



Comparative report on Audience Needs in Ten European Countries

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, conducted as part of the Horizon Europe-funded MeDeMAP project [WP.5-Demand Side], explores the relationship between media and democracy across ten European countries: Italy, Germany, Austria, France, Ireland, Slovenia, Portugal, Estonia, Czech Republic, and Poland. It examines how citizens perceive and experience democratic processes and media in their daily lives, focusing on participation, trust, representation, and the impact of digital technologies.

The research adopted a cross-national qualitative approach, combining interviews and focus groups with diverse citizen groups in each country. Data were analysed by the IULM team using Grounded Theory principles, allowing insights to emerge directly from participants' experiences while maintaining interpretative coherence across contexts. The study highlights both recurring patterns and country-specific variations, offering a nuanced understanding of shared challenges and unique circumstances.

Findings reveal a complex picture of citizen engagement with democracy. While commitment to democratic ideals is widespread, experiences and expectations vary significantly. Many participants see democracy as ensuring freedom and equality, while others describe it as unresponsive or elitist. Trust in institutions appears fragile, yet local initiatives and transparent governance can restore confidence when citizens are offered tangible opportunities for participation.

Political engagement is influenced by both structural and perceptual barriers—apathy, limited access to resources, bureaucracy, and media manipulation among them. Digital technologies, especially social media, illustrate this duality: they can foster participation but also amplify misinformation, polarization, and echo chambers. Participants stressed the need to balance civic empowerment with safeguards for informed deliberation.

Media, both traditional and digital, play a central role in these dynamics. Mainstream outlets are often distrusted for perceived bias and sensationalism, while social media enables direct participation but requires stronger regulation and accountability to ensure pluralistic discourse. Participants consistently called for media literacy and institutional transparency to ensure media strengthen, rather than erode, democratic practices.

These findings have clear implications for policymakers at national and European levels. Promoting media literacy, supporting inclusive participation, and ensuring transparency and accountability in both politics and media are crucial to rebuilding trust. Responsible regulation of digital platforms and participatory civic initiatives can enhance citizen involvement. This synthesis provides actionable insights for fostering more inclusive and resilient democratic systems across Europe.

Note:

In this report, the analysis has been developed to provide a coherent overview across countries, laying the groundwork for further enrichment through more detailed national data analyses by the research teams involved.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Europe, the relationship between media and democracy has become a central focus of both scholarly inquiry and political debate. While historically constitutive of democratic life, this relationship is today characterized by fragility and contestation. Democratic institutions face challenges such as citizen disaffection, declining electoral participation, and growing distrust in representative mechanisms, while the media landscape is undergoing rapid transformation through digitalisation, platformisation, and the destabilization of legacy journalism. These parallel dynamics complicate the assumption that access to reliable information, deliberative debate, and meaningful participation is guaranteed, raising urgent questions about the capacity of contemporary democracies to sustain legitimacy, responsiveness, and inclusiveness.

What is at stake is not merely the procedural functioning of political institutions, but the everyday experience of democracy as lived by citizens. The legitimacy of democratic regimes is produced and reproduced not only through constitutional frameworks and formal procedures but also through citizens' perceptions, expectations, and practices. To understand the current state of democracy in Europe, it is therefore essential to move beyond institutional analysis and attend to the experiential and discursive dimensions through which democracy is understood and enacted.

This study contributes to this endeavour by systematically examining the interdependencies between media and democracy, with a particular focus on citizens' perspectives across diverse European contexts. The research adopts a multidimensional approach, integrating institutional, structural, and individual levels of analysis, and recognizing that the vitality of democracy depends on both systemic conditions and subjective experiences. In particular, it investigates how citizens conceptualize democracy, how they perceive the media's role in supporting democratic processes, and how they engage with participatory opportunities in everyday life.

The study pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it examines citizens' conceptions of democracy, understood both as normative ideals and lived realities, identifying aspirations as well as disillusionment. Second, it investigates citizens' perceptions of media's contribution to democratic processes, evaluating their performance, legitimacy, and capacity to function as watchdogs, forums for deliberation, and platforms for engagement. Third, it explores citizens' repertoires of political and civic participation, encompassing both conventional forms (e.g., voting) and unconventional practices (e.g., protest, volunteering, digital activism), with attention to structural, cultural, and media factors that facilitate or inhibit involvement. Collectively, these objectives illuminate the ambivalences, contradictions, and tensions that characterize the media–democracy nexus, offering a deeper perspective on how democratic legitimacy is understood and contested across Europe.

The empirical design of the study was explicitly oriented toward capturing the subjective and experiential dimensions of these processes. Rather than relying on predefined categories or survey instruments, qualitative methods were employed to elicit the complexity of citizens' discourses, including doubts, conflicts, and affective investments. Focus groups generated collective deliberation and negotiation of meaning, while semi-structured interviews allowed in-depth exploration of individual experiences and reflexive accounts of democratic engagement.

It is important to note that the study does not aim to measure citizens' behaviours or levels of participation per se. Instead, it focuses on their signifying practices — that is, how individuals make sense of democracy and the media through language, interpretation, and everyday meaning-making. This discursive orientation defines both the scope and the limits of the project, positioning it as an

inquiry into the symbolic and experiential dimensions of democratic life rather than its behavioural manifestations. Within this framework, the research was guided by four overarching questions designed to explore how citizens construct, articulate, and negotiate meanings around democracy and the media:

- ✚ **RQ1:** What is people's idea of democracy? (where it applies).
- ✚ **RQ2:** What is the connection between democracy and media? (Have media a role in democracy?)
- ✚ **RQ3:** How do people perceive their (political) participation in democracy?
- ✚ **RQ4:** What roles do the media play in people's democratic (participatory) practices?

Collectively, these questions form a coherent analytical trajectory that moves from citizens' conceptualizations of democracy, through their evaluations of media as democratic institutions, to their own understandings of participation and agency. Together, they explore how individuals articulate ideals and frustrations around democracy, how they attribute responsibility and legitimacy to media systems, and how they position themselves as political and civic actors within mediated environments. By addressing them, the study seeks to illuminate the meanings through which democratic legitimacy is constructed, negotiated, and contested across European contexts.

The structure of the report follows the logic of the research process. It begins by outlining the theoretical and conceptual foundations, clarifying key notions such as democracy, participation, and media. It then turns to the methodological design, describing sampling strategies, country profiles, data collection tools, analytical procedures, and methodological reflections. The empirical analysis is presented next, organized around the guiding research questions and attentive both to cross-national patterns and to country-specific particularities. Building on these findings, the report develops an interpretative synthesis that identifies recurrent tensions, discursive typologies, and their implications for democratic practice. The concluding chapter reflects on the distance between democratic ideals and lived realities, summarizing the main insights and advancing recommendations to enhance civic engagement and democratic quality in Europe.

Finally, a set of detailed appendices ensures transparency and methodological rigor, offering interview and focus group guides, coding schemes and the ethical protocol. Taken together, these components provide both a rich empirical account of citizens' perspectives and a critical framework for debating the evolving relationship between media and democracy in Europe.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the nexus between media and democracy requires an interdisciplinary theoretical grounding that spans political science, sociology, and media studies. Democracy, as both an institutional system and a lived practice, is inseparable from the infrastructures of communication that mediate citizens' voices, shape public opinion, and facilitate participation.

This chapter outlines the conceptual and theoretical foundations that guide this report, focusing on how contemporary scholarship has problematized and redefined the relationship between democracy and media. In doing so, it engages with classical perspectives on democratic systems, critical approaches in media studies, and recent contributions whose work foregrounds the mediated and participatory dimensions of democracy.

1.1 Democracy in Theory: Traditions, Tensions and Transformations

The theoretical conceptualization of democracy has developed across multiple intellectual traditions, each emphasizing different dimensions of institutional design, civic practice, and normative aspiration. Contemporary debates show that democracy cannot be understood as a fixed or finalized model: it is a dynamic and contested project that continuously adapts to social, technological, and political transformations.

Classic contributions remain crucial for understanding democratic practices. Dahl's (1971) theory of polyarchy defined democracy through institutional guarantees such as inclusive suffrage, political contestation, and access to information. From this perspective, democracy is secured when formal mechanisms allow citizens to participate meaningfully in political decision-making. Habermas (1962), however, shifted attention to deliberation, presenting the public sphere as a communicative space where rational debate, inclusivity, and scrutiny of power underpin legitimacy. While Dahl emphasizes procedural safeguards, Habermas stresses the cultural and communicative foundations of democratic legitimacy. These traditions together highlight two essential dimensions: democracy must both protect citizens' rights to participate and create conditions for reasoned public discourse.

Later research demonstrated that institutional arrangements alone are insufficient. Norris (2000, 2011) illustrates that democratic performance must be matched by citizens' perceptions of legitimacy and trust. Without this subjective dimension, institutions risk being formally robust yet substantively hollow. Dalton (2014) adds that generational shifts in political values and orientations are reshaping how democracy is practiced and evaluated, with younger citizens often demanding greater inclusiveness, transparency, and responsiveness. These perspectives underscore that democracy is sustained as much by evolving civic cultures as by constitutional design.

In recent years, scholars have examined how global crises and structural transformations affect democratic resilience. Youngs (2024) highlights how polarization, populism, climate change, and shrinking civic space challenge traditional democratic models. Rather than treating innovation as optional, Youngs argues that democratic renewal—through institutional reform, participatory experimentation, and civic engagement—has become indispensable for safeguarding democratic resilience in the twenty-first century.

Similarly, Donatella della Porta (2018) emphasizes the role of contentious politics and grassroots mobilization in democratic innovation. Social movements, protests, and civic practices are not merely

corrective mechanisms but central arenas through which democracy is continuously redefined. They challenge procedural minimalism and demonstrate how citizens themselves can act as engines of democratic renewal, especially in contexts where institutions appear unresponsive or captured by elites.

Another enduring debate concerns the place of conflict in democracy. Mouffe (2000) critiques consensus-oriented models for neglecting the constitutive role of disagreement. Her agonistic perspective views conflict not as a pathology but as a vital element of pluralistic politics, where adversaries compete within a shared framework of democratic norms.

Parallel to these theoretical debates, emerging models such as “liquid democracy” experiment with flexible and transitive forms of representation, enabled by digital infrastructures. These proposals echo broader discussions on how to reconcile direct and representative principles in technologically mediated societies. Scholars such as Landemore (2020) or della Porta (2013) highlight how institutional innovations, from deliberative polling to participatory governance, can address challenges of scale, complexity, and legitimacy. While still experimental, such initiatives show how democratic theory increasingly engages with digital transformations in ways that combine political imagination with institutional practice.

These contributions reveal democracy as an evolving and contested construct. Several tensions remain central:

- ✚ **Representation vs. participation:** balancing electoral mechanisms with demands for continuous civic involvement.
- ✚ **Consensus vs. conflict:** recognizing disagreement as intrinsic to pluralist societies while preserving institutional stability.
- ✚ **Stability vs. innovation:** maintaining institutional continuity while adapting to crises and technological change.
- ✚ **Institutional design vs. civic culture:** ensuring that formal rules are complemented by trust, legitimacy, and civic responsibility

These tensions are increasingly refracted through global crises, digitalization, and shifting patterns of civic engagement. For the purposes of this report, recognizing democracy as both institutional structure and lived practice is essential. Citizens’ perceptions of democracy oscillate between valuing stability and demanding inclusiveness, transparency, and adaptability. Understanding these dynamics requires a theoretical framework that acknowledges both the durability of democratic principles and the necessity of continuous transformation.

1.2 Media, Communication and the Public Sphere

Media occupy a constitutive role in contemporary democracies, not merely transmitting information but shaping the conditions under which visibility, legitimacy, and participation are established. They influence which issues are amplified, which actors gain recognition, and which forms of civic engagement are promoted or marginalized. Consequently, their function extends beyond a supportive infrastructure, forming an integral part of democratic discourse.

Habermas's (1962) normative framework of the *public sphere* envisioned media as enabling rational-critical deliberation among citizens, providing a space where argumentation and scrutiny of power generate legitimacy. However, this ideal has been increasingly challenged. The commercialization of mass media introduced market logics that often prioritize entertainment over civic information, while professionalization created journalistic norms that, though safeguarding autonomy, also reinforced gatekeeping powers. Digital transformation added further complexity, with algorithmic content curation, accelerated communication, and audience fragmentation, making the public sphere a hybrid, plural, and continuously negotiated environment.

From a comparative perspective, Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology remains central, distinguishing between liberal, democratic-corporatist, and polarized pluralist models. These frameworks show how historical, institutional, and cultural contexts shape the interaction between journalism, politics, and citizens. Papathanassopoulos (2023) demonstrates that despite pressures toward digital convergence, these structures continue to influence European media systems, even as hybridization and transnational influences blur traditional boundaries.

The growing prominence of digital platforms marks a paradigmatic shift. Van Dijck (2018) describes the *platform society*, where major corporations such as Meta, Google, and X govern information infrastructures, determining content visibility and the architecture of interaction. These platforms are not neutral intermediaries: their governance has significant implications for inclusivity, transparency, and public accountability (Van Dijck, 2024), establishing them as political actors that both enable and constrain democratic communication.

Recent scholarship by Carpentier and Wimmer (2025) offers a particularly valuable framework for understanding the complex relationship between media and democracy. They adopt a discursive-material perspective, conceptualizing media as assemblages that integrate technological infrastructures, institutions, economic resources, and discursive practices. Within this framework, media are expected to fulfil multiple democratic functions: providing pluralistic and reliable information, monitoring power, serving as arenas for deliberation and agonistic debate, reflecting social diversity, and enabling active citizen participation. Carpentier and Wimmer emphasize that the realization of these functions depends on material and cultural conditions, including the economic sustainability of media, the protection of editorial independence, civic and digital literacy, and regulatory frameworks that ensure pluralism and fairness. They also highlight key threats, such as monopolistic platform control, declining public trust, and symbolic exclusion of marginalized voices, which can undermine media's democratic capacity.

Other research complements this view. Couldry (2012, 2024) demonstrates how decisions about coverage and representation shape visibility and political legitimacy, while Chadwick (2013), through the concept of the *hybrid media system*, describes the interaction between legacy journalism, digital platforms, and citizen-generated content, operating under intertwined logics of authority, speed, and virality.

Overall, these perspectives show that the contemporary public sphere cannot be understood as a singular or stable space. It is a hybrid and continuously negotiated arena in which media, platforms, and citizens interact, constantly shaping visibility, participation, and legitimacy, while simultaneously facing risks of polarization, exclusion, and disinformation. Understanding these dynamics requires critical attention to the structural conditions, normative roles, and emerging threats that enable or constrain democratic functioning in a mediated environment.

1.3 Participation, Trust and Democratic Agency

Participation remains one of the most debated and multifaceted concepts in democratic theory. In representative models it is often reduced to voting, while participatory and deliberative approaches emphasize ongoing civic involvement. Pateman (1970) warned that limited opportunities for participation risk producing alienation and passivity, while Barber (1984) advanced the notion of “strong democracy,” grounded in collective self-government and active civic agency. Here, participation is not merely a formal entitlement but a process that cultivates democratic skills, responsibility, and legitimacy.

