives under preparation or evaluations** of the performance of existing EU actions. In addition, everybody has the possibility to comment on draft delegated and implementing acts.

The “Have Your Say” portal organised by the European Commission involves a straightforward process:

- **Starting point:** By accessing the “Have Your Say” portal on the European Commission's official website, the process for commenting can start. There, the list of ongoing consultations can be found, and topics are available for public feedback.
- **Registration and providing comments:** Commenting is possible only with log in or with creating an account on the “Have Your Say” portal. Once logged in, any interested citizen can submit comments by typing them directly into the comment box provided on the consultation page. Some consultations may have

40 [https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/how-it-works\\_en](https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/how-it-works_en)

specific questions or prompts to guide participants responses, while others may offer more open-ended opportunities to share their opinions.

- **Confirmation and feedback:** In some cases, participants/citizens can receive a confirmation or acknowledgment that comments have been successfully submitted. More often, the Commission does not respond individually to each comment, but all comments are taken into account when analysing public feedback.

According to the European Commission's Communication on the Conference on the Future of Europe,<sup>41</sup> "... the Commission's Have Your Say portal will become a one-stop-shop for online citizen engagement, bringing together all information on citizens' engagement mechanisms running in the Commission. This new online hub will integrate key features of the Conference's multilingual digital platform: direct exchanges between citizens, commenting – in all EU official languages thanks to eTranslation – but also online polls and hosting online participatory events. It will form the basis for a new ecosystem of democratic engagement and innovation." This way, the Commission aims to respond to the calls from the Conference participants for setting up online consultation platforms. The new online hub is under development and is planned to be launched during the fall of 2023. It aims to engage individuals in a more deliberative way and consists of different types of modules, including the Have Your Say portal. It will mirror the digital platform for the Conference on the Future of Europe.<sup>42</sup>

The European Commission used Decidim to implement the multilingual digital platform of the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)**, which is a pan-European initiative composed of multiple interlinked events and debates where people, civil society and all other stakeholders (including local, regional and national authorities) from Europe to share and discuss their ideas. It provided a unique opportunity for EU institutions to hear directly from citizens on Europe's challenges and priorities. The multilingual digital platform functioned both as the Conference (i) **main information hub**, providing relevant information to the public about the conference format, topics under discussion, planned events, and outcomes, and (ii) **main participation space**, enabling people to contribute online, individually or collectively, with concrete ideas for EU policies around the Conference's headline topics defined in the Joint Declaration, and to comment on other people's ideas. The digital platform was launched on 19 April 2021 and was open to contributions until 9 May 2022. During this period, **18,859 ideas and 22,167 comments were submitted, and 6,661 events were organised**. Decidim was chosen following an in-depth analysis of relevant leading proprietary and open-source online citizen engagement platforms.<sup>43</sup>

The Conference on the Future of Europe was a **pioneering participatory event at the European level in terms of scale, interactivity and multilingualism**. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the initial planning of the Conference, highlighting the importance of a digital platform as a way to provide alternatives to face-to-face events. In this way, the digital platform was key in increasing the opportunities for people to play their part and be involved in EU policy making. The multilingualism aspect was crucial to ensure that there were no language barriers to participate – participants could submit their ideas and comment in their own language as well as read other participants contributions in any EU language.<sup>44</sup>

Civil society groups raised some concerns related to the Multilingual Digital Platform used by CoFoE. According to Civil Society Europe's [report](#), the CoFoE Platform requires to

41 <https://commission.europa.eu/select-language?destination=/media/27775>

42 Source: Interview

43 <https://decidim.org/blog/2022-06-01-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>

44 Ibid

acquire an EU login, which involves a quite cumbersome and not user-friendly process. Concerns were also raised related to the Platform's lack of focus and structure, paired with the lack of guidance for CoFoE participants, which discouraged the submission of contributions. It was also not clear how the ideas were weighted and classified almost till the end of the CoFoE. Civil society organisations did not have their own space on the Digital Platform. Therefore, they had to follow the citizens' path to submit contributions. There were also accessibility problems for persons with disabilities. A [technical assessment](#) ordered by the European Disability Forum describes all the accessibility issues and provides recommendations on how to resolve them.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, **some of the key advantages of the existing online platforms** used by the EU institutions are:

- Enabling citizens from across the EU to participate in shaping EU policies and legislation directly;
- Almost all EU methods for public consultations the EU Survey are available in all EU official languages to accommodate participants from different Member States;
- The European Citizens' Initiative provides a user-friendly interface for signatories;
- The European Survey is accessible to a wide range of participants, available for both internal surveys and public consultation, in all EU official languages, and covers a broad spectrum of subjects.

There are also **some areas that would benefit from further development**, including the following:

- Any future activities on a website similar to the Digital Platform of the CoFoE need to provide a dedicated space for civil society to contribute by registering as organisations. Such a step is essential to ensure the transparency of the contributions.
- The platforms should guarantee accessibility to all, diversity of contributions, and meaningful analysis and inclusion of the contributions into the debate.<sup>46</sup>

### ***3.1.4. Use of online platforms at the national and local level***

On the EU Member States level, there are several examples of the use of digital platforms for involving members of society and relevant stakeholders in policy and decision-making.

For example, in Finland, the online platform "[Demokratia.fi](#)" is dedicated to promoting and enhancing democracy in Finland. The platform aims to provide information, resources, and opportunities for individuals to engage in democratic processes and participate in decision-making at various levels of governance. It brings together the various online services for democratic participation and provides up-to-date information on the stages of decision-making and law drafting. In one place, all interested individuals can find information and provide their input to various open consultations laws and policies on all levels, including municipal, national, and EU.

45 Civil Society Europe. Civil Dialogue in the EU – What's next? Lessons Learnt from the Conference on the Future of Europe and Suggestions to Strengthen Future Civil Dialogue. [https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Civil-Dialogue-in-the-EU\\_Whats-next.pdf](https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Civil-Dialogue-in-the-EU_Whats-next.pdf)

46 Ibid.

In this portal, which is maintained by the Ministry of Justice, other examples of democracy services can also be found, including the following:

- [Digiraati.fi](#) is an online service aimed especially at young people to offer all young people under the age of 29 an equal opportunity to have their voices heard on social issues and participate in discussions on various current topics. In Digiraad, the participants discuss a pre-agreed topic for 2–3 weeks. The discussion takes place in writing with name tags on the service’s own, closed discussion board. The goal is to form a final statement on the topic under discussion by the jury, which will be forwarded to the decision-makers and published on the service. The conversation is guided and supervised by a trained instructor who takes care of the progress, safety and smoothness of the conversation. For example, councils can be organised by ministries, municipalities, welfare regions, other authorities or non-governmental organisations. The use of the service is free of charge both for the organisers of the councils and for their participants. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the maintenance and development of Digiraad. Digiraati has been produced in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Children’s Strategy, the University of Tampere’s ALL-YOUTH research project, the Competence Center for Youth Inclusion and the Finnish Red Cross.
- [Otakantaa.fi](#) is an online service that enhances the mutual dialogue and participation of individuals, organisations, and authorities. In the service, you can open discussions and polls about current topics. The service facilitates people’s influence and access to information, and increases the transparency of decision preparation and decision-making, and improves their quality. The use of the service is free of charge for users. The service is maintained by the Ministry of Justice. The service can be used without registration or as a registered user, depending on the purpose of using the service. Without registration, you can browse the content of the service and participate in discussions and surveys of projects for which registration is not required. Opening a project and reporting an organisation to the service requires user registration. The service may also have projects whose participation in discussions and surveys requires registration.
- In the [Kuntalaisaloite.fi](#) service, residents of the municipality and users of the services can make initiatives for the municipality. With the help of a municipal initiative, a citizen can bring up a topical issue or problem and arouse decision-makers to pay attention to it. All initiatives are processed by the competent municipal authority without undue delay. The initiator shall be notified of the measures taken as a result of the initiative. The user of the service also has the right to take initiatives in matters concerning the municipality’s service. In addition, 4% of the municipality’s residents who have reached the age of 15 can submit an initiative to the municipality to organise a municipal referendum. To make a municipal initiative, you must first log in to the service.
- In the [Kansalaisaloite.fi](#) online service, a Finnish citizen entitled to vote can make a citizens’ initiative. A citizen’s initiative proposes a new law, an amendment to an existing law, or the repeal of an existing law. A citizens’ initiative will be considered by the parliament if it has collected at least 50,000 declarations of support within six months. The use of the service is free of charge.

In other countries and towns, different open-source softwares and global platforms (such as [Consul](#)) are used by local authorities mainly to enhance public participation and to involve people in decision-making processes. For example, the Consul has also been promoted in Bulgaria, and the municipality of Kurdjali has created a website called [Kurdjali for you](#). It is used to organise debates on local matters (environmental, animal protection, urban planning, and more), make proposals, vote for offered solutions, etc.

Also, governments have used digital platforms to involve a large number of participants to discuss important national issues, including the Constitution, such as in Iceland. Namely, an attempt to change the Icelandic constitution in 2018–2021 election period was made in collaboration with all in the Icelandic Parliament. The University of Iceland and the Citizens Foundation created a connection to the government, where the public can influence the proposed constitutional amendments. Over 39,000 people<sup>47</sup> visited the website and learned about constitution-making. More than one thousand citizens logged in and created ideas and debate points. Besides the digital platform (crowdsourcing), several other tools were used to engage people. For example, a regular survey was sent out and a randomly selected Deliberative Poll (a type of citizen assembly) was held with around 300 people from all over Iceland during a weekend. An educational game called “Make Your Constitution” was launched to teach citizens what constitutions are.<sup>48</sup>

Another example is when France and Germany used digital platforms to consult young people through the “Our Europe, Our Future”, as part of the Conference for the Future of Europe and reached around 95,000 young people in both countries. “Our Europe, Our Future” is a vast consultation of young people, who had the opportunity to express their priorities for Europe in two consultations: one carried out on the initiative of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the other in cooperation with Franco-German Youth Office and with the support of the German Foreign Ministry. The entire process started when, on the occasion of the launching of the CoFoE on May 9, 2021, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, with [Make.org](#), the #ParoleAuxJeunes, launched the consultation. For two months, young French people between the ages of 15 to 35 were invited to answer the question “Young people, what are your priorities for the Europe of tomorrow?” This example was followed by the Franco-German Office for Youth and the German Foreign Ministry, which provided a possibility for young Germans to express their priorities on the future of Europe, but also to identify the major consensus of the youth of both countries and to define impactful initiatives that young people from both countries will be able to implement. As a result, 11 common priorities for the Europe of young people in France and Germany have emerged: environment and European democracy are the center of the proposals, but also economy, health, fundamental rights, digital transformation and education take an important place among the ideas for the Europe of tomorrow. All the results of these consultations have been integrated into the online platform of the CoFoE.<sup>49</sup>

Platforms promoting public participation and civil society engagement have been developed by CSOs, too. For example, in Hungary K-Monitor<sup>50</sup> developed the **PARTIMAP** that is a free, easy-to-use and customisable map questionnaire for those who believe that stakeholders should also be asked about developments implemented with public funds.<sup>51</sup> In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law (BCNL) developed a [platform Ngo.vote](#) to consult civil society on their priorities for the new Civil Society Strategy that the government should adopt in the country. CSOs can complete a [survey](#) to rank their priorities.