Carpentier (2011) provides an important conceptual distinction between access and participation, particularly relevant for media studies. Access entails the ability to enter media circuits as an observer, listener, or occasional contributor, whereas participation involves influencing decisions and co-creating content. This distinction illustrates that surface-level engagement does not necessarily translate into genuine democratic influence, highlighting the need to assess the quality of mediated involvement.

Trust is another crucial dimension. Declining institutional trust, as documented by Norris (2011) and Dalton (2014), weakens willingness to participate and undermines legitimacy. Rosanvallon (2008) observes that modern democracies increasingly depend on mechanisms of oversight—monitoring, auditing, and contestation—that extend beyond electoral accountability. Within this framework, the media play an ambivalent role: they can enhance trust through transparency and accountability, yet also erode it through sensationalism, perceived bias, or commercial pressures. Empirical evidence confirms these dynamics. Eurobarometer data (2023) reveal that only 42% of Europeans express trust in national institutions, while 65% report some form of civic or associative participation within the past five years. These figures point to the need for public policies and media practices that jointly reinforce trust and participation.

Crucially, participation and trust must be considered together. Participation without trust risks fostering disillusionment, while trust without participation encourages passivity. A balanced interplay of these dimensions, supported by accessible and accountable media systems, is essential to strengthen citizens’ democratic agency in contemporary Europe.

1.4 Media and Democratic Participation: Beyond Access

Building on these theoretical foundations, it is evident that media (could) play a constitutive role in shaping democratic participation. Beyond providing information, media act as arenas where public visibility, political legitimacy, and civic engagement are continuously negotiated. The quality of democratic participation is therefore closely linked to the opportunities and conditions that media offer for meaningful involvement.

Carpentier's distinction between access and participation (2011) is particularly relevant here. While access refers to the ability to observe or contribute minimally to media content, participation implies the capacity to influence decisions, co-create narratives, and actively engage in public deliberation. This distinction emphasizes that not all media engagement translates into democratic influence: genuine participation requires both structural opportunities—such as inclusive platforms, editorial independence, and regulatory support—and cultural competencies, including digital literacy and civic awareness.

Digital platforms have expanded these opportunities but also introduced new challenges. Algorithmic content curation, echo chambers, and unequal visibility can distort deliberation and reinforce inequalities in political influence (Couldry, 2012; Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). At the same time, social media and participatory tools enable citizens to mobilize, deliberate, and contest power in ways that were previously unavailable, reinforcing the notion of democracy as a lived and continuously negotiated practice.

From a democratic perspective, media-enabled participation contributes to legitimacy, accountability, and civic learning. It allows citizens not only to monitor institutions and public actors but also to collectively shape agendas and assert agency. As argued in previous sections, trust and participation are mutually reinforcing media systems: enabling meaningful participation can strengthen civic trust, while trustworthy institutions increase the impact of participatory engagement. In this sense, understanding the interplay between media and democracy requires a multidimensional perspective, which considers technological infrastructures, institutional frameworks, economic conditions, and discursive practices simultaneously (Carpentier & Wimmer, 2025). Only by addressing these interdependencies media can fulfil their potential as instruments and arenas of democratic agency, supporting inclusive, resilient, and adaptive democratic systems in contemporary Europe.

This chapter presents the research design, key methodological and ethical considerations guiding the qualitative inquiry. In line with the overarching project goals, the study adopts a cross-cutting approach to European citizens' experiences along the media–democracy nexus, treating national differences as contextual factors that enrich interpretation rather than as comparative endpoints. The methodological architecture was devised to ensure both empirical robustness and interpretative sensitivity, combining procedural consistency with attention to the heterogeneity of cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts across Europe.

2.1 Research Design and Qualitative Approach

A qualitative, ethnographically inspired approach was employed to capture citizens' ideas, expectations, experiences, and practices relating to media and democracy. Qualitative inquiry was deemed particularly suited to the study's aims, as it allows researchers to access the meaning-making processes through which individuals and groups interpret democratic life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Unlike quantitative surveys, which may risk flattening ambivalences into predefined categories, this design privileged open-ended discursive material capable of revealing tensions, contradictions, and affective dimensions.

The multi-country design combined focus groups and semi-structured interviews, foregoing traditional participant observation for reasons of feasibility and comparability, but retaining a strong commitment to contextualisation. This strategy allowed the collection of rich, situated narratives while ensuring coordination, quality, and comparability across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts (Hennink et al., 2020).

To prevent interpretative drift—an ever-present risk in large-scale transnational qualitative projects—detailed methodological guidelines were established, balancing national teams' autonomy with a shared framework for conducting, documenting, and reporting research activities. Regular coordination meetings, methodological workshops, and intercultural mediation sessions functioned as safeguards, ensuring analytical coherence while respecting local epistemic sensibilities (Kohlbacher, 2006).

The fieldwork was organised around the four guiding questions that operationalised the theoretical framework into a concrete agenda (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): citizens' conceptions of democracy (RQ1), perceptions of the media–democracy relationship (RQ2), participatory practices and experiences (RQ3), and the role of media in shaping or constraining such practices (RQ4).

The thematic framework was structured around the overarching domain of **Attitudes & Participation**, as a means of exploring the interrelation between democracy and media. Within this framework, four axes of analysis were developed: political attitudes, political participation, media attitudes, and participation through the media (Table 1).

This four-axis model reflects the project's ambition to integrate political sociology and media studies perspectives within a single interpretative architecture. It allows researchers to move across different analytical levels—from orientations toward politics, to engagement practices, to perceptions of media's democratic functions—while maintaining conceptual coherence. The model also facilitates the cross-cutting reading of citizens' discourses, linking micro-level experiences to broader questions of legitimacy, trust, and representation. In this sense, it operationalises the theoretical concern with *how* citizens signify democracy and media in everyday life, rather than merely *how much* they participate or trust institutions.

The decision to employ the term *attitudes* in this context was made in reference to its continued relevance in contemporary scholarship on democracy and political communication. While often criticized for implying static and overly psychologized predispositions, *attitudes* have more recently been used as a broad analytical category encompassing opinions, trust, and orientations toward politics and media. For example, Dalton (2014) conceptualizes political attitudes as key indicators of citizens' relationship with democratic institutions, linking them to processes of political engagement and generational change. Similarly, Norris (2011) demonstrates the comparative utility of the term, using it to capture cross-national variations in trust, legitimacy, and support for democratic governance.

In media and communication studies, scholars have also extended the concept toward more dynamic and interpretive understandings. Dahlgren (2009) emphasizes orientations and dispositions as essential to political engagement in mediated environments, while Couldry (2012) and Chadwick (2013) highlight how attitudes toward media are shaped through everyday practices within hybrid information systems. This perspective aligns with the recognition that attitudes are not fixed traits but discursive constructions, emerging as individuals reflect on their political experiences and interactions with media.

In this study, the term *attitudes* is therefore used not in its narrow, psychological sense, but as an umbrella concept that allows for both empirical comparability and interpretive openness. This makes it possible to situate citizens' ideas, perceptions, and trust within established comparative frameworks (Dalton, 2014; Norris, 2011), while also stay alert to the situated and discursively constructed meanings articulated by participants themselves (Dahlgren, 2009; Couldry, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; Castells, 2009).

A further methodological choice was to maintain an open understanding of what counts as *political* and what counts as *media*. Rather than imposing strict definitional boundaries, participants were encouraged to construct their own meanings of these categories. This approach reflects a constructivist epistemological stance (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Charmaz, 2006) and responds to recent calls to avoid overly normative definitions of political engagement and media use (Schudson, 1998; Dahlgren, 2009). By combining the analytical coherence of the *attitude's* framework with interpretive openness, the study sought to balance comparability with sensitivity to the lived meanings of democracy, participation, and media in everyday life.

A distinctive feature of the design was the centralised analytical process coordinated in Italy, which ensured interpretative consistency across the multilingual corpus. Centralisation did not imply homogenisation; rather, it enabled systematic cross-national reading through iterative coding cycles, complemented by collective discussion sessions with national teams to preserve sensitivity to linguistic nuance and contextual specificity.

Table 1. Thematic structure and composition of the four areas of investigation on the axes of attitudes and participation

Theme	Core elements	Topics	Goal
Democracy	Political attitudes	- Idea of democracy; - Opinion about its national democracy (issues, threats, struggles etc.); - Trust in democracy (if it is a general feeling or it is related to specific institutions, specific aspects or problems);	Based on people's idea of democracy, to understand how their attitudes towards the national democratic context is shaped.
	(Political) participation	- What forms of (political) participation do people recognise and practise in democracy; - What obstacles there are and what could or should change.	To understand how people's (political) participation in democracy is perceived, where it applies and why.
Media's role in democracy	Attitudes towards media's role in democracy	- Role and responsibilities of the media in democracy; - Opinion about its national media's work in democracy (issues, threats, struggles etc.); - Media trust;	Based on citizens' expectations on media's role in democracy, to understand how this is perceived in each national context, in terms of citizens' opinion and trust in media democratic work.
	Media use and participation	- People's (political) media diet; - Forms of (political) participation through the media	To start from people's media habits, understand how people perceive the role of the media in their (political) participation in democracy

2.2 Sampling Strategy and Country Profiles

The sampling strategy was designed to maximise heterogeneity across key socio-demographic dimensions (age, gender, education, territorial distribution, political interest). This approach reflected the project's objective not to produce statistically representative findings but to capture the plurality of discourses available within European publics.

Focus groups were stratified by age (18–35; ≥36) and by self-declared political interest (high/low), thereby facilitating both intra-group diversity and inter-group comparability. Interviews, in turn, enabled deeper exploration of individual trajectories. In total, over 400 people were recruited across ten European countries—Italy, Czech Republic, Portugal, Austria, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Estonia, Ireland, and France—with sample sizes proportionate to partners' organisational capacity

and local constraints (Table 2). A minimum common core of 70 in-depth interviews was ensured across four countries (Italy, Estonia, Portugal, France), each lasting approximately 60 minutes.

The decision to conduct in-depth interviews in four countries (Italy, Estonia, Portugal, and France) was driven by the need to complement the collective dynamics of focus groups with more individualised, reflective accounts. While focus groups facilitated the observation of meaning negotiation and shared discursive patterns, interviews offered a space for participants to articulate more personal, nuanced, or marginal perspectives that might otherwise be constrained by group settings.

These four national contexts were selected to capture a diversity of democratic traditions and media systems within Europe, while also ensuring the feasibility of sustained, high-quality qualitative engagement. The inclusion of individual interviews thus added interpretative depth to the cross-national analysis, allowing for a richer understanding of how citizens' experiences and meaning-making processes vary across social and cultural environments.

Table 2. Overview of focus groups and interviews conducted by each team.

TEAM	FOCUS GROUPS	INTERVIEWS
OEAW & COMMIT (Austria)	4	/
OEAW & COMMIT (Germany)	4	/
CU	4	/
IULM	4	36
JU	4	/
Lusofona Uni	4	10
TLU	4	15
IMT	4	11
MIC	5	/
MI	4	/
TOTAL	41	72

Fieldwork was conducted between May and September 2024, employing both in-person and online modalities (Zoom/Teams/Meet) depending on participants' preferences. Physical venues were selected to ensure accessibility, neutrality, and comfort, in order to foster open and inclusive dialogue.

2.3 Data Collection Tools

Understanding citizens' experiences of democracy and media required methodological instruments capable of capturing both collective discursive dynamics and individual biographical narratives. To this end, the study combined focus groups and semi-structured interviews, both structured yet flexible, allowing participants to articulate perspectives in their own terms.

Focus groups, lasting approximately two hours, followed a modular guide covering four areas: (1) democracy and its meanings; (2) practices of participation; (3) evaluations of media's democratic role; (4) patterns of media use. Moderators employed a variety of projective and interactive techniques—hypothetical scenarios, sentence completion, free associations, and “extreme topic” provocations—designed to elicit reflection and debate beyond conventional opinion-sharing. Sessions were audio-recorded (with informed consent) and accompanied by detailed moderator debriefings documenting group dynamics, paraverbal cues, and contextual observations.

Semi-structured interviews, lasting on average 60 minutes, followed a flexible guide exploring conceptions of democracy, trust in institutions, participatory repertoires, and media habits. Guides were centrally drafted in English, then translated and culturally adapted by local teams to preserve semantic resonance. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, with consent for audio/video recording, and were accompanied by methodological notes capturing interviewer reflections and emergent issues not always visible in transcripts (Gibbs, 2018).

Focus groups and interviews were conducted by trained researchers from the national teams, each with prior experience in qualitative fieldwork on media and political communication. Moderators and interviewers participated in a preparatory workshop coordinated by IULM, where methodological guidelines, ethical standards, and moderation techniques were harmonised. This ensured a consistent approach across countries while allowing space for culturally sensitive moderation and linguistic adaptation.

Data collection was fully compliant with GDPR (EU Reg. 2016/679) and the project's Data Management Plan. All transcripts were pseudonymised, securely stored on consortium servers, and retained for up to five years before destruction. Participants' rights to access, rectification, deletion, portability, and withdrawal were systematically ensured. Where applicable, participants received economic compensation to recognise their contribution and reduce participation bias.

Particular attention was devoted to ethical principles, ensuring that participation in the study did not entail any form of harm or discomfort. Discussions occasionally touched upon politically sensitive or emotionally charged topics; moderators were therefore trained to recognise and manage signs of distress, to redirect or suspend conversations when appropriate, and to guarantee that no participant felt pressured to disclose more than they wished.

The research design also incorporated safeguards to protect participants from reputational or social risks, including strict confidentiality, pseudonymisation of all data, and anonymised reporting of quotations. Ethical practice was thus understood not merely as procedural compliance, but as a continuous, reflexive engagement with participants' well-being and the integrity of the research relationship.

2.4 Thematic Coding and Cross-Cutting Reading

The analysis followed an inductive, Grounded Theory–inspired strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), supported by NVivo (QSR International). The process unfolded in three main stages:

1. **Open coding:** systematic fragmentation of transcripts into discrete units of meaning, generating preliminary labels.
2. **Axial coding:** clustering and connecting categories by exploring conditions, contexts, and consequences.
3. **Selective coding:** integration of core categories into interpretative narratives, aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework.

The operational steps included:

- ✚ **Corpus construction:** central verification of pseudonymised transcripts, metadata, and Country Reports¹.
- ✚ **Iterative coding cycles:** initial testing on heterogeneous subsets, progressing towards thematic saturation.
- ✚ **Calibration and reliability:** double-coding procedures and periodic alignment meetings across national team (IULM).
- ✚ **Theoretical integration:** production of memos, conceptual maps, and typologies identifying recurrent ambivalences (e.g. democratic disaffection alongside symbolic attachment; media as both enabler and constraint).

Rather than privileging national comparisons, the analytical strategy employed a cross-cutting lens that emphasised thematic convergence and divergence across the European corpus. Country-specific contexts were treated as interpretative resources rather than as comparative endpoints, allowing the analysis to foreground shared concerns and heterogeneities within European democratic imaginaries.

The analytical process was iterative and theory-informed: emerging categories were continuously confronted with the conceptual framework and refined through successive cycles of discussion and memo writing. Analytical saturation was assessed collectively, once no new themes or interpretative distinctions were observed across national corpora.

2.5 Ethical and Reflexive Considerations

In addition to procedural compliance, particular attention was devoted to reflexivity and to the ethical challenges of cross-national qualitative research. Researchers confronted issues such as linguistic asymmetries and different cultural norms around political discussion. Regular debriefings and intercultural exchanges helped to surface and mitigate potential biases. The central analytical coordination was accompanied by a commitment to recognising the positionality of researchers and

¹ Country Reports, drafted by national teams, contextualised the empirical material by summarising the political and media systems, cultural specificities, and broader socio-historical dynamics relevant to each setting. These reports functioned as interpretative anchors for the central analysis team, ensuring that discursive patterns were situated within appropriate institutional and cultural frames.

the risk of interpretative dominance by the central team, an issue that was addressed by systematic consultation with local partners.

Table 3. Methodological Summary Table.

Section	Description
Research Design	Qualitative, ethnographically inspired. Combined focus groups and semi-structured interviews to explore citizens' conceptions, practices, and experiences regarding the media–democracy nexus. Centralised analysis in Italy ensured coherence, while local contexts were respected.
Sampling Strategy	Purposive sampling designed to maximise heterogeneity (age, gender, education, territorial distribution, political interest). Not statistically representative but aimed at capturing the plurality of discourses. Conducted in 10 European countries with more than 400 testimonies.
Analytical Procedures	• Inductive, Grounded Theory–inspired. • Supported by NVivo, iterative coding cycles, double coding, and conceptual mapping. • Emphasis on cross-cutting themes.
Ethical & Reflexive Considerations	Full GDPR compliance, pseudonymisation, secure data storage, and participant compensation. Reflexive attention to linguistic asymmetries, and cultural norms.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the main interpretative findings of the qualitative analysis, exploring how European citizens conceptualize democracy, perceive the role of media, and make sense of their own participation within democratic life. The results are organized according to the four research questions guiding the study. Each section explores a specific dimension of the media–democracy nexus, concluding with a short summary that links the findings to the corresponding research question.

Note: Throughout this chapter, the term “discursive elements” is used to refer to the main interpretative patterns identified in participants’ narratives. These elements represent recurring ways of framing democracy, media, and participation, rather than fixed categories or quantitative codes.

3.1 Citizens' attitudes towards democracy

In order to capture the multifaceted nature of citizens’ relationships with democracy, the analysis was organised around four interrelated dimensions: *ideas*, *judgements*, *expectations*, and *trust*. These categories reflect the different ways in which participants engage with democracy — as a concept (how they define it), an experience (how they evaluate its functioning), a horizon (what they hope it could become), and a bond (the degree of confidence they place in it). Together, they provide a comprehensive framework to interpret how people understand, assess, and emotionally relate to democratic life.

CONCEPTUALISING DEMOCRACY

Analysis of the collected testimonies highlights an idea of democracy that extends beyond the institutional sphere and takes root in individuals' everyday lives. Democracy is not merely a form of government or a set of procedural rules; it is a lived experience, shaped by expectations, ambivalences and aspirations. Democracy emerges as a relational and symbolic arena where the tensions between individual rights, collective recognition, and practical participation are played out.

In this framework, *freedom* is the most recurrent and shared value. Taking many forms: freedom of expression, of choice, of movement, of self-determination. It is perceived as the essential prerequisite for democratic life, to the extent that its exercise becomes an indicator of the very quality of democracy.

✚ **Czech:** [FG. 2] *“Participant 14: The ability to express what I think, but also bearing the risk that if my opinion isn’t trendy, meaning it’s not aligned with what some media are promoting, it could be discredited in some way”*

✚ **France:** [Int.10] *“Democracy, for me, it’s freedom of expression. It’s the freedom to choose a religion to have or not. It’s freedom, it’s simply freedom. That’s what democracy is for me”*

A crucial dimension of this freedom, emerging across several national contexts, is the freedom of information—the right to access independent, uncensored, and impartial media. Participants consistently identified a free press as indispensable to democratic functioning, highlighting its role in enabling informed decision-making, citizen participation, and accountability of those in power. Without this freedom, the democratic process itself is seen as compromised.

✚ **Estonia:** [Int. 3] Person C: Well, I think it's in the sense that, well, the media still has to be able to be free, after all, in a democracy, you still have to be able to, like, write about everything, after all, you can, like, criticise, approve of something. So it's not like you have a democratic country and then all of a sudden you're not allowed to express an opinion in the media, I don't know, or you have to say something like, I don't know, in an autocratic country, right. So if you say something wrong, then what do you want, right. So in that sense it's like a direct link, yeah.

These formulations converge on a vision of democracy as a lived value, experienced above all through the sense of agency available to individuals: the ability to speak, to choose, and to be recognized. Yet, they also reveal the fragility of this agency when it collides with social pressures, media dynamics, or the perception of unresponsive institutions.

Other participants stressed the **procedural dimension**, recalling the role of democratic mechanisms in channelling citizens' voices. An Italian respondent, with a more institutional focus, noted: *"Sovereignty is managed indirectly by the people"* [Int.16]. Similarly, a French participant articulated the expectation that electoral processes should ensure genuine responsiveness: *"I would say that it is to guarantee that the citizens or the people of the State have the opportunity to make their voice and their wishes carried by an electoral method in what concerns governmental decisions and the evolution of the country, whether at the political, economic, cultural level, and that it is visible and audible from those in power and then again"* [Int.6].

A second key dimension of the democratic ideal that emerged across countries is the notion of **people power**—the belief that citizens should have a meaningful and active role in shaping political decisions. This idea is rooted in the conviction that sovereignty ultimately belongs to the people, and that democracy must guarantee not only representation but also agency.

✚ **France:** [Int.11] *"It is indeed a government or a mode of government of a country where the people have the decision. And then, it takes different forms. Me, before going to look for the definition, I was on... I hadn't put the word government back, I needed to refresh my memories anyway. But I was really already on... It's actually a... I had the word space, in my mind. A space where people, not to use citizens or people on purpose, but in any case, the people who live in this space say their opinion, participate more or less, very more or less actively in the decisions that impact this space. Spontaneously, what I would have said was that"*

For many participants, voting is seen as the most direct and tangible expression of this power. The act of choosing representatives or deciding on policies through elections is understood as a core democratic right, symbolising both individual autonomy and collective responsibility. However, there is also a widespread sense that participation should not be limited to the ballot box. People want to feel involved beyond periodic elections, through mechanisms that allow them to influence public debate, monitor decision-making, and hold institutions accountable.

✚ **Austria:** [FG.1] "P1: Also the opportunity to participate, so to speak. As an adult citizen, I have the right [to vote], others are excluded. That is less democratic, so to speak. There may be reasons why, for example, people who are too young or foreigners are excluded from voting. But I would tend to say that this is undemocratic. The more you allow people to participate, the more democratic it is. Especially the people who are affected by the things that are being voted on".

✚ **Poland:** [FG.4] *“It is colloquially referred to as the rule of the people, right? Seemingly, we influence how this governance takes place. We discuss, we elect. And how it is in reality varies”.*

Equally central to citizens’ reflections is the **community dimension of democracy**. The maxim *my freedom ends where yours begins* emerges repeatedly as a rule of coexistence, a principle of civic responsibility, and a normative criterion for compromise—necessary to sustain the plurality that characterizes democratic life. A Czech participant recalled the evolution of this awareness over time: [FG.3] *“Participant 25: Well, to summarize, in the 1990s, everyone interpreted democracy and freedom in their own way and didn’t know the limits. Now, I think it’s much better because we’ve realized that freedom and democracy have limits. They start and end where the freedom and democracy of the other person begin. So, that’s how I would put it”.*

DEMOCRACY’S PERFORMANCE

Yet, when contrasted with the realities of everyday politics, this idealized view collides with widespread disillusionment. The analysis highlights a systematic imbalance between positive and negative evaluations, with the latter overwhelmingly dominant. Citizens describe a political sphere marked by distance and self-referentiality, unfulfilled promises, conflictual and ineffective communication, fragile leadership, and weakened representation. As an Irish participant noted with frustration: [FG.3] *“our government. They say a lot but do nothing. And that’s our power, our Taoiseach [Irish Prime Minister] at the moment, he says a lot but has done nothing since. Like everyone in government, they promise a lot, and as I say, when you talk to anyone, any political person, ‘I’ll do my best’, and that’s their words to you, ‘I’ll do my best’, but I’ll do nothing in the end. That’s our society”.*

This distance is further reinforced by communication perceived as evasive or disrespectful, a political discourse more oriented towards media spectacle than towards genuine public confrontation.

✚ **Poland:** [FG.1] *“when it comes to the mistakes of politicians, I think everyone has also noticed that they also have such a great, developed ability to evade answering questions, or to answer diplomatically. (...) The person will start talking for an hour and a half, but the answer to the question was not there, so it is also I think that so the truth lies somewhere in the middle”.*

The **crisis of representation** is a recurring theme across national contexts. Citizens lament fragmented parties, lack of clear ideals, unprepared leaders, and the absence of figures able to inspire and guide public debate.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“Participant 5: I miss a figure like Václav Havel. People with loving opinions—people you can listen to and take something from, apply it in daily life. When our politicians say something, it makes you feel sick. You can’t apply their words to your life, unlike Václav Havel, who could motivate you to improve yourself”.*

✚ **Poland:** [FG.1] *“when it comes to the mistakes of politicians, I think everyone has also noticed that they also have such a great, developed ability to evade answering questions, or to answer diplomatically. (...) The person will start talking for an hour and a half, but the answer to the question was not there, so it is also I think that so the truth lies somewhere in the middle”.*

Democratic fragilities are not only attributed to political elites, but also to citizens themselves. **Low participation, weak political identity, and widespread apathy** create a vicious circle of mutual distancing.

✚ **Italy:** [FG.2] “P3 (M, 27): A few days ago, I was talking to someone who told me that he voted for X because his father told him to. I think this is serious. We are theoretically in a democracy, but we are shooting ourselves in the foot by doing this”.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] “Participant 3: I feel like there's also a lack of pride in being Czech. Many other nations take pride in who they are—they have something unique and show it to the world. But we don't have that much. There's nothing that makes us feel proud to live in the Czech Republic and say, “We have this or that, it's beautiful here, and others don't have it.” That's missing for me”.

Concerns about fairness, equal representation, and **social justice** further deepen the sense of democratic fatigue. Many participants observed that democratic systems do not adequately protect vulnerable groups or uphold fundamental rights, especially regarding gender equality, minority protections, and civil liberties. An Italian respondent criticized governmental positions on family and abortion rights [Int.19], while a Portuguese participant linked democratic deficits to ongoing discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ communities [Int.2]. These testimonies suggest that citizens perceive democracy not only as procedurally fragile but also as substantively failing to guarantee equity.

✚ **Italy:** [Int. 19] “I think of this government and the decisions it makes, for example on civil rights, where the prime minister himself says that the family is only the traditional family, the family is father and mother – which, of course, is true, it is also that – but he does not take a position to guarantee the right freedoms. Or he is superficial on some points, such as the right to abortion, which is taboo with this government. It is full of pro-life associations”.

✚ **Portugal:** [Int.2] “In Portugal, at this moment, being homosexual, for example, I feel that there are groups that can inhibit my freedom, and I think that no matter how much friction or sensitivity these groups might bring to our social and political landscape, as a minority—though it's not a word I like, on the contrary—I feel that, for example, if I put myself in that position, yes, I fear that we might have a society that is less free in this sense. Another issue is the topic of women, the way women and their role in society are still viewed, this lack of equity and opportunities. The discrepancy that still exists between men and women in Portugal is alive”.

Distrust is compounded by the perception of institutions as **excessively influenced by external actors** such as corporations or supranational bodies, eroding popular sovereignty and accountability. In Slovenia, one participant bluntly summarized:

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.1] “I have read quite a lot of laws, and I dare to say, as an estimation, that there are at least 50 percents that are not in line with the Constitution. That means that somebody should go and clean it up.

Moderator: In short, what is not working in our democracy could be said to be legislation.

Participant H: Legislation. Laws, yes”.

Despite the predominance of negative judgments, **positive evaluations** also surface, offering a more nuanced picture. Some citizens emphasize procedural robustness, the availability of democratic tools, and the comparative advantage of **democracy over alternative systems**. Czech participants, for example, acknowledged both the progress achieved in just three decades since the regime change and the continued vitality of democratic mechanisms [FG.4]. In Germany and Slovenia, several respondents affirmed that, while imperfect, democracy remains “*the best available option*” [FG.3, FG.4]:

✚ **Czech:** [FG.4] *“Participant 30: I actually think that democracy in the Czech Republic is at a really good level. Even if we often don't like the outcomes of some processes, like elections, for example, we still have plenty of democratic tools that can be used. And it seems to me that, in the end, it works. So I think the level here is good.*

Participant 38: I also think it's pretty good considering we've only had democracy for how long? 30 years since the regime change. And that has also impacted the thinking of the older generations, who don't see it that way. And then the younger ones might push the boundaries of what they can say or do. But I think 30 years is still a short time, and the system works quite well”.

✚ **Germany:** [FG.3] *“And in my opinion, there is no alternative. It is simply the best state system. Unless it's a really good dictator who really means well with the people. (laughs) Then yes, I can imagine that it would work there too. [A dictator] who really approaches people and asks: Hey, what do you need? And that's how it should be: politics is actually meant for the people. And if a politician is a nice person, even if he is a dictator, and communicates with the people and implements it properly, I can also imagine that it would work. But I don't want Putin now”.*

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.4] *“Participant B: It's not perfect. But you don't have a better option”.*

Positive views often derive from **comparative or historical reasoning**: democracy may fall short of ideals, but it provides freedoms, protections, and opportunities absent in authoritarian or populist regimes. Others highlight inclusive developments, such as rising voter turnout in Estonia [FG.2] or the recognition of minority rights in Ireland [FG.5]. These elements are cited as evidence of democratic vitality and resilience:

✚ **Estonia:** [FG.2] *“Participant H: Yes, I was thinking that we can assess democratic participation by voter turnout, which we've just recently been doing. So, the voter turnout, voter activity, I mean, is on the rise, and this reflects well how people feel their involvement and role in the democratic society”.*

✚ **Ireland:** [FG.5] *“what I mean by that is, if it was majority only, we wouldn't be looking at rights of LGBTQ or other minority groups. But in fact, I think our democracy does try to allow for that. So, I would say, minorities, yeah, I would settle for that”.*

Overall, the picture that emerges is ambivalent: **democracy is simultaneously valued and doubted, affirmed and criticized**. On one hand, it is appreciated for its guarantees of freedom, pluralism, and institutional continuity; on the other, it is experienced as unresponsive, elitist, and vulnerable to external pressures. The coexistence of symbolic attachment and democratic disillusionment reveals a fragile equilibrium—where optimism is often conditional, tempered by pragmatic realism, and accompanied by calls for vigilance and reform.