---

47 Iceland has a population of 372,520 citizens. The people who visited the website is more than 10% of total inhabitanace.

48 [https://citizens.is/portfolio\\_page/icelandic-constitution-crowdsourcing/](https://citizens.is/portfolio_page/icelandic-constitution-crowdsourcing/)

49 <https://oecd-opsi.org/innovations/our-europe-our-future-notre-europe-notre-avenir/>

50 K-Monitor supports institutions, journalists and individuals to fight corruption through community building, technology development, advocacy and research. <https://k-monitor.hu/about>

51 <https://www.partimap.eu/hu>, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/17p1JAL02iNtYNMhMkCvHClqUTIFYrb2/view>

## 3.2. Gamification and serious games

Gamification and serious games are considered as useful tools to enhance public participation and decision-making processes by making them more engaging, informative, and inclusive. While gamification means the inclusion of game-like elements into a process (for example reward systems, points systems, leaderboards etc.), serious games are actual games that do not have entertainment as their primary goal. Although playing them is often entertaining, they are used mainly to raise awareness of a certain issue, educate, broaden perspectives, gather public opinion, and involve members of society into decision-making.

Research showed that gamification and the use of serious games succeeded in increasing **participation rates** and, specifically, the **activity of participants**. The rationale behind turning public participation processes into games lies in the hope of evoking learning processes. By playfully exploring options and engaging with others, it is anticipated that people extend and enrich their knowledge and understanding of issues, roles of key actors, and processes.<sup>52</sup> Mobile technologies and social networks provide the substratum for supporting formal empowerment, but public engagement in participation processes is still an open issue. One of the techniques used to improve engagement is *gamification* based on humans' predisposition to games.<sup>53</sup>

**Gamification is particularly relevant for policy making on the local level**, where in many cities, residents can vote or propose projects for the community, give opinions or feedback about the government's actions, etc. Within this context, researchers, local governments, and companies have demonstrated a growing interest in studying, developing, and adopting technologies and techniques to foster civic participation. It is important that all relevant stakeholders understand the potential of information technology and make a conscious decision to use that technology to transform life in positive ways. However, participation cannot be taken for granted, it needs to be fostered because people become engaged when they are motivated and have both the abilities and the opportunities to participate through the right means.<sup>54</sup>

### 3.2.1. Key characteristics and benefits of gamification

**If they are set up carefully and considering the needs of various groups, gamification can offer numerous advantages as tools for public participation in decision-making processes.**

- Serious games can provide **educational content** in an interactive and engaging manner to help participants to understand the complexities of decision-making to be aware of different options and various aspects that need to be considered. It can also be used to create interactive educational content that helps the public understand complex issues, policies, or projects.
- Serious games can **encourage cooperation and teamwork** among participants by working together towards a common goal, so they can better understand the problems and challenges that can commonly contribute to better solutions.

52 Thiel, S.-K., Frohlich, P. Gamification as Motivation to Engage in Location-Based Public Participation. In: Georg GARTNER and Haosheng HUANG, ed., Progress in Location-Based Services 2016. S.l.: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017, Lecture notes in Geoinformation and cartography, pp. 399–421

53 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12652-021-03322-6>

54 Ibid

- Gamification can **inspire a broader range of participants**, including those who might not typically engage in public participation processes. It is especially effective in engaging young people.<sup>55</sup> By making the experience more enjoyable and accessible, a diverse group of people can be involved and gather a wider range of opinions, proposals, and perspectives.
- Gamification can **empower participants**, making them active contributors to the decision-making process, so they feel that their input matters and can influence outcomes. In such situations, they are more likely to engage and stay involved.
- Serious games can facilitate the collection of **real-time feedback**. Data can be analysed fast and in a way that is less resource-demanding to improve decision-making processes and adapt strategies based on the preferences and opinions of the participants. It can also collect **valuable data** on participant choices and opinions. This data can then be analysed to identify trends, patterns, and insights that inform decision-making processes.
- Gamification is an approach most notably popular with behavioral change or to motivate activity. Therefore, **it can also facilitate the implementation of policies** where a change in human behaviour is needed or where active engagement is desirable to facilitate the smooth implementation of a policy.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.2.2. Types of games

Serious games can be categorised based on several criteria, including how they are played (analogue vs. digital games), the purpose and main features of the games.

#### 1. Analogue vs. digital games

One way to classify games is by how they are played. There are two main types: **analogue games and digital games**.

- **Analogue games:** Analogue games are the ones that are played in person, like board games, card games, or games with little figures. They are usually limited to people who are in the same place because they rely on physical components. But sometimes, these games can also be utilised in a broader way (also on working on national, transnational issues), as they can help coming up with fresh ideas, and promote understanding of different perspectives in an engaging way. For example, the [Game of Circularity](#) created in London (UK) by the Royal Society of Arts seeks to inform the public about the significance of product design in shaping future environmental outcomes. Players select a product and make design choices affecting their train's path on the board through illustrated junctions, depicting environmental costs. In Helsinki (Finland) city leaders devised a board game for small teams of managers and staff to learn various public participation methods. Named the [Participation Game](#), over 2,000 Helsinki employees from diverse departments have played it nearly 250 times in 2017.
- **Digital games:** Digital games, on the other hand, are made using computer programming. They can be played on a computer (online or offline), and they allow people from different places to join in. These games also enable to process information quickly, as all data gathered through the game is easily accessible and analysable. For example, the "Block by Block" is a public space project that

55 <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/gaming-city-planning-community-planit-detroit/>

56 Lobna Hassan and Juho Hamari: Gameful civic engagement: A review of the literature on gamification of e-participation. 2020, Government Information Quarterly. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0740624X19302606>.



employs Minecraft to empower people with a design method and language for altering local public spaces. This is a prime example of how an already existing game created for entertainment can be used for a different purpose and reach a tremendous impact: it was used in 37 countries, impacting the lives of more than 2.3 million people.<sup>57</sup> By using the game, a deserted market in Pristina (Kosovo) was turned into an appealing, multifunctional public space<sup>58</sup> through the high participation of the public.

## 2. Purpose and main features

Serious games can also be grouped by their purpose and main features, as also mentioned in the thorough paper Current Research Trends in Games for Public Participation in Planning by Viktorija Prilenska (Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia):<sup>59</sup>

- **Information sourcing games:** the primary purpose of these types of games is to gather in a fun way information from citizens in planning phase of a project or to improve public services. It can also be utilised to collect opinion of already implemented decisions/plans. *For example*, [Community PlanIt](#) was a platform to facilitate online interaction and in-person meetings. Boston Public Schools wanted input on how to figure out the relative quality of its schools. Participants engaged in a series of talks with fellow players, earning credit for their level of participation. Those points could then be spent on advocating for the ideas they think are most important in measuring the quality of schools.
- **Data generation games:** Participatory games can have the power to generate large datasets revealing the preferences of citizens. The patterns in the massive unstructured information can be revealed with the use of data mining methods. Results can be validated through surveys. As an example, this process can show special preferences of the citizens. *For example*, data generated by commercial games [Geocaching](#), [Ingress](#) and [PokémonGo](#) can indicate the points of interest in cities including emerging spaces.
- **Pervasive games (location-based games):** These interactive games make use of GPS-enabled devices. They range from simple geocaching to more advanced games like Pokémon Go. This type is also called “pervasive” because they go beyond the boundaries of traditional gameplay, engaging public spaces and people outside the game’s usual scope. *For example*, the four-week game ZWERM deployed in Ghent (Belgium) boosted communication and community unity in two nearby districts. Interactive tree devices at the centre of each neighbourhood encouraged paired check-ins, creating a buzz that drew in more participants and led to additional activities like check-in parties.
- **Deliberative games:** This type of game facilitates two-way information exchange between organisers and participants, fostering discussions and deliberation. Unlike many civic engagement methods that involve only one-way communication, where information flows from organisers to participants and back, deliberative games encourage open dialogue. *For example*, [CommunityConversational](#) encourages every participant to speak out and to diversify discourses by means of action and question cards (camera recordings for qualitative data).

57 <https://www.blockbyblock.org/>

58 <https://www.blockbyblock.org/projects/kosovo>

59 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345392320\\_Current\\_Research\\_Trends\\_in\\_Games\\_for\\_Public\\_Participation\\_in\\_Planning](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345392320_Current_Research_Trends_in_Games_for_Public_Participation_in_Planning)

- **Co-designed games:** Players actively participate in the design process of these games, shaping game mechanics, rules, and objectives, unlike traditional participatory games, where fixed frameworks are established. *For example*, in Zwolle (Netherlands), [online \(re\)design of citizens' garden is enabled](#) in a digital twin city. The goal is to design it as climate-resistant as possible. Players compete against other neighbours and also work as a team with them against other neighbourhoods (see the detailed case-study below).
- **Educational games** are crafted with a central emphasis on facilitating learning and education, so they do not generate results that can be used for planning or decision-making. These types of games intertwine the crucial characteristics of both entertainment and learning. They acknowledge that the enjoyment derived from gaming can significantly enhance the effectiveness of learning journeys. *For example*, The educational game “[Europe Matters – A Question of Values](#)” developed by the European Union aims at showing pupils (8-12 y.o) Europe’s shared values through an analogue board game. This type of game cannot only be used to promote young people’s learning, but adults can also largely benefit from it.
- **Marketing games:** Gamification can also be used to build exciting campaigns and reach new customers by harnessing the power of playable marketing. *For example*, [Playable](#) is a flexible gamification platform that allows the users to integrate game mechanics in their marketing at all stages. They offer a game-based lifecycle marketing software and their self-service platform allows the users in any industry to build their own branded online marketing games. Their 30+ customisable game concepts fit into three categories, including luck games (e.g., Wheel of Fortune), knowledge games (quiz and poll) and skill games.

Naturally, there can be overlaps between the purpose, features and functions of these games. Below we provide a case study of Grendel Games, which developed a serious game to promote participation.

# CASE STUDY: SERIOUS GAMES AS A MOTIVATOR FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION- GRENDEL GAMES

Citizens are the engine of their street or neighbourhood. Serious games are being developed to increase the involvement of citizens and their interaction with municipalities, motivate people, change behaviour or transfer knowledge. One such example is the games developed by Grendel Games. They use it in several areas, including: 1) healthcare; 2) education (teaching math, misinformation); and 3) sustainability (saving water and energy, climate resilience). Various municipalities, including Zwolle have been hiring them to use their tools to promote citizen participation.