EXPECTATIONS AND THREATS TO THE DEMOCRATIC DREAM

Citizens' expectations regarding democracy do not point to rejection of the system, but rather to a strong desire for its renewal and reinforcement. Across countries, participants expressed the need for a democracy that is **more inclusive, participatory, and grounded in shared responsibility**. Rather than dismantling institutions, people envision a system capable of listening more attentively, educating its citizens, and translating ideals into concrete practices.

A recurring theme is the demand for greater and **more meaningful opportunities for participation**. In Austria, for instance, the call was for direct involvement through mechanisms such as referendums, seen as a way to reduce the gap between votes cast and political outcomes

✚ **Austria:** [FG.3] *"R1: What would that be? What are topics that can be developed further?"*

P10: Yes. Referendums, for example. More freedom of choice for citizens perhaps. (um). Participation opportunities, I say, to be able to decide on certain issues (um) and not always..., yes. You give your vote to someone, so to speak, but then they form a coalition and then it all becomes blurred again. And that's always, well not always... You don't always vote for what you get. So, it somehow becomes blurred due to party politics".

Others stressed that participation is not only about having a say, but about being adequately informed. An Italian interviewee argued that if power belongs to the people, then citizens must also be empowered through civic education:

✚ **Italy:** [Int.18] *"Since power belongs to the people, there should be ways to educate the people better, to put them in a position to have more in-depth knowledge, especially with regard to voting issues. For example, now that the European elections are coming up, the average voter does not know much about how the European Parliament works. Therefore, there should be ways to make voters aware of what they are going to vote for, to make voting more informed".*

Several participants expressed the need for **improved communication and access to political information**, especially for younger generations. The existing modes of political messaging were often described as too heavy, inaccessible or overwhelming, which contributes to civic disengagement.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.16] *"A: Lightness. Everything is always so heavy. The way they present things, if you watch a political party speaking, it's all very... there needs to be a little more lightness. It's complicated to say, we're talking about running a country and ideas, but there's a lack of lightness. It's always so heavy and suffocating that it makes you lose the will to go on".*

✚ **Ireland:** [FG.1] *“Speaker 6: Would there not be a chance that the Government could come up with an apparatus (app) to better inform young people or people in general and maybe there could be tighter laws against political violence, I’m just hoping the ball here (colloquialism: Hoping the ball is Irish slang for ‘putting the idea to the group for discussion’).*

Speaker F 2: I do believe they need a better platform to target young people, especially for things that challenge what you said challenge democracy, but if have no interest because it is just a bombarding of information when it comes to local elections, and they (the Government) are not targeting the information correctly towards people”.

Beyond technical or institutional reforms, these reflections converge in a deeper aspiration: to nurture a **renewed civic spirit based on empathy, solidarity**, and the common good. In Portugal, one participant called for a less selfish public culture in which information and mutual support circulate more widely [FG.3]. In Slovenia, the emphasis was on media independence and the courage to stand against systemic pressures [FG.4]. These testimonies underscore that citizens see democracy not only as rules and procedures, but as a cultural framework that requires care, collaboration, and ethical responsibility.

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.3] *“I think we could be more empathetic and more collaborative. Information, and to mention my colleague a bit, certain helps exist, for example, that people don't exactly know about, but no one gives them that knowledge either. And I think we should be a bit more... less selfish. And that makes each person's role in society a little bit more important, we could all contribute to each other, we could provide information”.*

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.4] *“Participant D: I would agree with Participant C. There will always be media. If nothing else, they will be paid to talk and to inform us. They will be somebody's voice. Unless they stand up against the system and say they will not work like that anymore. I hope to see more of that”.*

Citizen’s expectations outline a vision of democracy not as a structure to be dismantled, but as a living system in need of care and reform. Their suggestions are not abstract or utopian, but concrete and actionable, aimed at restoring trust and **encouraging a more meaningful connection between citizens and institutions**. This renewed democratic vision is built on three core pillars:

- Civic education and informed participation, including through more effective media tools.
- Public ethics and institutional transparency, with consistency between political promises and action.
- Inclusion, representation, and responsiveness to local communities.

Rather than a list of complaints, these reflections represent a **collective call to action**—an invitation to rethink democracy as a shared, everyday practice, capable of addressing contemporary challenges and rebuilding public confidence through openness, integrity, and proximity.

At the same time, citizens express awareness of **multiple threats to democratic stability**. Among the concerns raised by participants, one of the most prominent is the rise of **extremism**, mentioned across multiple countries and linked to increasing polarisation, aggressive discourse, and anti-

democratic tendencies. The fear is not limited to a particular ideology but reflects a broader anxiety about the destabilising effects of political extremes—both on public debate and on democratic institutions themselves.

Beyond the political sphere, participants also point to a deeper, more diffuse erosion of civic culture. Through references to concepts like drift in values, aggressiveness, lack of respect, loss of cohesion, and superficiality, they highlight a perceived **decline in the shared democratic norms** and values that underpin civil coexistence. The difficulty of holding constructive conversations, the tendency to prioritise controversy over dialogue, and a general weakening of mutual respect are seen as symptomatic of a society where the fabric of democratic life is fraying.

🇫🇷 **France:** [Int.1] “What is quite worrying at the moment is the weight of the extreme right, in particular. Extremes in general, because when a country and its people go towards extremes, it is not necessarily a good sign. So afterwards, we talked a lot about the far right and the far left. Personally, I am not convinced that the left of the current popular bridge (Nouveau Front Populaire) that we had in the legislative elections is extreme. Now, indeed, if people think that this is extreme, perhaps we need to reframe the debate and redefine the institutions a little so that people can express themselves freely. But in any case, today, what would be interesting is to perhaps give more weight to popular speech, since that is what is being asked for through the various elections. Because we know very well that the far right is quite populist. And then the far left, on the other hand, also relies on popular demands”.

🇵🇱 **Poland:**[FG.1] “It seems to me that as far as my answer is concerned, but I think this also shines through in other answers... that very often also in the media, but also between people - it is very difficult to talk to each other and there is no such culture of discussion and very often people just want to express the most controversial opinions”.

In this panorama, **digital media emerge as a double-edged sword** in participants' reflections: on one hand, they offer unprecedented access to information; on the other, they are widely seen as channels for disinformation and manipulation. Social media platforms, in particular, are frequently mentioned as spaces where falsehoods spread rapidly, where communication can be deliberately distorted, and where media ownership and censorship raise concerns about the integrity and diversity of information.:

Participants highlight how manipulated media contribute to deepening societal divisions, fostering prejudices, and triggering social unrest, such as protests and riots fueled by misinformation. There is a widespread sense that democracy itself is under threat from these dynamics, as coordinated online campaigns, especially by far-right groups, actively seek to undermine public trust in democratic institutions. The abundance of media options allows individuals to selectively consume content that reinforces their own views, which further fragments public discourse and erodes mutual understanding.

🇫🇷 **France:** [FG.2] “PE (M, 19): [the media and social networks] It creates a big influence on the people. And in fact, that gives rise to prejudices. And so these prejudices will create problems and therefore will create demonstrations and riots. Like for example racism among young people, which is becoming more and more popular. And so it's

because of that that, for example, riots, for example in 2023, take place. Or other protests even earlier”.

✚ **Portugal:** [Int.1] *“And this democracy, I see it threatened every day by social media. That is, the proliferation of fake news. Today, we risk going to bed in a democracy and waking up in a dictatorship because we see that far-right parties are very well organized on social media. They have digital soldiers, and what has been observed is a constant attack on the pillars of our democratic institutions, attempting to discredit them, attempting to undermine public trust in democratic institutions”.*

✚ **Estonia:** [FG.2] *“That’s the danger we have with the abundance of media opportunities nowadays. People follow what is most suitable for them, perhaps, without thinking twice about whether it presents the whole truth. And then you get the feeling that everyone who thinks differently doesn’t understand a thing and is hopelessly lost”.*

Participants also raise deeper doubts about the resilience of democratic systems themselves, noting signs of structural instability and institutional inadequacy, particularly in relation to public services like welfare. In this view, democracy is seen as something fragile, constantly under pressure and requiring continual reinforcement—through inclusion, open dialogue, and respect for diverse perspectives.

✚ **France:** [FG.3] *“(PC, W, 65) So, the lack of listening. People are taking to the streets, making demands, and we really have the impression that they are just blows in the water, that no one is listening to them. It still has a bit of a discouraging side”.*

✚ **Ireland:** [FG.1] *“Speaker M 6: 05:23 I would be of the opinion that democracy is always under threat, always a work in progress, when you look back at the to the founding of America, they did not know what they were doing, they were constantly working on it (democracy). I would say we need always to strengthen our democracy by allowing people to have different opinions and respecting them and allowing that the whole point of the discussion process and discussion is the main tenant of democracy in the beginning”.*

Far from being indifferent, participants demonstrate a sharp awareness of the many forces—both internal and external—that threaten democratic stability. The rise of extremism and the erosion of shared civic values are seen as warning signs of a society drifting away from constructive dialogue and mutual respect. This deterioration is not only ideological but cultural, affecting the tone and quality of everyday democratic life.

At the same time, digital media—while offering opportunities for information and engagement—are largely viewed with suspicion. They are perceived as amplifiers of disinformation, manipulation, and polarisation, contributing to a fragmented public sphere in which shared facts and common ground become harder to find. These dynamics are seen as particularly dangerous when exploited by actors seeking to undermine democratic institutions from within.

Finally, the crisis of participation—manifested in apathy, protest fatigue, and widespread mistrust of political institutions—reveals a deep disconnect between citizens and those meant to represent

them. While democracy is often described as a work in progress, participants fear that its foundations are being weakened by inaction, exclusion, and institutional inertia.

Taken together, these concerns express a form of **critical loyalty**: a belief that democracy is still worth defending, but only if it evolves. People are not asking for perfection, but for a system that listens, includes, and reflects the values it claims to uphold. In their critiques lies not only frustration—but also the hope that renewal is still possible.

CONDITIONAL DEMOCRATIC TRUST

In this scenario characterised by ambiguity and doubt, **trust in democracy is layered and complex**. While participants often differentiate between trust in institutions and trust in the political class, many express **residual confidences in the system itself**. In this sense, a big part of people's trust comes from the intrinsic value of the democratic system, pointing out that many people still believe in democracy as a principle. This is backed up by comparisons with other political systems, which reinforce the idea that democracy is seen as the least bad option, an imperfect system but better than any authoritarian alternative. The comparison with authoritarian regimes therefore fuels a defensive trust, based on a collective or cultural memory of worse alternatives.

- ✚ **Czech:** [FG.3] *“Participant 23: It’s something different to have trust in the government and trust in the system. And in democracy, definitely yes”.*
- ✚ **Italy:** [Int.20] *“I am confident in the sense that I hope we will not return to dictatorial times, and in this sense I feel protected by the Constitution. However, it is not that I have so much confidence in our politicians”.*

A subtle, irrational trust emerges across several interviews — not rooted in institutions, but in personal impressions, emotional intuition, and a hope for change. This trust is often directed at individuals perceived as credible or morally close, rather than at the political system as a whole.

- ✚ **Estonia:** [Int.A] *“I have some people I trust, but they are people who are in politics and who are also good acquaintances of mine. So, I know them as people. I know what their values are. I know that they are, if not in some scene themselves, at least good allies. But above that. I don’t know, I don’t exist for them”.*
- ✚ **Italy:** [FG.2] *“P3(M,27) For me, trust is important, how much the person speaking conveys it to you. We are used to seeing lots of people talking and making propaganda. Everyone has great ideas during election campaigns, but if the person speaking doesn’t convey trust to you on a gut level, or maybe they’ve been in politics for 10 years and have always failed, I don’t trust them again”.*

This confidence is increasingly rooted in personal experiences of integrity, common sense, and rationality, rather than in a generalized trust in formal institutions. Trust is not reserved only for large-scale democratic structures but also extends to interpersonal and political relationships that are perceived as close, relatable, and trustworthy.

- ✚ **France:** [Int.2] *“Afterwards I also think that I also have confidence in democracy, in the sense that I still have enough confidence in the citizens, in the French people, and I think that if it has been threatened, I think that we would still be able to manifest itself so that it does not disappear, or that it is not altered, and as such, I*

think that democracy is still something in which we can have more or less confidence in, but whether we can have complete confidence in it, I don't know".

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.1] *"With regard to trust, I'm always going to trust in one way or another, that is, I'm going to give credit because we believe, I believe in the potential of human beings to do fantastic things. This trust doesn't go away, regardless of the regime we're living under, in our case, democracy. But I continue to trust because I have a strong belief in the ability of human beings to overthrow anything and to go and move towards a greater good. I think that's my confidence, a greater good".*

Conversely, **mistrust is primarily directed at politics**, perceived as distant, inconsistent, and self-referential:

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *"Participant 7: I think that when people vote, they can end up disappointed with the politicians they chose. The politicians promise something and then don't fulfil it, which discourages people from voting again. I think it's good when someone completely new comes into politics, someone who isn't tainted by politics, because people might trust them more than politicians who promise things and then do nothing".*

This view fits perfectly into the context of the **crisis of representation**, where the substance of political participation and responsibility is being hollowed out. Voters therefore continue to vote but feel that their choices do not bring about real change.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.2] *"Participant A: You try what's best. But then they [individual parties] realise that they can't do anything on their own. And then they go and get a coalition. And you realise that there is no change. Ones got the majority. But not strong enough to do something on their own. Anywhere".*

It is relevant to note that from citizens' reports in different countries, the role played by **disinformation** in undermining the credibility and stability of democracy itself. One person in Estonia admits that they cannot fully trust the democratic system precisely because it is impossible to verify the reliability of information; in Italy, criticism focuses on the role of politicians and journalists, who are perceived as responsible for the deterioration of public debate; while in the Czech Republic, there is frustration at the evident bias of the media, which negatively influences the perception of political issues.

✚ **Estonia:** [Int.C] *"Q: Do you trust the democratic system in Estonia?"*

Person D: No, I can't say I trust it one hundred percent. Again, I could say that so and so, that fifty percent I trust, fifty percent I would rather not.

Q: What influences your trust one way or the other?"

Person D: Trust is definitely affected by the fact that a lot of this kind of misinformation is spread. That I can't be sure about the information that is shown to me, whether it is right or wrong".

✚ **Czech:** [FG.4] *"When the moderator is obviously biased towards someone from an independent perspective, I always try to look at it objectively, whether I like the person*

or not. Whether it's this side or that side, sometimes it's obvious that the moderator is on one side. And that bothers me because I can see how it influences people around me. And when you actually look up the information on what was discussed, you find out that, it's different. So that's probably it for me”

These experiences show that, although the role of the media is crucial for democracy, it is often ambivalent: on the one hand, it can promote participation and information, but on the other, it risks fuelling divisions and mistrust, hindering the functioning of a healthy and inclusive democratic debate.

❖ **RQ1: What is people's idea of democracy? (where it applies)**

Findings reveal a Europe where **citizens hold democracy as both a guiding ideal and a lived challenge**. The gap between the promise of equality, freedom, and participation, and the everyday realities of mistrust, disinformation, and institutional inertia, is stark—but it is precisely within this tension that the vitality of democracy persists. Europeans are not passive observers; they demand a system that listens, educates, and empowers, signalling that democratic legitimacy depends not only on institutions, but on the continuous engagement, vigilance, and collective responsibility of its citizens.