The purpose of these games is to:

1. create awareness;
2. teach and train- e.g., teach behaviour (green habit) and help them to keep their resilience and change behaviour in a longer period.

Their overall approach is:

- They identify the relevant stakeholders. In the beginning of each project, they look at the target audience and make a list of the end-users and all stakeholders- it can be CSOs, municipality, citizens etc. What type of organisations work in this area, what is their interest, digital literacy level etc. They think of various distribution channels and aim to use existing ones, such as schools.
- They set the goals together with them and engage them through the process. They create a list of requirements and ask citizens what they like, why they use these tools, what the current problems are and brainstorm together on ideas. They engage them during the entire process and test the tool to cross-check if it is realistic, reliable and makes sense in the local context. They are also supported by domain-experts (e.g., on urban planning).
- They use various ways to approach and engage stakeholders: 1) active way- game through which they can communicate with each other- e.g., public space planner, 2) passive and more automated way to provide updates to a broader group of people and show aggregate results - e.g., a newsletter.
- Remain open to improve the tools: They collect a lot of feedback also through the button on 'Give us Feedback' and discuss it with the municipality engaged in the specific project.

- They secure data protection and privacy: They are ISO certified and have detailed policy on how they protect their sources. People can voice their concerns and there is some moderation and filtering needed on who can see the messages (e.g., some is only available to the municipality)

Overall, it is engaging, very visual and can be rewarding and hence people keep on playing. It allows users to better visualise what they try to achieve and experiment. It is also more accessible and can be used on browsers and mobile phones, too.

There are not that many limitations. In general, it works better if it is local or tied to something physical. For example, it makes it much more effective if they organise an in-person event to celebrate the end of the battle where people are invited from the neighbourhood. Also, not everyone is open to games, so marketing is a challenge. It is important how to frame it ('Battle' or 'Planner') and not to compete with other tools but offer something in a more fun way.

The game was partly financed by CATCH, a European Interreg project, in which 7 European cities were conducting climate adaptation pilots.<sup>60</sup>



60 Sources: Interview and website: <https://grendelgames.com/>

### 3.2.3. Use of gamification by the EU institutions

On the **EU institutions level**, there are some examples of gamification, but they are most often used for educational purposes. Some games raise awareness of the basics about the EU and its Member States (e.g., how the Council and the European Parliament work, EU's single market, the euro, European flags and famous landmarks etc), and certain topics (biodiversity and climate, how to live a healthy future).<sup>61</sup>

One example is **EUcraft – a digital simulation game** that helps the player to step into the shoes of a national minister and experience EU decision-making by negotiating on real topics that matter to them. Potential topics include agreeing on a common charger for devices, banning single-use plastics or supporting the transition to electric cars and greener buildings. The mission of the game is to discuss a proposal and align positions with other countries, while balancing their needs with one's own country's objective. The aim of the player is to agree on the legislative proposal and approve it after a vote. There are three elements to be negotiated for each topic. Countries might have very divergent positions on some elements and closer positions on others.<sup>62</sup>

Another interesting game relevant for participation is the **Role-play EU decision-making** that introduces students to the practicalities of the EU decision-making procedures. For 75 minutes the pupils take their seats at the negotiating table as one of the EU Member States, the European Parliament or as an official of the European Commission, eager to see its legislative proposal on the 'Chocolate Directive' adopted. It is intended for higher education students and for groups professionally involved with the EU, like companies, civil servants etc. It is also appropriate for pupils in the last grades of secondary school.<sup>63</sup>

A third example is the **Erasmus +, Opengame project**, with the aim to introduce gamification during the studies at the universities across the EU. According to the available information, educators represent the biggest "resistance" to the adoption of Open Education (OE) resources and practices, mainly because they do not have a full understanding of the potential of OE and because they fear that their role might be undermined by open approaches. Further, the main barrier is not the use of technology nor the low acceptance of the OE philosophy, but rather the absence of applicable and inspiring examples of practices that can be implemented in their daily work. Among several activities in the frame of this project, an exciting web-based gamified learning experience, titled **Catch the Open!**, has been developed to inspire, involve and motivate educators to know more and put into practice OE. It is available in French, Portuguese, Spanish and German, and can be found and played on the project website.<sup>64</sup>

The Council of Europe also created a game called "**Europe Matters – A Question of Values**", targeting **pupils at the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school (8-12-year-olds)** and pages with instructions on how to prepare to play this game of discovery, as well as supplementary information. It enables a class to engage in a **shared recreational activity**, while at the same time reflecting on the key values that enable people to live together in society. Although the game can also be adapted to small **groups of two or more players**, it has mainly been designed for school classes, under the guidance of a teacher. **The game is available online and in paper booklet.**

The EU institutions may wish to consider introducing further games to facilitate deliberative processes and better engage multiple opinions and civil society voices in decision-making.

---

61 [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/play-games\\_en?page=0](https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/play-games_en?page=0)

62 [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/eucraft-digital-simulation-game\\_en](https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/eucraft-digital-simulation-game_en)

63 [https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/role-play-eu-decision-making\\_en](https://learning-corner.learning.europa.eu/learning-materials/role-play-eu-decision-making_en)

64 [www.opengame-project.eu](http://www.opengame-project.eu)

### 3.2.4. Use of gamification at the national and local level

There are also some good examples of the use of gamification and serious games in the Member States, mainly at the local, but also on the national level, organised both by civil society and institutions.

In Latvia, the organisation Civic Alliance – Latvia organised a virtual game about EU Values. The aim of the game was to present the values of the European Union in a fun and engaging way, to stimulate debate on the future of Europe and to challenge Euroscepticism. The **Digital Escape Room** is a dystopian online game, playing out the scenario of what would happen if the European Union was destroyed by political populism and existing EU values were lost. Players were tasked with solving various challenges related to the European Union and restoring European values. The game was open primarily for young people and students from 9th to 12th grade, as well as others interested. The Escape Game was part of the international project “ESCAPE ROOM – What would life be without EU?!” , and in total, 10 countries were involved, including Latvia, Italy, Slovenia, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Greece, Estonia, Austria, Bulgaria and Spain.

Civic Alliance–Latvia also organised the game “**Democracy 2084**”, which was designed to strengthen people’s understanding of democratic values and processes. Its participants gain knowledge and understanding of democracy as a governing system. The game is suitable for players at the age of 14 and older. The game creates a dystopian vision of the collapse of a democratic state. The purpose of the game is to show its players what life would be like without democratic values and what difficulties they would have to face if democratic systems no longer existed. After completing the game, young players and the game leaders discuss various aspects of democracy and what each of them and the society as a whole could do to strengthen democracy.

One concrete example of the application of Grendel Games at the local level is the **Garden Battle**, which is used to create a climate-adaptive living environment.<sup>65</sup> In this game, residents of Zwolle (in the Netherlands) get to work with the online (re)design of their garden in a digital twin city. After claiming their own garden, the goal is to design it as climate-resistant as possible. They compete against their neighbours and also work as a team with them against other neighbourhoods.

As a civic participation project, Zwolle opted for a serious game to motivate residents to work on climate resilience. Compared to gamification, where game elements are used in a non-gaming context (such as a participation platform), serious games go one step further. The Garden Battle is more playful, the users get the opportunity to work on their own garden and they see the effects of all their actions and designs. This makes it more fun to work on their garden digitally.<sup>66</sup>

Another example is the “**Mind the Game**”, which is a project initiated by [Mindspace](#) in 2014 in Budapest, Hungary. It started by asking individuals, “How do we playfully motivate city dwellers to make their city more liveable? What will make a city more liveable, lovable, colourful, where residents form a community?” Mindspace, an organisation that works on [participatory processes and social inclusion](#), sought answers to these questions through a series of conferences and an urban game. Some of the activities/games developed in this process such as a dancing session for strangers to meet in a public space, riddles to solve in the middle of the street to know more about a district’s history or even an outdoor backgammon session (inspired by the local tradition of playing chess at spas).

---

65 <https://grendelgames.com/increasing-citizen-participation-with-serious-games/>

66 <https://grendelgames.com/increasing-citizen-participation-with-serious-games/>

In **Portugal** the Municipality of Lisbon, in cooperation with [BIP/ZIP programme](#), have created the [Fórum Urbano](#), where **all the data once collected by the Municipality in a technical and bureaucratic language has been transferred into an interactive platform**. They created a series of cards explaining all the different activities developed in time by the BIP/ZIP programme. These cards can be read as a manual for local development but can also be played for a better understanding of projects and for a better co-creation of new ones. This **Manual for Local Development** is accessible to every citizen and **adapted for an online board game** on Miro. It is a **collective game** that, in a simple, effective, and fun way, promotes the design of strategies for new local development projects. The Manual consists of 90 cards: (a) 47 Action Cards; (b) 31 Methodology Letters ;(c) 17 Goal Cards, which cover challenges of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda and the “17 Sustainable Development Goals”. All cards have the title in Braille and a QR code on the back, which allows access to content available in Audio description and Portuguese Sign Language via smartphone. The Urban Forum Game can be played in different ways, suited to each context. There are three different options to play:

- **Team Challenge Game:** This is a competition version, in which groups of 2 to 6 players will find a strategy to respond to the challenge launched by an objective card, using the action cards and the methodology cards. Each group constructs a potential intervention project and presents it to the remaining groups, who assign a score of 1, 5 or 10 points. Whoever scores the most wins.
- **Mystery Game:** The players need to place all cards face down, with the objectives facing up. In each turn, each player chooses 1 action card and 1 method card trying to build a strategy to respond to the challenge of the objective card chosen by all. If the presented strategy was accepted by the group, the player earns 1 point. Whoever scores the most wins. The game ends with the pairing of all cards.
- **Duel (2 players / 2 teams):** Methodologies and actions are divided between players. For each methodology card thrown, the next player must respond with an action card, which gives coherence to the first one (for example: if the methodology is ‘collective mapping’, the suggested action can go through a ‘guided tour’ to get to know the territory). If the strategy is accepted participants move on to the next card.<sup>67</sup>

## 3.3. Opportunities and considerations related to online platforms and gamification

### 3.3.1. General opportunities and considerations

Overall, online platforms and gamification offer several opportunities that EU institutions, central and local governments can capitalise on. On the other hand, the deployment of digital tools presents a series of challenges and considerations that need to be addressed as the various stakeholders integrate these tools in their participatory processes.