In this sense, **democracy emerges less as a fixed structure and more as an ongoing, shared endeavour**—a fragile yet resilient experiment that must be actively nurtured to transform its ideals into tangible, lived experiences.

Table 4. Main discursive elements emerging from participants' definitions of democracy. It should be read as an interpretative synthesis rather than a quantitative representation.

Aspect	Ideal / Expectation	Reality / Threats
Freedom and equality	Freedom of expression, equal rights, mutual respect	Freedom limited by pressure groups; persistent discrimination; rights not guaranteed
Participation and active citizenship	Informed voting, engaged involvement, civic pride	Political apathy, poor information, votes influenced by others, sense of powerlessness
Community and social cohesion	Compromise, respect for others' freedoms, solidarity	Conflicts between individual and collective interests; social selfishness; lack of civic spirit
Political representation	Responsible politicians, credible leadership, clear communication	Self-referential politicians, unkept promises, aggressive or manipulative communication
Social justice	Inclusion of minorities, gender equality.	Exclusion, discrimination, failure to protect civil and minority rights
Institutional functioning	Transparent institutions, political alternation, effective democratic tools	Distance between institutions and citizens, inefficiency, external influences on legislation and policy
Information and media	Media as tools for education and participation	Misinformation, polarization, echo chambers, media perceived as manipulative
Democratic stability	Resilient system, constructive dialogue, shared civic values	Polarization, extremism, trust crises, social fragmentation
Trust in the system	Trust in institutions, EU, Constitution; politicians' credibility	Distrust of political class, uncertainty in information, perception of system inefficiency
Democracy as a living project	Active participation, collective responsibility, civic vigilance	Gap between ideals and daily reality, structural fragility, disconnect between citizens and politics

3.2 Media, Trust, and Democratic Processes

Building on the previous discussion on citizens' democratic attitudes, this section addresses the second research question: *What is the connection between democracy and the media? Have media a role in democracy?*

Across all national contexts, participants recognised that democracy is not only lived through institutions and elections, but also through information — through how issues are framed, voices represented, and power made visible. Media thus emerge as both the arena and the instrument through which democratic life unfolds.

Citizens repeatedly highlighted that media practices are integral to democratic legitimacy: they shape trust, accountability, and participation. Yet, this relationship is described as deeply ambivalent. While participants reaffirm the media's democratic mandate — to inform, educate, and scrutinise power — they also express widespread disillusionment with how these ideals are realised in practice.

The following analysis explores this dual perception, showing how citizens conceptualise the democratic role of media across three interrelated dimensions: their normative expectations, their perceived performance, and their everyday practices of trust and media use within an increasingly hybrid and digital information landscape.

MEDIA NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS

Citizens' discourses consistently affirm that media, mainly understood in the symbolic meaning of the journalistic profession, should play a **central democratic role**. Across countries, participants define good journalism through four core values: **independence, neutrality, accuracy, and public responsibility**. These are seen as the preconditions for citizens' ability to form informed opinions and to hold decision-makers accountable.

🇨🇪 **Czech:** [FG.1] *"Participant 2: I think the role of the media should be to aggregate all that information, as Participant 8 mentioned, summarizing what has been promised and what has been fulfilled, without saying whether it was good or bad—just present the information and let people decide for themselves. It should be mostly objective".*

🇫🇷 **France:** [Int.1] *"for me, the media must have a neutral role. They must not fuel gossip and make things worse. They must have a role as journalists to ask questions that are fair on the subject. I have the impression that the media direct thinking according to their own point of view. And often, I change radio stations, precisely, because I feel the journalist's personal opinion on the subject".*

Building on these conditions, citizens also describe the democratic roles they expect the media to perform. Chief among these is the **watchdog function**: holding those in power accountable, exposing abuses, and ensuring that political promises are monitored. The expectation is that journalists not only inform but also hold those in power accountable by scrutinizing institutions, exposing abuse, and revealing dysfunction. In Germany, a focus group participant captured this expectation by highlighting how *"the media can put pressure on politicians faster than individual citizens and spread the word quickly"* [FG.1]. Similar reflections emerged in Italy, where citizens underlined the importance of the media in helping the public discern whether political discourse is appropriate or misleading.

✚ **Italy:** *The media enable us to understand whether someone is saying the right things or saying things that are inappropriate.*

Beyond scrutiny, many participants assign to the media a crucial **educational responsibility**. This is not limited to conveying news but extends to fostering political literacy and critical thinking in an age of information overload. Education here is understood not as indoctrination but as empowerment, equipping citizens with the tools to navigate complexity and form independent judgments.

✚ **Portugal:** [Int.7] *“The media basically has an obligation to educate”.*

✚ **Italy:** [Int.23] *“They should provide food for thought so that the person hearing it starts to think and seeks further information to form their own idea and opinion”.*

What emerges from these perspectives is a layered vision of the media, in which structure and function are deeply intertwined. The ability of the media to inform impartially, to act as watchdogs, and to foster critical citizenship is seen as dependent on the structural guarantees of independence, neutrality, and professionalism. As several participants stressed, journalists should be **knowledgeable** [Portugal, FG.4] and remain outside political **entanglements** [Italy, Int.27]. In this sense, Europeans do not describe the media simply as a channel of information, but as a cornerstone of democratic life whose effectiveness relies on the integrity of the conditions under which it operates.

✚ **Poland:** [FG.4] *“A journalist must have knowledge, well, it is impossible to write a good article without it, or to convey information clearly, if there is no knowledge of the subject, proper education. Education of some sort, it doesn't have to be specifically directional, but well, some kind of knowledge simply must have”.*

✚ **Italy:** [Int.27] (Journalists) *They should be people outside politics.*

PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE: BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY

Far from embodying the democratic ideals they are supposed to represent, the media are often perceived as inadequate, subject to political and economic pressures, incapable of guaranteeing impartiality and increasingly distant from the needs of citizens.

A widespread dissatisfaction emerged regarding the current state of the media and their role in democratic life. The most frequently reported problem concerns a perceived **lack of impartiality and objectivity**. This is closely followed by concerns about unreliability and misinformation, with participants referring to manipulation, contradictions, and the absence of credible sources. Such views reflect not only a general crisis of trust, but also a deeper perception of information being strategically used, rather than serving the public good.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.3] *“Participant 22: We know that the media isn't independent. They belong to someone. Of course. And that person lobbies for certain people or parties. The media will never be the way it should be”.*

Many participants expressed frustration with what they see as **external pressures**—particularly economic and political—that compromise the integrity of the media system. Strong criticism was

directed at corporate control and profit-driven logics, such as clickbait practices, which are believed to degrade the quality of information and distort editorial priorities.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.12] *“Unfortunately, with the advent of social media, newspapers have also changed. They seek likes and views. They post useless news on Facebook, such as “today this actor went to the bathroom three times”, which is of no interest to us. But all it takes is for someone to click on that newspaper headline and the views and ads roll in. Google advertising pays them accordingly, so they try to get paid by advertising rather than real news”.*

Additionally, the precarious working conditions of journalists were seen as contributing to superficial reporting and limited independence. These concerns cast doubt on the structural neutrality of the media and on their ability to fulfil a true public service function.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.1] *“A journalist is also a human being and, on a payroll, and is afraid, even more so in the case of private media, of being fired. At RTV, practically no one has been sacked, although one was reporting on Gaza from Singapore. Or from Bangkok.*

Participant B: There's more. Not that one will be fired. Most journalists in private media are not even employed. They are self-employed entrepreneurs [note: journalists in private media are often forced to take a status of self-employed entrepreneur]. And if something is not right with the owners or editors, they just say goodbye”.

Criticism also focused on the formats and overall quality of content. Participants described the media landscape as saturated with **low-quality programming**: superficial news, sensationalist guests, poorly moderated debates, and repetitive or unengaging formats. Traditional television was singled out as emblematic of this decline, associated with outdated storytelling, populist tones, and entertainment-driven approaches. In contrast, there was a clear and consistent demand for more in-depth, accessible, and well-structured information—something that many felt is currently lacking.

✚ **Italy:** *If I turn on the TV and there are harmful programmes that are objectively bad, that's how people grow up.*

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.2] *“I get fed up watching the news and videos and everything else, because what I see is attacks on each other, and that's what it comes down to for me, for example, for me, if I'm a winner, I'm not going to say that other people's products are worse than mine, I'm going to say that mine is better than theirs, and they're always attacking, always... We're not like them, they want to do this and then they'll do that. And these attacks, no, no, they don't mean anything to me. I want to know what they're going to do to move forward”.*

✚ **Poland:** [FG.2] *“in our opinion, the stability of democracy in the context of the media is certainly undermined by the lack of professionalism of journalists. Then, there is a lot of information and there is a problem with checking whether it is credible or not. You also have to put a lot of your own energy into it. And there are no such safe places to verify it. There are also no trusted sources, but if you want to check some information, to be sure, you have to look for it yourself in many, many sources”.*

Finally, it is important to note that many citizens perceive the media as **overly focused on negative news**, which leads to anxiety, emotional fatigue, and, in some cases, a conscious withdrawal from traditional news sources. This constant exposure to negativity is often seen as a commercial strategy aimed at "selling" fear and shock, contributing to a decline in trust—especially in sensationalist outlets. As a result, people increasingly choose to limit their news consumption or turn to lighter, alternative platforms. There is a strong desire for more balanced reporting that also includes positive and constructive stories, along with a clear need to find a healthy balance between staying informed and protecting one's mental well-being.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *"Participant 5: For me, it's what happens in the world that affects how I feel or why I'm sometimes negative. When you constantly hear about climate change, the war in Ukraine, COVID, and how resources are running out, you start to feel that things aren't like they used to be. Just ten years ago, things were different, but now we have COVID, the war in Ukraine, and alarming climate issues. It feels like too much information sometimes".*

✚ **Ireland:** [FG.3] *"you look at the news now, and there's nothing in the news only bad, you know".*

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.1] *"we Slovenians are not only sensationalists, but negative sensationalists. And here we should follow the Croatians a little bit more and emphasise the positive things a little bit more. But we are not able to do that".*

Yet these critiques coexist with **recognition of quality journalism**. In nearly every national corpus, citizens identify positive examples — investigative reporters, reputable newspapers, or respected anchors — who still embody professional ideals. Citizens do not reject the role of the media outright; rather, they express hope for a more transparent, inclusive, and democratically engaged information environment.

Public service broadcasters—though not immune from criticism—were generally viewed in a more favourable light compared to private or commercial outlets. In many discussions, they were described as anchors of **reliability** within increasingly fragmented media landscapes. Participants valued their efforts to maintain neutrality, balance, and factual accuracy, especially when these institutions operated under transparent public interest mandates and robust regulatory oversight. Concepts such as impartiality and objectivity were often evoked not merely as descriptive traits but as normative ideals—qualities that participants believed public media could and should embody more consistently.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.3] *"Participant G: I find RTV quite objective. I find it maybe a little bit more left-leaning, but I still find it quite objective".*

✚ **Estonia:** [Int.K] *"overall, Estonia is very, is very like, very good. Yeah, especially the state media, because the state media doesn't speak about gossip or so. For me, that's the best you could get, because they don't, yeah, they don't really speak about gossip or too much about sport, which I don't care so much. They have just clear information".*

Although rarely, participants also recognised the civic role of the media in promoting democratic engagement. Media were valued when they:

- facilitate public debate,
- supported citizen awareness and action (e.g. during elections or public campaigns),
- and helped individuals make informed decisions.

In this regard, media are seen not only as sources of information but also as tools for education, empowerment, and active citizenship.

🇮🇹 **Italy:** [Int. 11] *“Those online and on Facebook are a bit like those on TV. If they are newspaper articles, such as La Repubblica, they are shown as they want them to be. I see the difference more when I follow and watch a programme where people can talk and give their opinion, whether positive or negative. Because at that point there is no filter and there is someone who has the ability to say what they really think and no one interrupts them”.*

🇸🇮 **Slovenia:** [FG. 1] *“Moderator [sees Participant F nodding in agreement]: Participant F, would you also turn to journalists if you found yourself in such distressful situation? And you would still have the impression that if you tell a journalist it will go ahead?”*

Participant F: I would also go to a journalist in that case. Because you have a feeling that if you tell the journalist, it will go ahead.

Participant D: I think the media still has some power. Especially the traditional ones. In the past, if you threatened with the media when you got into a conflict, it helped. Now we don't have such problems or experiences anymore. But I would say that the media still have some power. If you are sure that you are right and that it is not going to continue, it is right to go to the media”.

Overall, citizens' assessments of the media oscillate between deep disappointment and cautious recognition. While they denounce political interference, commercialisation, and the dominance of negativity, they also acknowledge the continued presence of professional ethics, committed journalists, and public broadcasters striving to inform and educate. This coexistence of critique and appreciation suggests that, despite widespread distrust, people have not abandoned the ideal of journalism as a democratic institution — rather, they call for its renewal and adaptation within an increasingly digital and fragmented information landscape.

DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A DOUBLE-EDGED ARENA

While the above reflections mainly concern the concept of media in relation to the professional sphere of editorial offices and journalists, participants also discussed the broader digital environment, discussing its potentiality as spaces for peer-to-peer and public communication. Social media emerged as a recurring reference — both as a challenge and an opportunity for democratic engagement. These remarks, although less central, complement citizens' views on how mediated participation is evolving.

The negative **impact of digital media**, especially social platforms, was a recurring theme. Social media were frequently associated with echo chambers, polarising algorithms, fake news, hate speech, and addictive behaviours. Participants expressed concern that the digital environment amplifies the flaws of the broader information ecosystem, deepening divisions and undermining the possibility of a constructive public discourse.

✚ **France:** [FG.2] “PE (M, 19): In networks, there is an algorithm. And so, in relation to sensitive information or precise information that you defend, it will lead to certain parties. So ultimately, you're going to like a party more, precisely, because you only liked one thing about the party. And so, little by little, with the algorithm, it will only give you things that will be in favor of that party. And so, your idea will be completely distorted”.

✚ **Germany:** [FG.2] “P1: I would put everything in the social media sector at the very, very bottom of the list in terms of media quality. We're often somehow caught up in a bubble. For example, if you realize: I'm interested in AfD topics, then I only get AfD topics. That's why a medium like a printed newspaper or something like that is somehow better, because in the end a wide range of opinions are presented. And the newspaper doesn't know [what interests me]”.

Another area of concern relates to issues of **censorship**, exclusion, and representational imbalance. Several participants referred to both public and private media as engaging in forms of censorship, while many felt that ordinary citizens are rarely given a voice. The invisibility of minorities, and a perceived lack of attention to people's real problems, reinforced the sense that the media often fail to represent society in all its complexity.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.29] “A: Before, when there weren't these differences between channels, or rather there weren't such big differences between Rai channels and other channels like La 7, recently there's been a clear difference, in my opinion, in that various things have been censored on Rai channels and so, in my opinion, information is no longer as “free” as it was before, it's very guided. In short, in my opinion, even with regard to newspapers, i.e. what news to report and how to report it, everything is quite guided, in my opinion, unlike other channels”.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.2] “Participant E: Even if there are those who dare to say something outside, so that they don't obey, either they are removed to another news slot or back to the office”.

✚ **Estonia:** [Int.1] “Person L: Yeah, it's not really democracy when you're limiting your journalists on what they want to post about. And if it especially if it was against EKRE. Then I read that it was definitely like censored somehow, or they did, or the editor didn't, the main editor didn't let it go through”.

At the same time, **social media** emerged in the discussions as both a challenge and an opportunity for democratic engagement. Across groups, participants highlighted their role as powerful tools for rapid access to information and as key channels for reaching younger generations who increasingly rely on digital platforms as their main news source. The immediacy, visual appeal, and accessibility of these media were often praised, particularly for their capacity to simplify complex issues and promote the circulation of ideas beyond traditional gatekeepers. Yet, this enthusiasm was often tempered by a recognition of the risks associated with superficiality and misinformation. Still, many participants saw in short, well-crafted digital content—especially videos using clear and simple language—a way to make **democratic participation more inclusive** and responsive to contemporary communication habits.

✚ **Austria:** *I think that shorter videos in simple language are perhaps a bit more conducive to democracy, because more people are then picked up by perhaps really short and simple information.*

Ultimately, citizens' reflections on digital and social media reveal a nuanced awareness: while these platforms amplify fragmentation, misinformation, and polarisation, they also represent an unprecedented opportunity to broaden access, visibility, and participation. For many, the democratic challenge lies not in rejecting digital media, but in learning to inhabit them critically turning immediacy into understanding and connectivity into collective engagement.

DEMANDS FOR REFORM AND MEDIA LITERACY

European citizens are not merely calling for *more* information—they are demanding **better information**: independent, pluralistic, accessible, and truly useful to democratic life. Citizens express frustration with superficial reporting, sensationalism, and commercialised content. Instead, they call for **deeper analysis, better programming, more constructive narratives**, and a reduction in the excessive focus on negative news.

✚ **France:** [FG.2] *“Being more neutral, does not try to make people hear what people expect. Don't try to say what people want to hear. Show more the reality”.*

There is a clear expectation for political information to be accessible and easy to understand—well-structured, contextualised, and relevant to everyday life. Citizens want **in-depth journalism**, fact-checking, data-driven reporting, and more educational content. They also call for a journalism that connects with ordinary people, rather than focusing solely on elites, scandals, or polarised debate.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“Participant 8: Especially consulting with people of all age groups. I like it when schools explain how elections work. I'd like to see more explanations of the impact of our politicians in the Chamber of Deputies and the European Parliament, like what influence they have. But in a simplified way, not through complex laws, just explaining it clearly—how it all works. I think that education is essential”.*

Many participants call for a **structural reform of the media system**, stressing the need for greater independence—both editorial and financial. Public service media are seen as crucial actors, provided they remain politically neutral and accountable. Regulation is widely viewed as necessary to curb the excesses of private and digital media. Citizens also suggest the creation of **institutional information channels**, more specialised reporting, and dedicated programming on referendums and civic matters.

✚ **Italy:** [Int. 19] *“A: One thing I would like to see in terms of communication is a public or European body that monitors television, at least the most important channels. This would ensure freedom of information; news must be reported, but it must all be verified. There should be no filtering or reworking of the truth. I don't know if this already exists, perhaps something called Vigilanza Rai, but I don't think that's enough. There should be something at European or international level to regulate information. In my opinion, there is a lot of work to be done on this issue, at the level of social media, Meta, agreements with states and between states, to guarantee freedoms. This is what I would like to see: information that is accessible to everyone, on all channels, true and objective, without fear of exposing oneself on objective matters, at least. This does not exist, and so I would like to see it”.*

Participants across Europe widely recognised the powerful influence of the media on society, describing them as key agents in shaping public opinion, mobilising participation, and affecting civic engagement. Far from being perceived as neutral transmitters of information, the media were seen as **active forces that can inspire, divide, inform, or manipulate**—depending on how they are used and by whom they are controlled.

The capacity of the media to shape opinions was mentioned most frequently, with citizens stressing their centrality in how people form ideas, interpret political events, and decide whether to engage in democratic life. At times, this influence was seen as constructive, but many participants expressed concern that media coverage—through techniques akin to **political marketing or sensationalist framing**—can distort perceptions and steer democratic choices in ways that undermine genuine deliberation. As one Austrian participant reflected, the blurring of political communication and marketing raises doubts about whether electoral outcomes truly reflect informed judgment. Similarly, a Czech participant described how media narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic created fear and confusion, illustrating both the persuasive and disorienting power of mediated communication.

- ✚ **Austria:** [FG.1] *“I just sometimes ask myself whether the media can really bring about a representative democracy, because if I bring marketing into politics, as certain parties do, I don't know whether people vote simply because marketing has worked or because they are really interested in it and have really dealt with it”.*
- ✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“Participant 9: I, for example, during Covid, it personally influenced me at first, like, it kind of forced me, or like, people were pushed to get vaccinated a lot, but on the other hand, it kind of put some off, like it put me off at the start, because they were really scaring people with everything, how terrible everything was, and today Covid has pretty much passed. That influenced me in that time. That I was really scared until it started to settle down”.*

Social media platforms were discussed as particularly influential in this regard. Their speed, reach, and accessibility, especially among younger users, were widely acknowledged, with several participants noting that political attitudes and even voting choices are now strongly shaped by the flow of information on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X. Yet, this influence was almost universally framed in ambivalent terms. While some valued the **participatory potential of social media**, many voiced concerns about their tendency to generate echo chambers, reinforce existing opinions, and fuel polarisation through algorithmic filtering. For younger or less informed citizens in particular, this dynamic was perceived as a **threat to critical thinking and pluralism**, as it risks limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and undermining democratic dialogue.

- ✚ **Germany:** [FG.2] *“if you've just been allowed to vote for the first time, at 16, 18 or so, then you might be on TikTok or Instagram a lot or whatever. Or maybe some are still on Twitter or X. And I think that has a big influence on voting decisions, because the algorithm amplifies a lot of things and I think that you can be influenced very easily, especially at a young age”.*
- ✚ **Portugal:** [FG.1] *“The way the model is set up increases the polarisation of opinions. Because I have certain interests, I think in a certain way, certain tastes, the algorithm will bring me more of that and, therefore, I think this is a disservice to democracy, because democracy is about accepting all differences and listening. But these algorithms are polarising”.*

These reflections reveal a vision of **the media as indispensable but double-edged instruments of democratic life**: essential in shaping collective awareness and participation, yet also capable of distorting public debate and weakening the very principles of pluralism and deliberation that underpin democracy.

Table 5. Overview of the main evaluative topics regarding media's democratic role, highlighting both normative expectations and perceived performance.

Dimension	Positive Expectations	Concerns & Risks
Impartiality & Quality	Desire for neutral, balanced, well-researched journalism with constructive and informative narratives.	Frustration with sensationalism, superficial coverage, and media bias (political/economic).
Accessibility & Usefulness	Call for clear, contextualised, fact-based news that connects with everyday life and helps citizens make informed choices.	News often too complex, elite-focused, or disconnected from ordinary people's lives.
Systemic Reform & Regulation	Support for independent public service media, stronger media regulation, and pan-European oversight bodies.	Concerns about commercial influence, lack of editorial independence, and weak regulation of digital media.
Participation & Pluralism	Media should promote democratic engagement, reflect diverse views, and encourage youth and community involvement.	Fear of exclusion, echo chambers, and underrepresentation of grassroots and minority voices.
Media's Influence on Opinion & Civic Life	Media seen as powerful drivers of public opinion, democratic awareness, and civic mobilisation.	Risk of manipulation, over-reliance on marketing, and emotional influence (e.g. fear-driven coverage).
Social media	Valued for accessibility, speed, and participatory potential—especially for youth.	Risks of algorithm-driven echo chambers, misinformation, polarisation, and reduced critical thinking.

The European media landscape is marked by a profound transformation, shaped by the coexistence of traditional mass media and new digital platforms. Citizens navigate this environment by combining established outlets with emerging sources, developing increasingly diverse and complex information repertoires. At the same time, questions of trust and distrust toward media have become central: the way people evaluate the credibility, impartiality, and professionalism of news providers fundamentally affects how they consume and interpret information.

Despite the rise of digital technologies, **traditional media** such as television, radio, and the press continue to play an important role in how Europeans access news. Their persistence reflects enduring habits, but also the authority and legitimacy that many citizens still associate with legacy outlets.

✚ **Ireland:** [FG.2] *“Speaker F7: I still believe what I hear on the 6o’clock news. I still believe what I hear on the 6o’clock news. I watch it every night. I do”.*

✚ **Italy:** [FG.1] *“(M, 23): If a politician speaks on TV, I trust them more than social media”.*

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.3] *“I would probably place the written press first, as it has more investigative journalism, Expresso*

Alongside these, **digital media**—especially online newspapers, websites, and social networks—**have become increasingly central in everyday information practices.**

✚ **France:** [FG.1] *“PA (W, 30): I read the press, but online. I don’t know if that changes. Online articles.*

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.3] *“By opening that Google platform, news, or another news site, etc. It’s a way to keep up because there’s no time to turn on the television when I get home”.*

Rather than displacing one another, traditional and digital channels coexist in a **hybrid media system** (Chadwick, 2013). Citizens fluidly move between these sources, often consuming news across multiple outlets and platforms. This diversification suggests a desire to access information from varied perspectives, which can help counterbalance bias and support democratic deliberation.

Many citizens do not rely on a single medium but instead combine television, radio, press, online news, and social media in complementary ways. This **diversification** reflects not only the abundance of available sources but also a more critical and reflexive orientation toward information.

✚ **Poland:** [FG.3]:” *I go by the comparative variant of several media at the same time. And I try to form opinions based on that”.*

✚ **Czech:** [FG.2]: *“Participant 15: You have to read. I have to read even my enemy’s newspaper. That’s the Alpha and Omega. I need to know what the newspaper representing me is saying, whether it’s Rudé Právo or something else like Lidová Demokracie (both pre-1989 partisan newspapers), and I have to see the opposing*

paper, because then how can I find the middle ground, like I said here, if I only see everything from the front or from the side or from the back”.

✚ **Italy:** [FG.4] “P2 (F, 53): *I take a little bit here and there, because I’m a bit distrustful. I always question things a little”.*

Trust remains a cornerstone of media consumption. Many citizens continue to associate public service media and professional journalism with **credibility, impartiality, and independence**. Attributes such as transparency, ethical standards, and adherence to professional norms are strongly linked to trust. Journalists are evaluated not only on their ability to report facts accurately but also on their **perceived independence** from political or commercial pressures.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.10] *“I trust a YouTube channel much more, sometimes, which is self-financed with its own production, which is self-financed, which perhaps asks its subscribers for money, with a subscription, therefore self-financed, compared to a television channel. Where Rai has political management, Canale 5 historically has a right-wing slant and, in short, Rai Tre is communist television, in inverted commas. There, you know what to expect. But if I want to find more neutral information, I look elsewhere”.*

At the same time, trust is not evenly distributed across the media landscape. Citizens tend to distinguish between institutionalized forms of journalism and more commercial or entertainment-driven outlets. Public media organizations often enjoy higher levels of confidence than private channels, reflecting their mandate to provide impartial, balanced, and inclusive coverage (Trappel, 2019).

At the same time, while social media are mentioned less frequently in relation to trust, they still reveal recurring patterns and meaningful nuances. Among these, **YouTube** stands out as a platform perceived to offer relatively more trustworthy content. Its accessibility, combined with the possibility for users to engage in open discussion, contributes to a sense of credibility.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“On social media, I trust specific YouTubers who I know do thorough research when creating their informative videos”.*

✚ **Italy:** [Int.25] *“A: I don’t know who owns the newspapers on social media, so I avoid them because there are right-wing and left-wing newspapers and, obviously, the article and the author’s opinion will lean towards one side or the other. So, not knowing, I avoid them. On YouTube, on the other hand, I listened to several people and in the end I narrowed it down to these two for now because they seem more objective to me. It’s too important for me to form an opinion that isn’t influenced”.*

Rather than trusting the system as a whole, citizens seem to navigate the media environment carefully, often resorting to **critical consumption** and personal judgment to assess reliability.

✚ **Austria:** [FG.4] *“I think everything you read on the internet [should] be taken with a pinch of salt”.*

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *Participant 9: I don’t have a specific source where I get all my information. I read a bit of everything that seems sensible to me and then form my own opinion.*

Alongside trust, however, there is widespread **scepticism and distrust toward media**. Many citizens perceive the news as biased, sensationalist, or overly negative. Concerns about partisanship, echo chambers, and clickbait practices undermine the credibility of both traditional and digital outlets. Social media platforms, in particular, are frequently criticized as unreliable, not only because of the presence of misinformation but also due to the perception that they prioritize **engagement over accuracy**.

✚ **France:** [FG.2] “PE (M, 19): *The problem is that you can be completely anonymous. You can post something, but post with a fake account. It's dangerous, suddenly. Yes, social networks, in fact, are very dangerous for that. There is a lot of fake news*”.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.5] “*I don't usually take news on social media as true, so I start from that assumption, and then for the others I look for other sources to see if they are fake or not. But let's say that the news I read on social media, when I scroll through it, I almost never take it as true*”.

Although social media are praised elsewhere for accessibility and participatory potential—especially among younger generations—these data show that they are equally viewed as fertile ground for misinformation, manipulation, and ideological polarization.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.1] “*There are a lot of untruths, there is a lot of fake news. And unfortunately, it's the case that everybody is aware, but nobody has the time to check. You see something. If it's too sensational, you know it's not true*”.

Yet distrust is not confined to digital platforms. Some citizens also express doubts about the impartiality of television or the commercial motives of private media. This ambivalence illustrates that trust is conditional and differentiated, rather than absolute: people may trust individual journalists or outlets while distrusting the general system.

The European media environment is therefore characterized by a tension between **diversification and scepticism**. On one hand, citizens actively seek out multiple perspectives, verify information, and appreciate professionalism in journalism. On the other, they remain wary of partiality, manipulation, and sensationalism. This ambivalence reflects the complexity of navigating a high-choice media environment where credibility is constantly in question.

✚ **Germany:** [FG.3] “*the media definitely provide support. But everyone has to make sure they don't allow themselves to be manipulated. They have to look at where they get their information from and how they get an overall picture*”.

Rather than a simple decline of trust, what emerges is a more nuanced picture: citizens are not rejecting media outright but are engaging in **selective trust**, evaluating sources based on professional standards, institutional affiliation, and perceived independence.

The interplay of media habits and trust dynamics reveals both **challenges and opportunities** for democratic societies. Europeans increasingly combine traditional and digital outlets, diversify their media repertoires, and adopt critical practices of verification. At the same time, persistent distrust—fueled by perceptions of bias, sensationalism, and the influence of commercial or political interests—highlights **vulnerabilities in the media system**.

Strengthening trust requires not only high-quality journalism and transparent editorial practices but also robust policies for **media literacy and platform accountability**. In an era where citizens are

simultaneously more critical and more sceptical, the resilience of democratic communication depends on the ability of media institutions to sustain credibility while adapting to a fragmented and contested information environment.