#### Opportunities

- ▶ **Increased legitimacy and usage:** As highlighted by the European Movement International, “new technologies bring opportunities that need to be grasped to

<sup>67</sup> <https://forumurbano.pt/jogar/>, <https://forumurbano.pt/jogar/modos-de-jogo>

stimulate citizens' involvement in the democratic process. Fully embedding e-tools in the European political process can increase their legitimacy and usage, which would be further supported by the active usage of these tools by the European institutions themselves."<sup>68</sup>

- ▶ **Extension to dialogue with civil society:** Integrating e-tools in existing processes can be extended to other forms of participation and consultation, for example, to implement Article 11 TEU on dialogue with civil society.<sup>69</sup>
- ▶ **Replicability and possibility to be combined with other methods:** Since the digital space is open and easy to adjust to any circumstances and needs, the replicability and multiplication of positive examples are possible to happen at all levels if there is political will and resources dedicated to this.
- ▶ **Young people as a main pillar of democracy building:** The positive trend is involving young people in public consultations and amplifying their voices throughout Europe. The examples of escape room games organised by Civic Alliance–Latvia, as well as the “Our Europe Our Future” process supported by French and German governments, showed that the young generation is interested in shaping the future of their countries and EU as a whole, and is willing to learn and to contribute to solving the problems and proposing solutions, actions and vision for the future.

## Considerations

- ▶ **Internet Access:** a persistent problem that comes with increasing digitalisation is the digital divide between those who are able to access and effectively use online tools and those who do not have access or the capabilities to make use of them. To avoid unequal digital opportunities, internet access should be made available throughout Europe, and emphasis should be placed on developing and improving people's e-skills.
- ▶ **Digital Literacy:** In addition, e-democracy tools should be equipped with a form of monitoring to counter the spread of disinformation on these platforms, which should flag up unverified information, refute false information with counterevidence and enable fact-based discussions.
- ▶ **Content curation/moderation policies in place:** Those responsible for the design, development and deployment of e-participatory tools should also be mindful of facilitating and putting in place transparent, easily understandable and inclusive content curation/moderation policies: users should clearly be informed, e.g., about when, how and why their posts will be removed and should be equally provided with access to human review (content moderation). The same goes for clarity on where and how contributions are posted, in what order, for how long, integrally or edited, etc. (content curation). There should also be clear detailed policies and examples of how the tool facilitates inclusivity, combats hate speech and disinformation and allows users control over their participatory experience. All these aspects are also a crucial element of the recently approved EU Digital Services Act (“DSA”).<sup>70</sup>
- ▶ **Privacy and Data Protection:** The risk of compromising the protection of personal data and the right to privacy of users is an overarching priority for those responsible for e-democracy tools. Safeguards must be in place for all sorts of potential abuses of data processing – including, e.g., against the unlawful use of data for profiling purposes, unlawful retention of users' personal data, unlawful inferring and

---

68 Enhancing Citizen Participation in the European Union. European Movement International, 2020. <https://europeanmovement.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Policy-Position-Citizen-Participation-2019-Final-1.pdf>

69 Ibid

70 See the Digital Services Act (DSA) Human Rights Alliance letter to the EU calling for strengthened participation in the drafting of such policies under the DSA: <https://ecnl.org/news/joint-call-human-rights-centered-approach-dsa-enforcement>



processing of users' sensitive data (e.g., political opinion, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, health conditions, etc.). In the EU, the structured involvement of the European Data Protection Supervisor in the development and implementation of e-participatory tools could ensure this.

- ▶ **Cybersecurity:** the digital space is ripe with examples of hacking, trolling and denial-of-service (DoS) attacks, to name only a few, which could seriously compromise not only the functioning, but also the credibility and trustworthiness of e-participatory tools. Investment in cybersecurity should be another priority as well as clear communication of the measures taken to safeguard the digital participatory space.
- ▶ **Protection of human dignity:** the proliferation of e-participatory tools should not erode the inalienable right of individuals to have access to meaningful participation in physical spaces, where they can express themselves and fulfil their human dignity via face-to-face interaction and socialisation. For example, e-institutions using e-participatory tools could still provide at the same time alternative or parallel opportunities for meaningful in-person exchanges, such as workshops, conferences, focus groups, etc. Where possible, hybrid forms of participation could also be explored (e.g., workshops where a cohort of stakeholders first discuss in person and then provides concerted feedback, either as a whole or as part of small groups, to the hosting institutions via online tools, following the discussion).
- ▶ **Effective follow-up:** Feedback is essential to show that the contributions of individuals and civil society have been taken into consideration. In order to strengthen the accountability of these participatory tools and improve their trustworthiness among users, each tool should have clear and easily accessible information on the use of input and provide feedback to those who contribute on how their information has been taken into account or not.<sup>71</sup>
- ▶ **Environmental impact:** Last but not least, the use of technologies and especially computation-intensive AI systems bear a significant carbon footprint related to energy and resources consumption. It is important to consider this at the phase of designing online tools in order to make sure that more energy efficient technologies and solutions are applied.<sup>72</sup>

---

71 Enhancing Citizen Participation in the European Union. European Movement International, 2020.

72 See more on the intersection on AI and climate action in ECNL's research "Where AI and climate action meet: How is the Civic Space for Environmental Defenders affected by AI" <https://ecnl.org/publications/where-ai-and-climate-action-meet>

### 3.3.2. Specific opportunities and considerations

Besides the general opportunities and considerations both online platforms and gamification have its specific opportunities and considerations, too. Below we list some of these.

## Online platforms

### Opportunities

- ▶ *Single platform for online participation, including on EU policies:* The user-friendly online platform Demokratia.fi as well as Decidim.Barcelona can serve as a model for other countries to strengthen their efforts for e-democracy, e-learning, and e-participating. Having in one place the opportunity to be informed and to provide contributions for all ongoing policies and laws on the municipal level, state level, and EU level make these portals a champion and model that can be followed. This is very relevant, especially for those countries (for example, Slovenia, Croatia etc) that have a well-developed public participation mechanism on the national level, but are not good enough at the EU level issues. People who usually provide their input for national laws and policies can find in one place all relevant information for ongoing EU policies that are subject to consultation. The new online hub that is currently being developed at the EU level can also benefit from the recommendations of the present report.
- ▶ Moreover, digital platforms can provide space for **multiple interlinked events and debates** where individuals, civil society and all other stakeholders can share and discuss their ideas. They provide opportunities for institutions at all levels to directly hear from members of society about their challenges and priorities. Such platforms can serve as **information hubs**, providing all needed information and as the **main participation space**, enabling people to contribute online, individually or collectively, with concrete ideas. The CoFoE is one recent example where many possibilities that digital platforms can provide were used. The modules used for the CoFoE could be customised and combined to tailor the overall engagement process, complementing or facilitating also the face-to-face engagement activities. Moreover, such open-source platforms (like Decidim) could be easily hosted and moderated by the servers of the institutions on local, national and EU levels.

### Considerations

- ▶ Most of the general challenges mentioned above are specifically relevant to digital platforms. Thus, issues such as access and inclusion of everyone, protecting privacy and security, as well as situations of excluding marginalised groups, especially those who lack skills, do not have resources or are not able to participate due to some handicap, are most visible when people engage through digital platforms.
- ▶ In addition, when using digital platforms for public participation, there is a need for an underlying regulation, willingness, capacity and skills of institutions to implement it properly. Sometimes, the existing infrastructure, institutions, and, in general, the already used methods of direct communication are difficult to change and adjust to digital consultations. It can be challenging for the administration in the institutions, but also for the people. Promotion, campaigning and education should be considered before starting to use such methods.

# Gamification and serious gaming

## Opportunities

- ▶ Gamification and serious games can enable increasing of **civic engagement** and participation in decision-making processes, including usually **underrepresented groups**, such as youth, working-age people, people with disabilities, etc. In fact, gamification is most suitable to attract participants of young ages.
- ▶ **It allows the visualisation of what participants want to achieve**, and allows users to experiment. In addition, educational games facilitate the **understanding of existing planning systems**, whereas co-designed games enable **questioning and reframing the underlying concepts**. It can also enable widening perspectives and **appreciation of opposing or diverging positions** (especially role-playing games). Usually, all explanations are done through the game in an **interactive** way, real time **visualisation** or feedback after each user's input.
- ▶ In public participation processes, this method is mainly used **at the local/municipal/city level in various areas**. According to available data, gamification has been **used in several contexts**, such as in welfare and energy management, urban planning, urban mobility and mapping, civic learning, emergency response, law enforcement, etc.
- ▶ Often data is entered digitally, which enables **faster data processing, less resource-demanding** data analytics, and may supply **additional, non-articulated** by participants, **insights** into participants' preferences.
- ▶ Public participation via gamification, similar to other online tools for public participation, is possible at **any time and from any location** and can collect contributions in a **structured or semi-structured format**. Similar to other methods for public participation, gamification can be adjusted to any needs. The **replicability and multiplication of positive examples are possible to happen at all levels** if there is political will and resources dedicated to this.
- ▶ On the **EU institutions' level, gamification is not yet well developed** as a tool for public participation. There are some examples but mainly for educational purposes. EU programmes such as Erasmus + and universities that already started to use gamification for educational purposes could cooperate with CSOs and interested institutions to create similar tools for public participation.

## Considerations

- ▶ One of the main criticisms of gamification as a tool for public participation is the fact that gamification does not work in all domains, and some elements might even be harmful to reaching overall objectives in civic participation. It has become a synonym for adding points and badges for interactions within an application rather than meaningful participation. Criticism includes that by adding rewards or incentives to an activity, **people might feel that the activity is not valuable enough to be done without the help of rewards**. Moreover, seeing rewards as a call for action by system operators, users might feel like their actions are being controlled, and it is expected of them to perform these activities. Thus, the pleasure is not additive and rewards can backfire.<sup>73</sup>
- ▶ The essence of games and gamification is voluntary engagement. But with the introduction of gamification to especially governmental and democratic processes, there are concerns that **the power imbalance between governments and people would create situations where engagement with gamification is not fully voluntary or autonomous**.<sup>74</sup>

73 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0740624X19302606>

74 *ibid*

- ▶ There needs to be a strategy to address cultural sensitivity and inclusivity while developing the serious games for participation. If they are not designed considering the biases, they can **reinforce existing inequalities**.
- ▶ Much research has been done to determine the **impact of games on those who play them**. There is also evidence to suggest that games can change how (young) people behave online – both in terms of how they engage and interact with others, and what information or content they find appealing, more likely to be drawn to gamified language, content and experiences. There are general concerns related to the use of online games and their impact. For example, a recent edition of the RAN Practitioners Spotlight magazine takes a look at the nature and scale of the radicalisation challenge on gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms, the use of gamified techniques, digital grooming tactics, and the opportunity to use games to tackle a range of social harms.<sup>75</sup>

## 3.4. Other tools

New methods of involving members of society in policy-making and participation such as those described above are only part of the opportunities that institutions can use in an attempt to hear the public's thoughts on their policies and activities, but also to contribute to open and transparent institutions. The digital space, as we have seen, with all its challenges, allows greater opportunities for participation, especially at the local level. However, the impression remains that the public still does not use these opportunities enough. Also, the institutions on the national or EU level do not follow all positive examples or use and combine all potential tools to maximise the effects of public participation and involve all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, it is necessary to see the other available tools and methods and to use them, combine them and put them to the function of the public so that they can be involved more regularly in the creation of policies. In this line, it is essential to involve all interested people and to adjust the tools to their needs. Sometimes, there is a need to work with students, sometimes with marginalised and vulnerable groups, sometimes with elderly, and sometimes with the general public. Also, policymakers and institutions, when creating opportunities for public participation, should consider the multiplication and replicability of a given tool and capitalize on positive experiences that come from the universities, civil society, business, etc. Below, we present several other tools that separately or combined with the above-mentioned digital tools and use of existing methods give added value and open new horizons for participatory democracy and good governance.