Table 6. Overview of the key themes emerging from participants’ discussions on media habits, trust, and distrust. It synthesises how citizens evaluate different types of media, from traditional outlets to social and digital platforms.

Media Habits, Trust & Distrust	
Trust in Media	Trust is selective and conditional, based on perceived impartiality, professionalism, and independence.
Traditional Media	Still central—especially public TV and quality print media—seen as more reliable than social media.
Public Broadcasters	Viewed as potential guardians of democracy, if free from political and commercial influence.
Role of Journalists	Trust often placed in individual journalists rather than platforms; valued for ethics, expertise, and independence.
Social media	High visibility, low credibility—linked to fake news, echo chambers, anonymity, and manipulation.
Systemic Distrust	A broader crisis of confidence in the entire media ecosystem, not just in specific platforms.
Media Habits	Growing awareness of the need to compare sources, verify facts, and think critically.
Active Engagement	Citizens increasingly adopt a pluralistic and responsible approach to consuming information.

❖ **RQ2: What is the relationship between media and democracy?**

Citizens across Europe articulate a rich, ambivalent, and reflective view of how media relate to democracy. Journalism remains normatively central: people expect it to serve the public interest, uphold independence, and act as a watchdog. These ideals endure even as participants lament bias, sensationalism, and political capture.

Crucially, public discourse does not portray media merely as failing institutions. Participants identify positive islands — ethical journalists, balanced public broadcasters, quality investigative work, and digital spaces that foster debate and learning. Such acknowledgements show that the crisis of trust is accompanied by a continuing belief in media's democratic mission.

Digital and social media appear as double-edged infrastructures: they democratise access and visibility while eroding shared standards of credibility. Citizens experience them as both empowering and destabilising. Their everyday practices — cross-checking, comparing, discussing — testify to a growing awareness of how information shapes democracy.

Across all contexts, the relationship between media and democracy is perceived as fragile but vital. Media are seen not merely as channels of communication but as arenas where legitimacy, accountability, and participation are negotiated. The intensity of citizens' critiques reveals not rejection, but critical loyalty: a demand that journalism and digital platforms live up to their democratic potential through transparency, ethical integrity, and inclusiveness.

3.3 Political Participation and Civic Agency

Political participation is the arena where democratic ideals are translated into action, where citizens can express their will and shape collective life. In all the European contexts examined, people describe participation as a duty and a struggle: they appreciate the opportunity to get involved and make their voices heard, but often feel frustration, disillusionment or a sense of distance from formal politics.

At the European level, it would seem that participation includes several forms of engagement that reveal a deeply relational understanding of democracy, rooted in trust, recognition and shared responsibility, but also limited by social, structural and emotional barriers. Exploring these experiences highlights how citizens negotiate their democratic agency between feelings of empowerment and disaffection.

INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY AGENCY

At the institutional core, **voting remains the most widely recognized and symbolically powerful act** of democratic participation. Many respondents describe it as “the foundation” or “cornerstone” of democracy, yet their statements are often tinged with doubt about its effectiveness in influencing real change. Alongside elections, referendums and direct interactions with representatives are valued as more immediate and participatory, offering citizens a sense of closer proximity to decision-making. Such accounts illustrate that while formal mechanisms continue to carry normative weight, they are rarely seen as sufficient on their own.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“Participant 6: Voting, in my opinion. Voting is the foundation. Participant 1: I also think it’s the fundamental cornerstone, just going to vote”*

✚ **Italy:** [Int.23] *“Citizens could make their voices heard by proposing referendums. I very much welcome the fact that referendums can also be signed online”.*

✚ **Portugal:** [Int.10] *“The first basic thing is to vote, okay? It’s voting and interacting, for example, interacting with political figures, I don’t know. Seeking information about the parties, what the parties stand for, and if necessary, running for office, joining a party, running for office. I think it’s all of that, but the main foundation of democracy is that people have the freedom to vote”.*

Beyond the ballot box, **collective action retains strong symbolic resonance**. Demonstrations and strikes are framed as markers of solidarity and citizenship, but their efficacy is contested. Some citizens affirm their value as expressions of unity, while others voice scepticism, citing political co-optation or declining impact. These divergent evaluations reveal the fragility of protest as a democratic instrument: powerful in principle, yet contingent in its ability to generate meaningful political outcomes. Normative debates about protest style also emerge—distinguishing between legitimate, respectful demonstrations and disruptive or violent acts perceived as counterproductive.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.1] *“Participant 7: I think protests don’t have much weight anymore. Thanks to Babiš, who mocked the largest protest, they haven’t had the same impact since then”.*

✚ **Italy:** [Int.11] *“Doing it like a riot is useless. There's no need for riots. I think we need more dialogue, the ability to listen and talk. Even an idea that could be positive, if it comes across as a mob or shows no respect for the police, I don't like it. Instead, it would be nice to be able to express our opinions together in the square, with knowledge and respect”*

A more **everyday layer of participation** emerges through petitions, community initiatives, associations, and NGOs. These activities are valued as low-threshold, accessible avenues that provide a sense of agency, especially when individuals feel powerless in national politics. The emphasis here falls on **collective networking**—joining forces with like-minded citizens to create tangible impact, even if limited to local contexts. Volunteering and neighbourhood initiatives are seen as vital vehicles of “bottom-up democracy,” sustaining civic life outside the spotlight of institutional politics.

✚ **France:** [Int.11] *“I happened to sign a petition on the subjects I mentioned to you. I did that. With, how to say, not necessarily any illusion about the impact, but to need to have found somewhere a piece of space where I could express myself, directly, even if it is not considered behind. There are two or three key topics that we've raised. I've done that”.*

✚ **Austria:** [FG.1] *“P2: There are many ways to get involved. Most people aren't interested in them. There are lots of associations, whether they are politically orientated or not. And there are lots of neighbourhood associations, neighbourhood clubs, NGOs. I'm involved in a children's hospice and so on and so forth. You can do a lot of voluntary work”.*

✚ **Estonia:** Person A: *Who can and wants to, all kinds of opinion festivals, all kinds of community centres and things like that, which are on a smaller level. Those are places where you can have your say if you have the energy. And in fact, it's much easier to make a difference in a tiny village community somewhere than it is at the national or larger city level. If you've got four or five able people in a tiny village somewhere who get together and put their heads and their skills.*

Participation also takes place in more subtle, **everyday forms**: following news actively, attending debates, exchanging ideas, and reflecting critically on current affairs. Such practices highlight the role of **dialogue, information-seeking, and opinion-sharing** as essential components of democratic life. Even seemingly modest gestures—discussing politics with family or neighbours, fact-checking claims, or explaining issues to those with limited media access—become ways of sustaining an informed public sphere. Democracy, in this sense, is enacted not only through formal institutions but also through the ongoing circulation of ideas and arguments in daily life.

✚ **France:** [FG.2] *“PE (M, 19): Above all, it would be active information that should be obtained. It would be necessary to learn a lot about the subject, take time, truly create a constructive opinion and not just brief ideas”.*

✚ **Austria:** [FG.1] *“P9: Yes, I think exchanging ideas, although I have the feeling that this has somehow become old-fashioned. So, taking part in discussions, going to*

information events. Yes, maybe also (...) reading and researching a lot. Yes, in that direction..."

✚ **Czech:** [FG.3] "Participant 22: Democracy isn't just about politics, but also about people coming together and talking".

Finally, participation also includes **symbolic and unconventional forms** that challenge traditional definitions. Abstention from voting, selective engagement with media, or critical withdrawal from political debates are framed by some as deliberate acts of dissent. Rather than signalling apathy, these practices often express **disillusionment with established institutions** and a desire to maintain autonomy in the face of a system perceived as unresponsive. Similarly, selective use or avoidance of certain media channels illustrates how citizens consciously navigate the information environment, asserting their agency in shaping what counts as legitimate participation.

✚ **Italy:** P4 (m, 61): Not voting is also a vote. Statistically, I am at least in the group that has not been voting for a few years. There was a time when the Five Star Movement appealed to me a little, but then they too fell into the trap of democracy in power, like everyone else. For ten years, it was the Left with the Centre, and now it's the Right, but the same old problems remain.

This multifaceted understanding of political participation highlights the richness of democratic involvement across Europe. Citizens employ a variety of strategies and channels to engage, challenge, and shape their political realities, emphasizing that democracy flourishes not only through elections but through everyday acts of civic commitment and collective dialogue.

PARTICIPATIONS'S OBSTACLES

Although political participation is widely recognised as an essential element of democracy, data highlights a few obstacles that severely limit its effective realisation. The responses collected show that many citizens face a widespread sense of **mistrust, disillusionment and distance from the political system**, accompanied by personal, cultural, social and economic barriers. These difficulties not only reduce the effectiveness of individual participation but also contribute to reinforcing dynamics of exclusion and disengagement.

A fundamental and widespread barrier to participation is **deep scepticism towards politics and political actors**. Many citizens feel ignored and powerless, perceiving political institutions as ineffective, corrupt, or disconnected from everyday concerns. This lack of trust erodes motivation to engage and fosters disengagement.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.4] "Participant 1: Our street is covered with pigeons. I think I wrote 2 e-mails to the inspectorate. I wrote 2 e-mails to the mayor, we were on TV ... Our street is still covered with pigeons and nobody moves anything. What am I supposed to do about it?"

Politics is perceived as ineffective or corrupted, with broken promises, lack of representation, and distance between citizens and institutions, both national and European.

✚ **Italy:** [FG.2] "I hear many people saying the same thing: 'It's always the same, they all do the same thing. Yes, there is a political difference, but regardless of who you vote for, the political situation is always the same, so I don't vote.' I have heard several people say this to me, and I saw this with the European elections, with a

disastrous turnout. And I am led to believe that many people find themselves in this situation and therefore do not vote”.

Beyond mistrust in political systems, **many individuals doubt their own ability to influence political outcomes**. A common feeling is that individual actions or complaints are insignificant, fuelling frustration and apathy. This sense of futility often stems from limited recognition or lack of practical tools to engage effectively.

✚ **Austria:** [FG.2] *“I think there is a kind of fake participation and that is something that creates frustration. I'm allowed to have a say, but I have absolutely no influence on decisions. So when (...) people say: It doesn't really matter who's at the helm anyway”.*

Respondents also problematize the media environment, citing biased, sensationalist, or inaccessible coverage:

✚ **France:** [Int.11] *“I also think that it can directly generate frustration to always hear an orientation. So, I will listen to the media that always goes in my direction. If I found one, well, finally, it's comfortable. But I think it can be... In any case, I hear a lot of people around me frustrated because of that too. I continue to go from one media to another. I listened to France Inter throughout my youth. At home, it was France Inter. I've listened to France Inter all my life, in fact. And I'm tired of always hearing it slanted in the same direction. Precisely because it's public, I'd like this radio to bring about a debate. And I enjoy it and I still listen to a lot of shows. The humor is always oriented in the same direction, etc. And I think that's a shame. We have lost in this public media space”.*

A significant obstacle is the **lack of political knowledge and civic education**, which leaves many confused about how to participate or the importance of doing so. Without clear understanding or guidance, citizens may withdraw from political engagement, perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and abstention.

✚ **Italy:** *Many, for lots of reasons, including political ignorance, can't make decisions and prefer to abstain, which I think is wrong. Precisely because it's a power given to us, I think we should use it to the full. It's not fair that so many people don't take advantage of it; it's a right they're denying themselves, but it's a very special right, for us, for all Italian citizens. We have worked so hard to get it... it is a waste.*

✚ **Portugal:** [FG.1] *“Lack of training, lack of education. We had to have more educators and more trainers at all levels”.*

✚ **Austria:** [FG.3] *“P7: I find [it's] very difficult to get correct and good information. And this party programme, you also have to..., you first have to [find it and then understand] what they really want and the way there is too long for me. [If] you know straight away: OK, this party does this, I know my way around, this is what I want, then I might be more likely to vote, because then I know what I want, or... But these are usually posters that say something on, something that doesn't work”.*

Emotions such as **fear, shame, and anxiety** also act as significant deterrents to political participation. In polarized or hostile environments, individuals may fear retaliation, social exclusion, or personal harm, especially minorities or dissenting voices.

✚ **France:** [Int.8]: *"Hate speeches, speeches by Jean-Marie Le Pen, by Éric Zemmour, by his girlfriend, people like that, people who in municipalities burn cars, where mayors from the Front National and who say that it's the Arabs. This kind of thing, that's the danger for me. And when you see them all the time and they talk, then there are consequences".*

✚ **Poland:** [FG.1] *"I think to myself that in Poland very often taking part in some actions that are associated with politics is considered a shame. And I think about the fact that if we know someone who has participated in such actions, then maybe we become more accustomed to it, that there is nothing wrong with going to a political demonstration and that normal people also take part in it, and not just, I don't know, some paid agents".*

✚ **Austria:** [FG.3] **"P2:** *I don't know. You're afraid of doing something wrong. So now I've been to the elections or the democratic right...I have a child, I don't want to go demonstrating with my daughter for other things. I don't know what to vote for. There are, I don't know, five left-wing parties and one right-wing party. Yes, you're afraid of doing the wrong thing, of voting for the wrong thing".*

The risk of publicly exposing or being judged limits political expression, especially for minorities or opposition groups.

✚ **Italy:** [Int.30] *"For me, quite simply, it's much harder to walk in a march, and if violence breaks out, I'm the first to end up on the ground. They scare me a lot. Once, they really scared me. They were extremely dangerous situations from my point of view. Even the noise... it's not for me. Maybe that's why I don't participate much, besides the fact that maybe I do participate and then at some point they put out a new message that I don't agree with".*

Finally, concrete practical barriers also restrict participation, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. These include difficulties in voting procedures, lack of time, bureaucratic hurdles, and geographic distance from polling stations or political events. The digital divide and inaccessible information further exacerbate exclusion.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.4] *"Participant 38: I think it generally discourages people from voting because, for example, if you start taking an interest in politics at 35 or, for instance, my parents, who are around 50 and never really went to vote much, my brother and I managed to convince them that it's important, not just for them but also for us. It took long evenings of watching, reading, explaining, and communicating, but not everyone can handle that or wants to spend that much time and effort thinking about it. It's easier to just not go to vote and say it doesn't matter because it doesn't matter who you vote for".*

✚ **Estonia:** [Int.A] *"Person A: It's maybe not the most important thing, but in a way it's very important. What a friend of mine once said to me is that a lot of parties and politicians and others, they actually talk over the head of the average person. Which is also absolutely, some of the Social Democrats agree with that. The things that they are planning and want to do and all of their principles are talked about in such a way that you have to be in the know or at least you have to be in a way political or at least*

have a higher education to understand these things. It goes over the head of the average Estonian”.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Despite frustrations and obstacles, **citizens across Europe articulate a strong desire for democratic environments that make participation both possible and meaningful**. Their reflections converge on a set of conditions that they see as essential for enabling engagement: credible institutions, accessible information, sustained education, effective tools, collective mobilization, and tangible outcomes.