### 3.4.1. Facilitation tools

The EU and governments engage people and civil society in a variety of topics many of which might be complex. Therefore, it is essential to create a basic understanding and define the shared language of the specific topic/legislative initiative to ensure that individuals and CSOs can meaningfully contribute to the process. There are tools, such as cards that the EU and local institutions can use during the engagement of stakeholders through consultations, workshops, expert meetings and others. One such example is Methodkit.

<sup>75</sup> Games, gaming and gamification. Spotlight, June 2023. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/spotlight\\_on\\_gamification\\_062023\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/spotlight_on_gamification_062023_en.pdf)

# CASE STUDY: METHODKIT

MethodKit is a think tank founded in 2010 with the initial mission to “democratise creativity”. The founders felt that there was a lack of tools that help people to understand the bigger picture of a topic and allow them to have good conversations. They develop kits to define the shared language of a discipline, theme or topic. They help to spark creativity, collaborate, co-create and align mutual thoughts and ideas, and shape meetings and workshops. They currently have 51 kits that could be sorted into three main categories: 1) kits for planning and structure; 2) kits for brainstorming and news ideas; 3) kits for workshop planning. There are six common and functional ways to use the kits, including gameboards, tables, grids, post-its, worksheets, laying them out or as elements in custom-designed workshops. One of the kits is called ‘MethodKit for Society & Politics’. It helps people to discuss societal developments and how to address, change & fight for different things.<sup>76</sup> They also have kits on gender equality, service design, partnerships & ideas, trends, and artificial intelligence, among others.

Methodkit works with a variety of stakeholders, including the United Nations, national governments and cities. For example, they have a project with the UN through which they introduced girls to urban planning and engaged them in rebuilding the place where they are living in. Also, the Estonian Prime Minister used it in developing the plan for her party. In Sweden it was used by the government to plan a diplomatic training programme. The Deutsche Welle Podcasting kit has been used in 15-20 countries already. They’ve been running workshops and trainings for media professionals in Europe, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. They also made a visualisation of the Swedish legal process. They have sold kits to 150 countries so far. They are in the process of digitalising the kits and will release them soon online, too. People will be able to use them via Miro and Mentimeter, too.<sup>77</sup>

---

76 <https://methodkit.com/shop/methodkit-for-society-politics/>

77 Source: Interview and website: <https://methodkit.com/>

### 3.4.2. University programmes and living labs

#### University programmes

*“Tell me and I will forget, teach me and I will remember, involve me and I will learn.”* The quote from Benjamin Franklin highlights the importance of education and learning by doing in all spheres of life, including the area of policy-making. It is important to further promote the use of existing participation tools and gain inspiration to improve them both at the EU and national levels. One of the key opportunities for building awareness of public participation is the educational system, primarily universities, and intensive work with young people. Through education, the new generations from a younger age are strengthened to be socially active and responsible persons, who contribute to the creation of better policies for everyone.

In some of the universities in Europe, students have the opportunity to learn and research the topics of public affairs, policy-making, lobbying and advocacy at EU institutions and national levels and apply this knowledge in practice. Examples include the Maastricht University, University of Zagreb, and Leiden University, among others. University curricula can build the knowledge of the students on various topics, have their opinions and stand behind them, and make them aware of the current main issue on the EU agenda that affects the entire Union, but also each individual country and citizen. Students can enhance their capacities on the process of involvement in policy-making, as well as become aware of EU institutions and possibilities for direct engagement with them. Other universities can easily replicate such curriculum, can test it, and can share their experience with other universities and among students.



# CASE STUDY: Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia

One example of the structured engagement of young people in policy making at the EU institutions level is the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Zagreb, Croatia. Under the mentorship of their professor, Igor Vidacak, 120 talented undergraduate students studied for one semester (in 2023) through an engaging approach. Each student selected an EU initiative of personal interest, delving into problem analysis, evaluating EU competencies and past efforts in the field, and mapping stakeholders affected by or interested in the proposed policy. Finally, they all posted their unique insights and perspectives on the EU's official public consultation- Have Your Say -portal.

The idea came from previous research on the participation of civil society in Croatia. Namely, some data shows that ten years after entering the EU, there is still a low level of participation at the EU level of policy-making, including the engagement of young people. Thus, the action was taken, and in the scope of work in the university class, one of the mechanisms for public participation was tested in practice as part of learning about EU policy-making.

All 120 students had the opportunity to choose a current legislative policy initiative open for consultation and they had to prepare their own written comments based on evidence. They were asked to prepare a problem analysis, root causes, and problem tree approach, explain why the EU action is needed, and what added value it would bring. They also carried out a comparative analysis of the advantages of common action, and dig a bit more into what has been done so far in the selected area - searching for previous evaluation reports and analysis, what is still to be done, and thinking about their own perspective. Students also analysed the key stakeholders.

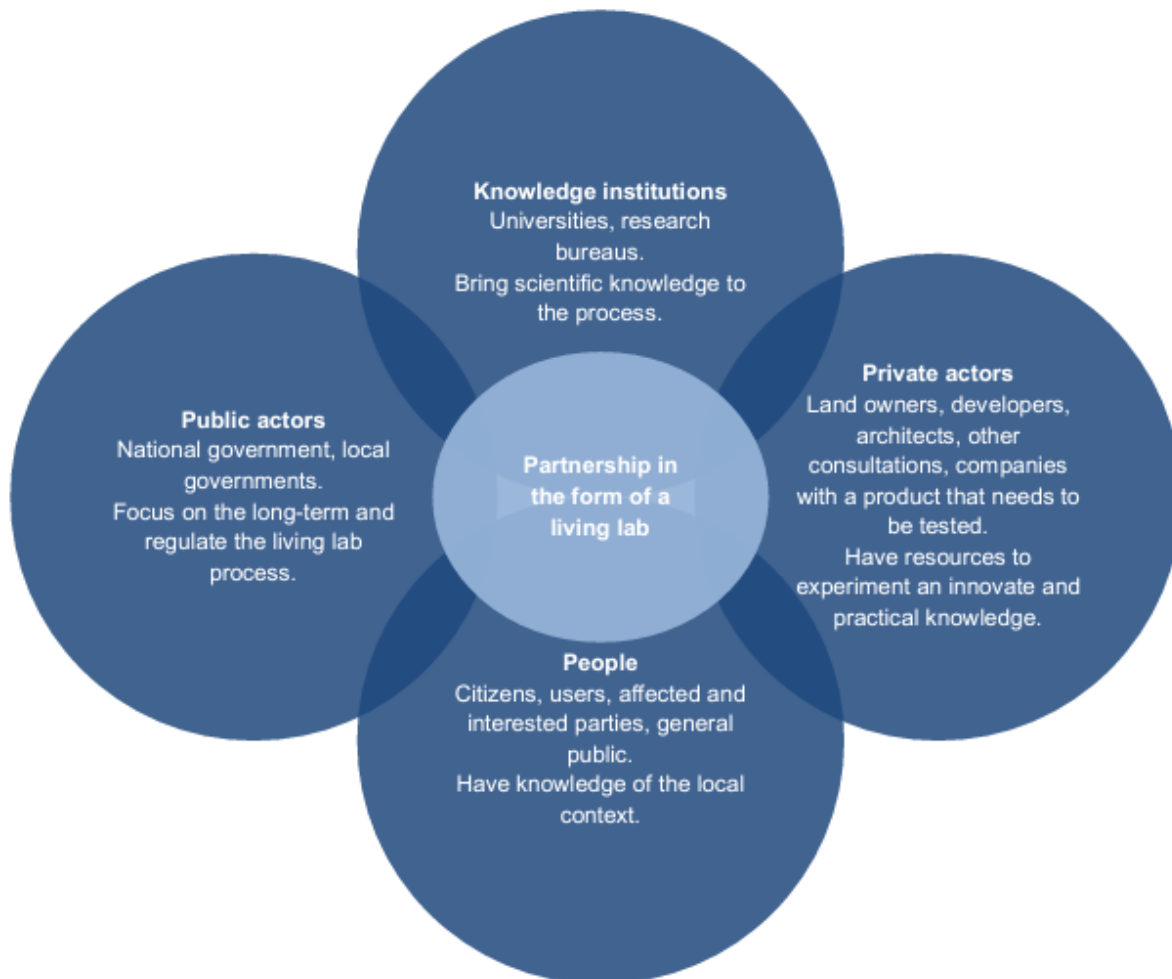
The central part of the exercise for students was to produce their own individual opinions on a specific policy open for consultation. Through this process of learning, besides the development of analytical and critical skills and thinking and in-depth studying of a particular topic, they also learned about the process of involvement in policy making at the EU institution level and practised all steps of commenting on the Have Your Say portal.

In terms of the lessons learned and impact, since the exercise was done in 2023, the first results will be seen in the near future. Still, the issue with the EU reports on consultations is that they are usually collective reports, and it is not always easy to track the influence of specific suggestions. Thus, additional analysis would be needed to see the final impact of the policies. On the individual level, it had an impact: students learned new skills, felt empowered by posting their signed contributions, and showed that they had opinions and stood behind them.

This exercise brought several interesting contributions across a wide range of policy areas and several newly empowered advocates for change. In the general absence of meaningful, critical debates on how EU policies, for example, affect the Croatian economy and society, these contributions can be considered a very positive start to the creation of a young critical mass prepared to shape the EU and country policies.

## Living labs

Living labs provide an opportunity for co-creation in a 'real world' experimental setting. According to the definition of the European Network of Living Labs, “*living labs (LLs) are open innovation ecosystems in real-life environments using iterative feedback processes throughout a lifecycle approach of an innovation to create sustainable impact. They focus on co-creation, rapid prototyping & testing and scaling-up innovations & businesses, providing (different types of) joint-value to the involved stakeholders. In this context, living labs operate as intermediaries/orchestrators among citizens, research organisations, companies and government agencies/levels*”.<sup>78</sup> All participating individuals in a living lab activity contribute to the research process based on their own knowledge, experience and skills.



Research: Living lab partnership illustration (author, based on: Ng et al. (2013) and Evans et al. (2017)).

There are several **advantages** of setting up and running living labs.

- Research participants are not merely viewed as passive study objects, but as **active collaborators**.
- Voices, needs, ideas and creative solutions of people can be included throughout the **research question formulation phase, the design phase** (i.e., co-creation of questionnaires, experimental manipulations and interventions), and the **outreach phase**.



- It is possible to implement both online and offline.
- Triangulation can help to ensure that **fundamental biases arising from the use of a single method or a single observer are overcome**. As such, the weaknesses of one research method (i.e., relatively low ecological validity in experimental research) can be compensated with the strengths of another research method (i.e., adding youth-panels in order to discuss with adolescents how experimental findings might translate to the real-world).
- As participants are included as stakeholders from the start of the research project, chances may be higher that the research project's **findings will actually be used**.
- Citizens have a **central role** who generate serious suggestions about innovations, can act as informant and testers, but can also act as contributor or co-creator.

On the other hand, it is also **important to consider** that people oftentimes lack the capacity and skills to participate in living labs. Technical skilled co-creators often dominate the co-creation process, which may frustrate people and lead to them deciding to drop out of the living lab.

There are **several examples of living labs run by universities or municipalities** in Europe and beyond, including the following:

- **UULabs at the University of Utrecht:** Research at Utrecht University does not only take place in laboratories. The campus is teeming with living labs in which researchers and students work together in an entrepreneurial way, on experiments concerning sustainable development. UULabs facilitates these living labs. The portfolio includes living labs related to creative space, climate action, circularity and biodiversity.<sup>79</sup> For example, one of the future living labs is 'Energy Savings ITS'. Utrecht University wants to be climateneutral by 2030 and energy saving is key to reach this goal. The aim of this living lab is to look into the possibilities of safely and securely saving energy in their network connections and data centres. There are five operating principles to guide the methods and thematic direction of the living labs. The living labs:
  1. are user-centered, open, real-life and transdisciplinary experiments performed by co-creating stakeholders;
  2. embody the sustainability ambitions and achievements of the University;
  3. offer a global perspective contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals;
  4. bridge theory and practice for a more profound learning experience; and
  5. influence daily routines to integrate sustainability into the University's culture.<sup>80</sup>
- **Living Labs at the City of Calgary:** The City of Calgary (Canada) aims to offer its infrastructure for companies, researchers and individuals to test and try ideas and products in a real-life environment. A Living Lab can support increased economic diversification and jobs for Calgarians. It can help entrepreneurs bring big ideas to fruition, support investment in the local economy and make the city

79 You can discover which present and future Living Labs take place on the University of Utrecht's campus by navigating the Campus Map: <https://www.uu.nl/en/organisation/uulabs/campus-as-a-living-lab/living-labs-portfolio> and reviewing the portfolio here: <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/1Gw00/15/>

80 <https://www.uu.nl/en/background/the-campus-as-a-living-laboratory>

more business friendly. For example, they have implemented projects to pilot public facing autonomous vehicle, test water sensor technology and support other innovations.<sup>81</sup>

- **Águeda Living Lab:** Águeda Living Lab is a project of the Municipality of Águeda (Portugal) that has a technological space open to the community and entrepreneurs for the meeting of ideas, knowledge, creativity and innovation. It promotes experimentation workshops, aimed mainly at younger people, where they can explore topics such as Robotics, Modeling and 3D Printing.<sup>82</sup>
- **Lorraine Fab Living Lab:** Under the patronage of the University of Lorraine and Greater Nancy, the Lorraine Fab Living Lab is a platform for the prospective evaluation of the uses and acceptability of innovation. It brings together devices to accelerate creation and collaborative innovation for tomorrow's uses. It is based on the concepts of Living Lab (integration of users into collaborative design and approaches) and FabLab (Fabrication Laboratory), an open and functional prototyping space.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.4.3. Social media platforms

One of the five minimum standards that shall apply to all consultations at the EU is outreach, i.e., ensuring adequate awareness-raising and publicity, and adapting communication channels to the needs of all target audiences.<sup>84</sup>

Social media have been increasingly used by governments to gain public opinions, distribute information, and support participation in planning practices.<sup>85</sup> There are several advantages of using social media, including low (or no) hard costs for set-up; potentially wide reach; quick/instantaneous sharing of messages; and new opportunities to listen, engage, and monitor the progress.<sup>86</sup>

Several EU institutions, including the Council of the EU, the European Commission and specific Directorates-General (DGs, e.g., DG NEAR) have their own social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, YouTube). Social media platforms can also be used to raise awareness or create opportunities for participation in decision-making. For example, the #AskThePresident is a unique opportunity to ask a question to President Ursula von der Leyen. Online questions should be submitted in video format (max 30 seconds) through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or email. Questions are selected based on the quality of the video and the relevance of the question, for a recorded Q&A session with the President.<sup>87</sup> The European Commission promotes some public consultation opportunities on Facebook and Twitter/X, too.

Active listening on social media can help to gain critical intel on a topic and harness the power of global conversation based on sifting through millions of social media data points in seconds built on intuitive workflows and proprietary AI-driven technology.<sup>88</sup> On

81 <https://www.calgary.ca/major-projects/smart-city/living-labs.html>

82 <https://all.cm-agueada.pt/v2/>

83 <https://lf2l.fr/concept/>

84 Better Regulation Guidelines.

85 Yanliu Lin and Stijn Kant: Using Social Media for Citizen Participation: Contexts, Empowerment, and Inclusion. 2021, MDPI. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/12/6635>

86 <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/electronic-advocacy/main#.UmgTcBYtfao>

87 [https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/get-involved/social-media-connect-european-commission\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/get-involved/social-media-connect-european-commission_en), the terms and conditions are described here: [https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/social\\_media\\_initiatives\\_terms\\_and\\_conditions\\_en.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-03/social_media_initiatives_terms_and_conditions_en.pdf)

88 One example of such a platform is Sproutsocial: <https://sproutsocial.com/features/social-media-listening/>

the other hand, it also claims that it allows the analysis of sentiment and extraction of actionable insight from conversations, albeit this raises doubts from a sound scientific point of view. There are also civic engagement platforms powered by AI that allows people to ask open-ended questions and algorithms analyse the answers.<sup>89</sup>

It would be important to have further debates related to the use of such technologies by the institutions of the EU and its Member States to make sure that they can make public participation more efficient but, at the same time, they respect the rights to data protection and privacy and do not lead to misleading results. Also, institutions can invest more into promoting transparency and accountability by publishing more information about participation opportunities (e.g., ongoing public consultations, and selection of expert committees) through social media and other platforms.

### **3.4.4. Hybrid forms of participation**

While participation has been increasingly moving to the online space, human interaction and in-person consultation methods remain to be crucial. Hybrid forms of participation can be an effective means to ensure that a diverse group and opinions are considered during policy-making processes.

For example, the EU used hybrid forms of participation during the series of three follow-up seminars to the 2022 Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The first half of the seminars could be attended both in person and online. There were group discussions in the afternoon on what measures the EU institutions and the Member States should take to further ensure the inclusion and empowerment of the civil society in democratic decision-making and dialogue. Each group was asked to upload their recommendations in real time on Slido<sup>90</sup> and participants had a chance to vote on the recommendations that they found most relevant. The recommendations should feed into the final report of the EU.<sup>91</sup> While the first half of the seminar was available both online and offline, only in-person participants could feed into the group and plenary discussions in the afternoon, even though Slido would have allowed online participants to also vote. We encourage the EU institutions and Member States to use hybrid forms of participation in the future, too.

---

89 One such example is Insights: <https://www.insights.us/civic-engagement>

90 Slido is an easy-to-use Q&A and polling platform for meetings and events, both in-person and virtual. <https://www.slido.com/>

91 <https://www.charter-report-on-civic-space.eu/>

# IV. WHAT ARE THE EXISTING GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGING CSOS?

There are several methods through which people and organisations can participate in shaping EU policies. The key EU participation instruments, including the European Citizens' Initiative, public consultations, citizens' dialogues, European Citizens' consultations, petitions to the European Parliament, European Parliament elections and the European Ombudsman, are analysed in further detail in the study 'Under Construction'.<sup>92</sup> At the national level CSOs can also engage in shaping the national position through monthly meetings with civil society, participation at the meetings of councils and special parliamentary committees, among others. There are many examples of how civil society can work together and mobilise for a common vision. Therefore, it is important that both the EU and national institutions are open to the power of the collective voice of civil society. In the below section we highlight some good practices and gaps that we identified during the desktop research, interviews and meetings with CSOs.

## Engagement in EU policy-making with EU institutions

Members of society are offered various ways to participate in EU politics. However, CSOs raised the following concerns related to the existing structures and practices:

- ▶ **Need for a visible, coherent, comprehensive, and effective formalised infrastructure for civil dialogue and targeted engagement of CSOs.** As highlighted in the study 'Under Construction', so far, no new instrument or reform has led to the development of a visible, coherent, comprehensive, and effective participation infrastructure at the EU. Such a shift to a more formalised and structured EU civil dialogue framework has not occurred to date, despite repeated calls from civil society and European Parliament resolutions. The lack of an overarching policy framework setting a common basic approach for the implementation of Article 11 TEU is seen by CSOs as one major gap affecting the coherence, transparency, inclusiveness, and regularity of civil dialogue between CSOs and EU policymakers.<sup>93</sup> CSOs have been calling upon the EU institutions and Member States to elaborate and agree on a common European Civil Society Strategy. The European Commission has made efforts to improve civil dialogue with CSOs, but there are inconsistencies across different departments. Enhancing consistency and effectiveness in civil dialogue is crucial for fostering inclusivity and addressing social challenges.<sup>94</sup> For example, it would be important to provide space for input from CSOs, including youth groups and beneficiaries to youth programmes such as Erasmus+ to make sure that these programmes are improved and are more beneficiary oriented.<sup>95</sup> Civil Society Europe (CSE) launched a Working Group (WG) in February 2023 dedicated to supporting civil society and citizens' participation in EU democracy, and to follow up on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and its final proposals. This WG—composed of independent European networks of CSOs specialised in

92 [https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2022/Study\\_Under\\_construction.pdf](https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2022/Study_Under_construction.pdf)

93 Linda Ravo, CSF/CSE paper on "Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue" April 2021. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

94 Ibid and the Study "Under construction": <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

95 Source: Interview

different sectors, including ECNL—has written the [Civil Society State of the Union report](#) addressed to EU institutions and EU Member States. The report comprises of CSOs' vision and key recommendations for a more democratic and socially and environmentally just EU.<sup>96</sup> Over the past year, the EU institutions have also worked towards promoting participation. In her State of the Union address on 14 September 2022, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, announced the [Defence of Democracy Package](#). As part of the package the European Commission aims to propose measures for helping Member States to frame the promotion of civic engagement in connection with the protection of democracies and respect for fundamental rights. It aims to ensure a common level of protection and engagement with these actors in our democracies across the Union. However, such measures should not be undermined by efforts to regulate interest representation and limit foreign funding influence. This could have a chilling effect also on countries outside of the EU.<sup>97</sup>

- ▶ **Engagement at early stages of policy-making.** Civil society should be able to participate from an early stage of the policy-making process. This was reinforced in the Better Regulation Guidelines, according to which the lead DG must start preparing a consultation strategy in the early stages of planning a policy initiative. Still, some CSOs raised concerns related to limited outreach and participation, for example in the case of the EU supranational risk assessment context and made some suggestions on how this could be improved in the future. Also, oftentimes when the consultation is launched, the Commission already has a quite elaborate idea, and it organises consultations to test it. Hence, it might be already too late to significantly change something. This is why investing in co-creation processes would be so important. We have also heard that some organisations found it a bit difficult to contribute to a call for evidence or public consultation because the questions were complicated and not tailor made for civil society. One solution could be to discuss and draft the questions with a representative from the sector to make sure that it can be completed by many organisations. It is also helpful to have more open questions during consultations.<sup>98</sup>
- ▶ **Deliberativeness.** Although deliberation is increasingly becoming part of the political scene, only a handful of EU participation instruments are truly deliberative, as highlighted in the study 'Under Construction'. Most participation instruments are not well equipped for enabling and fostering transnational debates, but new ways to facilitate more transnational perspectives are developing.
- ▶ **Gaps in inclusiveness and reaching underrepresented groups.** For maximum usefulness and inclusivity, the Better Regulation Guidelines highlight the importance to consult as widely as possible, giving all interested parties the opportunity to contribute to the timely evaluation or development of effective policies. All relevant stakeholders should have a reasonable period, in which to make informed and effective contributions. Subsequently, the respondents should receive feedback on how their contributions have been used.<sup>99</sup> However, further guidance and standards from the European Commission would be needed on how to organise transparent, adequate, and inclusive consultations. Targeted outreach should be conducted to engage underrepresented communities, such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ organisations, disability advocacy groups, and women's organisations. This can involve targeted communication and engagement efforts to ensure that CSOs from various sectors, regions, and communities are aware of consultation processes, expert group opportunities, and other forms of engagement. Capacity

---

96 <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSE-State-of-the-Union-DIGITAL-accessible-in-progress.pdf>

97 To address our concerns, ECNL, together with Good Lobby submitted a contribution to the questionnaire as part of the consultation process for the Defence of Democracy package. <https://ecnl.org/news/defending-democracy-clarity>

98 Source: Interview

99 Better Regulation Guidelines

building initiatives can empower underrepresented groups to participate effectively. Partnerships with community organisations and civil society networks with expertise in specific communities can enhance inclusivity. Additionally, innovative and digital tools, like online platforms, can facilitate broader access and convenience for diverse stakeholders. Diverse representation in expert groups and advisory panels can be achieved by actively seeking CSOs that represent different perspectives, sectors, and demographics. When establishing multi-stakeholder platforms, the European Commission can aim for balanced representation by ensuring that CSOs from diverse backgrounds are included. This can involve setting clear criteria for membership, actively seeking nominations from underrepresented groups, and periodically reviewing the composition to address any imbalances.<sup>100</sup>

- ▶ **Lack of sufficient feedback on civil society input and impact of participation.** According to the Better Regulation Guidelines, within eight weeks of the closure of the public consultation, it is mandatory to publish on the consultation website a **short factual summary** of the key issues raised in the public consultation. Also, beyond the factual summary, stakeholders should receive adequate and thorough feedback through a **synopsis report**, prepared at the end of the consultation activities. According to the Guide, providing effective feedback will contribute to the overall transparency of the Commission’s policy-making. Still, despite the provisions in the Guidelines, the EU reports on consultations are usually collective reports, and it is not always easy to track the influence and impact of specific contributions and suggestions. CSOs have been raising concerns related to receiving sufficient feedback on how their contributions have been taken into account by the EU institutions.<sup>101</sup>
- ▶ **Need for more visibility and better understanding of the use of the various participation methods.** According to the study ‘Under construction’, the visibility for most participation instruments is still very low and there is no coherent communication strategy about these instruments and their use. So far there has been no single information hub to gain insights into the scope of participation opportunities and how participation works. When looking at the entire set of available instruments, they are not presented collectively as a toolbox of different options from which members of society can choose depending on the issue they want to raise. People are often confused about how the instruments work in practice and how to choose which of the instruments is the right one for them and for their purpose.<sup>102</sup>

**There are several good examples that the EU institutions can build upon and can serve as an inspiration to improve participation practices across the EU.**

- ▶ **EU-Civil Society roundtables.** It is important to organise targeted consultation meetings or roundtables for civil society, sometimes also without industry participation. One good example is the **roundtable for civil society related to the implementation of the Digital Services Act**. The Roundtable Series aim to establish a crucial ongoing space for civil society to actively work with EU institutions, governments, and experts on issues related to fundamental rights and democratic, transparent governance. For example, the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) Europe organised a Roundtable on the EU Digital Services Act, Fundamental Rights, and Civic Space, bringing together an array of experts to discuss the best ways to play an effective role in the implementation of the Digital Services Act in a

---

100 CSF/CSE paper on “Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue”, page 29. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

101 Source: Interview

102 CSF/CSE paper on “Towards an open, transparent and structured EU civil dialogue” <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf> and the Study “Under construction” <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

manner that best protects democracy and human rights.<sup>103</sup> Through such exchanges CDT Europe encourages multi-stakeholder collaboration to find innovative solutions to some of the most pressing human rights challenges in the digital age.

- ▶ **Permanent platforms between DGs and partner CSOs.** Another way to consult and seek input from CSOs on a regular basis is to establish permanent platforms between the various DGs and their partner CSOs. One good example is the **Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group** under the Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO). The purpose of the group is to discuss with civil society the implementation of funds from the DG for humanitarian aid, both on a technical and political level. The Humanitarian Partnership defines the contractual relationship – regulations and responsibilities – between the DG ECHO and humanitarian organisations. The Humanitarian Partnership Watch Group represents the views of all ECHO’s NGO partners in the monitoring, review, and consultation of all matters relating to the Humanitarian Partnership. It works towards a common interpretation and consistent application of the HP. Composed of a smaller number of members elected by the Watch Group, the HP Task Force is the “executive” of the HP Watch Group. The HP Watch Group has been renewed in 2022. As well as the technical aspects of the HP WG, it is necessary to underline the importance of the Watch Group as a platform for cooperation, exchange of information and reflection. This dynamic of cooperation solidifies the strength of the Group, but above all, improves the level of professionalism of NGOs, allowing them to retain and protect their unique status.<sup>104</sup> There is also a **Multi-Stakeholder Group for the DEAR Programme** at DG INTPA, too. It consists of members from civil society organisations, youth groups, local authorities, scholars, international networks, agencies and ministries of EU member states.<sup>105</sup>
- ▶ **Expert groups.** CSOs can actively engage in policy-making through expert groups established at the at level of the European Commission. One good example mentioned during the interviews by one of the CSOs is the **Expert Group on Social Economy and Social Enterprises (GECES)**.<sup>106</sup> The GECES group was established by the DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs in 2011 to provide expertise and advice on matters related to the social economy and social enterprises. Currently, the GECES II is in its second mandate, 2018–2024, and held ten meetings so far. The members of the group are experts in the field of social economy and social enterprises, and offered insights and recommendations to the European Commission on various topics, such as legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, and best practices. They also provided advice on the formulation and implementation of policies that promote the growth and sustainability of social enterprises, fostering an enabling environment for their activities. According to the CSO members of the GECES, meetings provide space for discussion about ongoing files and policy work. Involvement in such groups is based on the application process, and it targets experts and organisations engaged in the specific field. Thus, involvement through the expert groups is narrower participation than with the general public, but in some cases, very efficient. It is more targeted and hands-on engagement with concrete results of input provided.<sup>107</sup>

---

103 <https://cdt.org/insights/cdt-europe-hosts-second-civil-society-roundtable-to-discuss-digital-services-act-democracy-human-rights/>

104 <https://voicceu.org/humanitarian-partnership-watch-group>

105 [https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/news/joining-forces-dear-multi-stakeholder-group\\_en](https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/news/joining-forces-dear-multi-stakeholder-group_en)

106 [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises/expert-groups\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises/expert-groups_en)

107 Source: Interview

- ▶ **Citizens' panels.** In its follow-up Communication to CoFoE, the European Commission expressed its intention to table proposals on “Organising smaller targeted deliberative or co-creation/co-design processes, run on a smaller scale, to address specific policy issues more cost-effectively and in a timelier way.” So far, the launch of **citizens panels on food waste, learning mobility and virtual worlds** is a welcome first step, but addresses a very limited part of the CoFoE conclusions. The Conference conclusions called for stronger involvement of organised civil society (as well as social partners) in the EU decision-making process, so as to “utilise the link between decision-makers and citizens which civil society organisations constitute.” They also called for “proper civil and social dialogue mechanisms and processes at every step of EU decision-making, from impact assessment to policy design and implementation.”
- ▶ **Engagement with the EU Parliament and Council of the EU.** While civil society can consult with the Commission on various issues, the processes involving the European Parliament, Council and the so-called “trilogue” negotiations<sup>108</sup> are not as open to civil society as to other stakeholders, such as industries that may have better access to government and political party representatives. It is not easily given to have meetings and provide input to co-create policies. One needs to have the capacity and direct access to be able to input to the processes that often happen behind closed doors. Still, there are some good examples and structures for cooperation with the Parliament, including [the European Parliament's Intergroup on Traditional Minorities, National Communities, and Languages](#). The Intergroup engages with indigenous communities to ensure their perspectives are considered in relevant policies. It conducts consultations and meetings with indigenous representatives to address their unique challenges and protect their rights.<sup>109</sup> At the level of the Council, it would be important that the Working Parties<sup>110</sup> systematically invite CSOs to their sessions, including to those working on legislation. One good practice example is the Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM) that has included CSOs into the agenda of some of its sessions and expanded the formal meeting to consult them. However, there are limited-if any-such practices among other Working Parties so this is an area where participation should be improved in the future.

## Engagement in EU policy-making at the national level

It is a good practice for state institutions to engage in regular dialogue with CSOs related to issues of public interest, including the national position on EU policies. This may take place both at the level of Government and Parliament and can be formalised by signing a declaration or memorandum of understanding between the parties. We have seen, however, that even countries that have a well-developed public participation mechanism on a national level do not have such on EU level issues. We present below some good examples that can serve as an inspiration on how to promote CSO engagement in EU policy-making at the national level.

- ▶ **Engagement with the Government.** For example, in Latvia the government and Parliament are generally open, and it is easy for CSOs to participate in decision-making processes. The framework for cooperation and civil dialogue is enshrined in

108 Trialogues are inter-institutional negotiations between the Commission, Parliament and Council that aim to reach an agreement before the formal legislative procedure is finalised. For more information on how they work in practice, see: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/olp/en/interinstitutional-negotiations>

109 [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/nl/photoset/intergroup-for-traditional-minorities-national-communities-and-languages-meeting\\_20221006\\_EP-137858A\\_AR2\\_0037](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/nl/photoset/intergroup-for-traditional-minorities-national-communities-and-languages-meeting_20221006_EP-137858A_AR2_0037)

110 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/preparatory-bodies/?filters=2025>



the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Cabinet of Ministers and CSOs in 2005. It ensures the development and involvement of civil society in decision making processes at all levels and stages of public administration. CSOs and highest-level civil servants organise monthly meetings as well as regular meetings with the Prime Minister. The Council is the main cooperation platform between the government and CSOs in Latvia. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) regularly coordinates with CSOs and shares information on national positions related to EU policies. Civic Alliance – Latvia, which is the largest umbrella organisation that advocates for CSO interests, can spread it to its 140 members and take part in the process. This way, they can engage early in the process and also ask line ministries to draft national positions. MoFA organises monthly meetings and invites cooperation partners (Civic Alliance – Latvia is one of the 6) where they discuss the national position towards the EU Parliament and other institutions.

- ▶ **Engagement with the Parliament.** In Latvia, a Special declaration between CSOs and the Parliament ensures that there is a favourable environment for CSO development and that CSOs are considered as equal partners and have access to information. For example, when they draft the national position to the European Council, they discuss it at the special Parliamentary Commission where CSOs can also take part and ask to add their position. There have been cases when such CSO input led to the change of the national position– for example, in case of the [European Values Instrument](#) a few years ago, where civil society advocated that MoFa asks for more commitment. Since the pandemic CSOs, including diaspora and regional organisations, are even more active in the Parliamentary committees due to the possibility to access the meetings online.<sup>111</sup>
- ▶ **Financial assistance to foster engagement.** The **Malta Civil Society Fund**, established in 2020 by the Malta Council for the Volunteer Sector in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Employment, aims to support CSOs in engaging in EU decision-making and educating their members on relevant EU matters. The Fund provides financial assistance to foster the development and enhancement of national CSOs within European coalitions, networks, and platforms. It also promotes the sharing of best practices, knowledge, and information among CSOs and offers training and capacity building activities on EU policies.<sup>112</sup>

The above examples demonstrate that some practices are already there, however, they are still a bit fragmented. This can also serve as an inspiration for countries that are part of EU's Enlargement package.

---

111 Source: Interview, [https://nvo.lv/uploads/public\\_participation\\_in\\_the\\_decision\\_making\\_2021\\_cal.pdf](https://nvo.lv/uploads/public_participation_in_the_decision_making_2021_cal.pdf) and <https://nvo.lv/lv/portfelis/petijumi>

112 CSF/CSE paper on "Towards an open, transparent, and structured EU civil dialogue" Page 32. <https://civic-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Civil-Dialogue-Study.pdf>

# V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Existence of relevant legislation for public participation at the EU level.** Public participation in policy-making at the level of the European Union is indisputably highlighted in the basic documents, including the Treaty of Lisbon, especially emphasised by Articles 10 and 11. In addition, there are a number of documents that regulate in detail the entire process of public participation in policy-making, such as the Better Regulation Guidelines. The foreseen measures are gradually applied in practice and create a series of opportunities and positive examples of public involvement in policy-making but there is more to be done. The institutions of the European Union, together or individually, apply different methods of involving the public and organised civil society, which, in addition to traditional methods, also include new tools adjusted to the developments and changes brought by the digital era.

**Need for better implementation and proactive engagement to improve public participation processes.** Despite the efforts to follow the recommendations of the Better Regulation Guidelines or positive examples from the practice, such as the Have Your Say or CoFoE portals, there is still space for the improvement of the public participation processes. There is a need for greater engagement of the institutions to ensure a process that is meaningful and available to all, to strengthen the awareness of participants and to emphasize the importance of the participation of the public and the civil sector for the institutions. The EU institutions still do not fully apply the recommendations from the Better Regulation Guidelines, especially the rules related to stakeholders and giving feedback. Hence, in order to consider a process of public participation as successful, it is necessary to respect and consistently apply the key steps, including: adequate planning of the process, clear definition of the need for consultation, clear determination of the stakeholders and a plan for their involvement, providing appropriate and direct feedback on each of the suggestions, impact assessment, etc.

**Limited consultations of EU policies on the level of Member States.** In some of the EU Member States, there is a well-developed national system for public participation in which members of society can influence the design of national policies. However, the same or similar approach is absent or very limited in the national-level consultation processes for policies created by the European Union institutions.

**Enabling environment is a precondition for civil society to be able to contribute to meaningful participation.** The context for civil society development and the actions (policies and practices) taken for the creation of the enabling environment for CSOs is the precondition for the inclusion of organised civil society. In this direction, it is important to have a: (i) favourable political, cultural, and socio-economic; (ii) respect of fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly; (iii) a supportive framework for CSOs' financial viability and sustainability, and (iv) the existence of policies and structures that enable dialogue between CSOs and public authorities.

**Novel methods are needed for increased public participation.** Regarding the new methods that are applied, it is evident that digital technologies significantly influence the ways of public participation and, in principle, contributes to greater public activity. If set up carefully and considering the needs of various groups, digital platforms for public participation, gamification, and other similar methods offer a range of benefits that institutions and people must capitalise on (i.e. reaching a wider population, accessibility

from different locations, real-time interaction, more cost-effective, etc.). At the same time, all the potential challenges must be considered, too. It is especially important to overcome weaknesses that prevent or make it difficult for marginalised, vulnerable and less included groups to participate (internet access, digital literacy including tools to counter disinformation content curation and moderation policies in place, privacy and data protection, cybersecurity, protection of human dignity, etc.). New technologies are more applicable and applied at the local level, including urban areas and larger cities, which use open-source platforms and create diverse opportunities for public participation. The EU and national institutions, with certain exceptions, are still in the process of adjusting to the need for greater use of digital tools for public participation. There is still a lack of a centralised approach at the EU institutions level that would provide in one place all relevant information and serve as a main space for consultation. However, there are ongoing efforts in this direction.

### **Questions to consider when introducing new participation methods or advancing existing ones at the EU and its Member States:**

- What is the gap in the existing mechanisms that a new method would be able to fill (visibility, accessibility, representativeness, deliberativeness, transnationality, impact)?
- What is the main purpose of the participation method? Specific methods serve different purposes (information sourcing, data generation, co-design etc.)
- What is the context of decision making, including the number and profile of participants, anticipated participation level, participation phase?
- What is the desired information flow? One-way from the institutions to people, one way from people to institutions (information sourcing games, educational games) or exchange between both parties (deliberative games)?
- Does it enable more inclusion of marginalised groups?

## Recommendations

Shaping a positive future for public participation requires collective action, clear policies, greater awareness and more dialogue on this topic. To facilitate this, we put forward a set of recommendations to the various stakeholders, including the EU institutions, national and local governments, civil society organisations, companies and academia.

### **EU institutions:**

- ▶ Create an overarching policy framework setting a common basic approach for the implementation of Article 11 TEU. Current supporting documents such as Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolkit need to be used by all institutions and implemented properly for every single regulation or policy proposed. Also, current horizontal mechanisms for consultations, such as the Have Your Say Portal, need to be further promoted and easily available for all.
- ▶ Provide more guidance on how to ensure inclusive participation. This could include quotas or other measures for inclusive participant selection, training on how to use these procedures and investing in accessibility for gender and social inclusion.

- ▶ Invest more into the systematic co-creation of decision-making processes with civil society actors and create more permanent platforms that allow for co-creation. For example, the Commission and specifically DGs working on connected topics could organise regular civic-space-thematic roundtables with CSOs, potentially mediated by the Fundamental Rights Agency. The series of three follow up seminars to the 2022 Report on the Application of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights organised by the European Commission in collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee was a good starting point to further develop a dialogue structure.
- ▶ Discuss beforehand and prepare the final questions of the call for evidence or public consultation with a representative from the sector, to ensure that such questions can be fully understood and replied to by as many relevant stakeholder as possible. It is also helpful to have more open questions during consultations.
- ▶ At the level of the Council, systematically invite CSOs to the sessions of the Working Parties, including to those working on legislation, and integrate civil society voices during the decision-making process.
- ▶ Expand the use of online tools from awareness raising to facilitate deliberation and dialogue, such as gamification and serious gaming. One can rely on existing games that are frequently used, especially by youth.
- ▶ Use hybrid forms of participation to facilitate input from people both in person and online.
- ▶ Provide a dedicated space for civil society to contribute by registering as organisations on any future website similar to the Digital Platform of the CoFoE. The platforms should guarantee accessibility to all, diversity of contributions, and meaningful analysis and inclusion of the contributions into the debate.
- ▶ Provide different means (with or without registration) to use the online platforms managed by EU institutions, depending on the purpose of using the service. For example, one could browse the content of the service and participate in discussions and surveys of legislative initiatives without registration.
- ▶ Provide more feedback on how civil society's comments have been taken into consideration. Make better use of data visualisation.
- ▶ Invest more into promoting transparency and accountability by publishing more information about participation opportunities (e.g., ongoing public consultations, selection of expert committees) through social media and other platforms.



## State institutions:

- ▶ Establish permanent structures and organise regular dialogue– e.g., monthly meetings– with CSOs to share information and discuss the national position towards the EU Parliament and other institutions.
- ▶ Support CSOs in engaging in EU decision-making and educating their members on relevant EU matters. There is a need for financial assistance to foster the development and enhancement of national CSOs within European coalitions, networks, and platforms.
- ▶ Consider creating one single platform and central online hub that promotes participation and allows networking opportunities on both national and EU policies.
- ▶ Use online tools to raise awareness and facilitate deliberation and dialogue, such as digital platforms or gamification and serious gaming. Existing good examples need to be promoted and regularly used for policy making on the national level, including for issues related to EU policies. One can rely on existing games that are frequently used, especially by youth.
- ▶ Invest more into promoting transparency and accountability by publishing more information about participation opportunities (e.g., ongoing public consultations, selection of expert committees) through social media and other platforms.

## Civil society organisations:

- ▶ Advocate for more inclusive participation of individuals and civil society both at the EU, national and local level.
- ▶ Create space/platform for sharing best practices, knowledge, and information among CSOs and offer training and capacity building activities on EU policies.
- ▶ Promote the use of digital technology and novel tools and methods for community engagement and involvement in decision making,

## Companies:

- ▶ Develop open-source tools to facilitate civil society participation in decision-making, including online platforms, games data visualisation tools and others.
- ▶ Offer services free of charge or for a reduced fee for civil society organisations.

## Academia:

- ▶ Introduce further opportunities for co-creation (such as living labs) and promote public participation among youth through awareness raising and practical engagement in EU-related policy-making processes.



**European Center for Not-for-Profit Law  
Stichting**

5 Riviervismarkt, 2513 AM  
The Hague, Netherlands

[www.ecnl.org](http://www.ecnl.org)

[twitter.com/enablingNGOlaw](https://twitter.com/enablingNGOlaw)