A recurrent demand concerns **the credibility of political actors** and the need for transparent, trustworthy processes. Citizens emphasize that politics should not remain distant or abstract but should be anchored in spaces of dialogue where ordinary people can make their concerns heard. Many highlight the value of local debates, town-hall meetings, and political festivals where face-to-face interaction fosters **proximity and mutual understanding**. These moments of encounter are seen not as partisan events but as opportunities to strengthen the democratic bond between representatives and citizens.

🇦🇹 **Austria:** [FG.2] *“P4: Simply give people more opportunities (um) to get involved in this discussion process. So more, more discussions at community level, where people are simply invited to join in and have their say. And that doesn't have to be limited [only] to this area. Simply make this offer from the administration, from the parties, make this offer globally (...)... It's not a party event, it's just four different parties sitting there and making this offer: Come and talk to us, tell us your concerns”.*

🇮🇹 **Italy:** A: *At the local level, they should organise more political meetings and debates in cities. I really like them and see them a lot on TV. I've never been to one in person, but it would be nice. And it's something that young people are passionate about, even though politics has no age limit. In my opinion, it's a solution that would work well. Organising political festivals, where politicians present their ideas, there's a debate, a moderator. It's something I'd like and it would also work well for other target audiences. So not just on TV but also live.*

Equally important are media that are accessible, comprehensible, and capable of fostering inclusion rather than polarization. Respondents ask for formats that simplify complex issues without trivializing them and that reach younger audiences through concise, creative, and engaging forms. From short videos to playful campaigns, citizens underline that political communication should not alienate but invite people into the conversation—**humanizing politics and lowering barriers** to entry.

🇨🇪 **Czech:** *humanizing politics because for many people, it's complicated, and they don't want to deal with it. I get that when you watch a debate like on Václav Moravec's show, where two people are yelling at each other, it's hard for the moderator to control them, and no one really enjoys it. Maybe also more campaigns like "Convince Grandma" or something similar that resonates with society and reminds people that elections are happening and why they should vote. But in a non-violent, entertaining way.*

🇩🇪 **Germany:** *P1: Maybe simplify the content in general, because many young people are on reels or shorts or something like that, for example. Is it possible to somehow reel off party platforms within 30 seconds? So that you can perhaps get some information.*

Across age groups, there is broad agreement on the importance of **civic and political education**. Respondents insist that democratic engagement must be cultivated from a young age, not only in schools but also through universities, community programs, and lifelong learning. Education is described to empower citizens to recognize their role, resist apathy, and appreciate the tangible impact of their choices. Without this foundation, young people in particular risk becoming detached from formal democratic processes.

🇸🇮 **Slovenia:** *[FG.3] “Participant C: I think young people should be more involved in elections. Because, as I said before, when I’m involved in electoral commissions, we need to keep statistics by age. And young people are maybe 20%, but more than 50% are over 65. So I would say that the younger generations are very poor voters. I think that young people should be encouraged to participate and should be told that nothing is going to change without them taking part in elections. Nothing.*

Participant A: It seems to me that young people are being made sufficiently aware of the importance of elections. It’s just that they still don’t believe the stories enough to find it worthwhile.

Participant B: I would add here that they are not taught enough about it”.

People are asking for **more ways—and better ways—to engage**. Proposals include simplifying voting procedures, strengthening direct democracy tools like referendums, experimenting with new formats such as citizens’ assemblies, and rethinking electoral systems to make political choices more meaningful. Some suggest mandatory voting, others propose age limits for candidates. But overall, the request is the same: **make democratic tools functional, inclusive, and responsive**.

In this context, many look to France as a model—not of perfection, but of active civic resistance. French citizens are often admired for their willingness to mobilise collectively when faced with injustice or unpopular policies. This is seen as a sign of a healthy, assertive democratic culture—where protest, visibility, and collective action are used to defend rights and shape outcomes. The contrast with more passive or resigned attitudes elsewhere is striking and often serves as a wake-up call.

🇮🇹 **Italy:** *[FG.3] “We are not capable of doing what the French did, with clashes and revolutions, as the French example teaches us. Instead of voting, let’s organise a big demonstration and start rounding up those who have been causing trouble. Unfortunately, it is obvious that some violence may break out, because we are not all the same, but if there were a big demonstration in the streets...”*

🇵🇹 **Portugal:** *[FG.4] “I’ll give an extreme example from France, where they always work. It’s very extreme, the protests in France. But here in Portugal, we see people going and striking, then the machinists strike. In France, everyone goes on strike. There’s a common cause. And if the nurses aren’t doing well, the whole country stops until the nurses are heard. I think that in Portugal, we don’t have that sense of general unity like the French”.*

A recurring theme is the power of **local communities and close social ties**. Participation feels easier and more rewarding when it is rooted in trust, solidarity, and shared goals. Proximity matters—whether geographical, relational, or cultural. Citizens are more inclined to act when they see their efforts contribute to something tangible and when mutual respect and collaboration are present. Volunteering, neighbourhood initiatives, and symbolic actions often serve as stepping stones into broader civic life.

✚ **Austria:** [FG.1] *“the example of “voluntary”: well, there is a huge difference between us in Vienna and the federal state or the provinces. There are actually 1.3 million people doing voluntary work. Me too, but in many different areas. The point is that it's lived there [in the country] and in Vienna it's completely different. You don't even know your neighbour, one floor above you. And that's one of the things that makes it difficult to get involved in voluntary work. Because that's how volunteering works: Don't you fancy popping round? Have a look at it... It's difficult in the city, but it works perfectly in the countryside”.*

Finally, participation must be seen to work. Many express frustrations at efforts that seem to go nowhere—blocked by bureaucracy or ignored by decision-makers. **Motivation depends on outcomes**. When people experience “small victories” or even symbolic recognition, they feel more inclined to engage again. What citizens ultimately seek is not perfection, but a sense that their voice matters, that something changes because of it.

✚ **Slovenia:** [FG.2] *“Participant D: I think there should be some small victories for the people. That maybe more people would try to make some change. Because I agree with that. You, let's say, as an individual or as a group, are trying and trying to do something. But in the end you will not do anything because somewhere some bigot will call somebody and say that it will not go through. And all your efforts, or the efforts of several people, are in vain and for nothing”.*

In summary, **people want to participate—but they need fertile ground to do so**. This means credible and responsive politics, transparent and inclusive media, strong civic education, and effective tools for engagement. Political participation does not grow in a vacuum; it is nourished by trust, proximity, knowledge, and recognition. When these elements are in place, participation becomes not only possible—but natural.

❖ **RQ3: How do people perceive their (political) participation in democracy?**

In conclusion, citizens perceive political participation as a **broad and evolving field of democratic action**, encompassing both formal and informal practices. Voting remains a symbolic cornerstone, yet it is no longer seen as the sole or even the most effective avenue for influencing decisions. People increasingly value civic engagement, volunteering, and everyday dialogue as equally meaningful ways of “doing democracy.”

However, this sense of agency coexists with widespread **disillusionment and fatigue**. Structural barriers — such as lack of trust, limited access to information, and perceived political inefficacy — intersect with emotional and social factors, from fear of exposure to apathy and shame. These dynamics generate what might be described as a **paradox of participation**: citizens affirm the importance of engagement but often feel unable or unmotivated to act within systems they view as unresponsive.

Despite these challenges, the data also reveal enduring **aspirations for renewal**. People call for participatory formats that are inclusive, transparent, and dialogic; for civic education that empowers rather than alienates; and for visible outcomes that restore faith in collective action.

Political participation, as citizens conceive it, is therefore not a static behaviour but a **relational and affective process** — one sustained by trust, recognition, and opportunities for meaningful contribution. When these conditions are met, democracy is experienced not as a distant ideal, but as a shared and lived practice of agency and belonging.

Table 7: Overview of key issues that have emerged with regard to forms of democratic citizen participation, obstacles and opportunities for fostering interest.

Participation	Main Obstacles Identified	Opportunities
Institutional Participation	• Disillusionment with electoral outcomes • Lack of trust in political actors. • Bureaucratic complexity and procedural barriers.	• Simplify voting and procedures. • Strengthen referendums and citizens' assemblies. • Make politics more accessible and dialogic.
Collective Participation	• Fear and shame. • Polarisation and politicisation of movements. • Lack of impact.	• Foster inclusive and civic mobilisations. • Promote local protest and debate • Recognise symbolic "small victories" to maintain engagement.
Civic and Community Engagement	• Limited visibility and institutional support. • Urban isolation and lack of networks in large cities. • Resource constraints.	• Support community-based initiatives. • Encourage partnerships between NGOs and local authorities. • Recognise civic volunteering as political contribution.
Informal Participation	• Information overload and disinformation. • Decline of public debate spaces. • Emotional fatigue from negative news.	• Media literacy education. • Encourage public dialogue through schools and communities.
Symbolic and Critical Acts	• Misinterpretation as indifference • Lack of institutional mechanisms to channel dissent constructively.	• Recognise dissent as part of democratic expression. • Develop new participatory forms for critical voices.

3.4 Media as Democratic and Participatory Infrastructures

In contemporary democracies, media are more than channels of communication: they are the infrastructures through which public participation, visibility, and accountability are enacted. As previous sections have shown, citizens view democracy not only as a system of values and institutions, but also as a **set of communicative practices** that allow them to be seen, heard, and connected to others. Within this broader framework, the media become a crucial interface between private opinion and public action.

The analysis in this section explores how citizens perceive and use both traditional and digital media as tools for civic and political engagement. In doing so, it addresses the fourth research question: *What roles do the media play in people's democratic participatory practices?*

Participants' accounts reveal a complex and often **ambivalent picture**. On one hand, social and digital platforms are valued for their accessibility and immediacy: they enable individuals to share views, mobilise support, and engage in collective discussions. On the other, these same platforms are criticised for fuelling polarisation, misinformation, and superficial debate. Traditional media continue to be associated with visibility and legitimacy — particularly for amplifying social issues and prompting political responses — yet they are often seen as distant and closed to citizen input.

Taken together, these narratives portray a **hybrid media environment** in which opportunities for participation coexist with deep scepticism about the effectiveness and quality of mediated engagement. Citizens' reflections reveal both the persistence of democratic aspirations and the growing awareness that the infrastructures enabling participation also shape, limit, and sometimes distort it.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND INCLUSION IN A HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEM

Social media emerge as the most frequently mentioned tools for political participation, particularly among younger generations, who value them for their capacity to circulate opinions, support petitions and online campaigns, mobilise people rapidly, and encourage collective fact-checking practices. In the Czech Republic, for example, one participant highlighted the usefulness of “community corrections” on Twitter, which allow misleading information to be contextualised and countered with verified details. In Estonia, another participant emphasised the **openness of social media platforms**, where “anyone can become an influencer” and seek to impose their opinion in the public sphere. These accounts point to the way in which social media are not only channels of consumption but also spaces for producing and negotiating political narratives.

🇨🇪 **Czech:** [FG.4] *“Participant 30: I really like the community corrections on Twitter, where there's some information, and below it, there's the real story. I think that's great. I understand that something similar is harder to do on TV, but I think it would be great if it existed. Some contexts for the information, maybe”.*

🇪🇪 **Estonia:** [FG.1] *“Participant D: Social media is today open to everyone, and there you can... you can become an influencer [?] and then you're the one who... the one who can impose his opinion”.*

For citizens less accustomed to digital technologies, however, traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers remain relevant, offering visibility and the possibility of triggering political responses. In France, participants recalled how the involvement of journalists and photographers

during a factory closure brought the issue to the public stage and elicited a political reaction, while in other cases local newspapers were invited to report on professional or civic initiatives in order to reach a wider audience. These examples underline how legacy media are still seen as capable of generating **political attention**, even if their role is increasingly perceived as indirect and mediated.

✚ **France:** [FG.3] *“PE (M, 50): Yes, to call on a journalist during a factory closure, for example, that they intervene with photographers, cameras, everything necessary to make politicians react, precisely. So that’s a way to do it.*

M: Have you ever asked for a newspaper?

PE (M, 50): Yes. In my professional case, when I opened an agency, I asked the local newspaper to come and write an article”.

Alongside these established channels, some participants referred to newer **digital tools**, including online platforms, electronic petitions, surveys, apps and blogs, which were described as alternative spaces for expressing opinions and accessing information. In the Czech Republic, for instance, the platform *Seznam Médium* was mentioned as a site where citizens can publish articles or comments and potentially gain visibility among a broader readership. Such references suggest that contemporary political participation takes place within a **hybrid media ecosystem**, where traditional and digital channels overlap but continue to serve different functions.

✚ **Czech:** [FG.4] *“Participant 30: Seznam has a platform called Seznam Médium, where people can write their articles, and if they’re good, they get some publicity among those who follow it. So that’s one way to publicly express your views.*

Moderator: Like writing an article.

Participant 30: Yes, or a comment, anything”.

The enthusiasm for these tools is nonetheless accompanied by significant reservations. Social media, despite being recognised as powerful spaces for expression and mobilisation, are often criticised for fuelling polarisation, spreading hate speech and disinformation, and being shaped by opaque algorithmic logics. As a German participant observed, posting a comment on Twitter is unlikely to influence politics in any meaningful way and serves mainly as a form of venting. In France, concerns were raised about the levelling effect of open access, which puts citizens without expertise on the same footing as professionals, philosophers or doctors, and was described as “very dangerous” for the quality of debate.

✚ **Germany:** [FG.2] *“If I leave a comment on Twitter, for example, that this could have any influence? I don’t think so at all. So how am I supposed to have an influence on politics if I leave a comment? I can perhaps vent my anger there, but how am I supposed to be able to influence anything?”.*

✚ **France:** [FG.3] *“PC (W, 65): I believe that the danger is that any ordinary person who does not have knowledge, who does not know their subject, who has the same access as someone informed, as a philosopher, as a doctor. And that is very, very dangerous”.*

Traditional media are also regarded with ambivalence. Some participants described them as distant, one-directional and closed to citizen interaction. In Italy, for example, television and newspapers were seen as spaces that deliver news without allowing commentary or dialogue, while in the Czech

Republic participants stressed that media outlets remain subject to external influence and therefore cannot fully reflect the interests of ordinary citizens. These perspectives suggest that while traditional media retain their function of visibility and legitimacy, they are rarely considered as genuinely participatory arenas.

🇮🇹 **Italy:** [Int.25] “Q: *In your opinion, can television, newspapers and radio be a space where citizens express themselves and talk about issues affecting them, or are they closed spaces?*

A: *In my opinion, they are distant. It seems that citizens seek them more for interaction and comments, to create more of the same. Then again, I don't use many other communication systems, except YouTube and social media, just to keep up. However, it seems to me that there is more news and comments below. News on the TV news pushes towards a type of communication and there are no comments below”.*

🇨🇪 **Czech:** [FG.3] “Participant 22: *Even if you get involved in the media, you still won't achieve anything. Maybe during elections or something like that, where there's more political power, but otherwise, the media is always influenced by someone. It will never be different”.*

Overall, citizens across contexts recognise that both digital and traditional media offer channels for political participation, but their testimonies also reveal a **widespread sense of disillusionment** about the actual effectiveness of these tools and the quality of debate they foster. Social media are seen as dynamic and accessible but distorted by mechanisms of hate, polarisation and superficiality, whereas traditional media continue to play a recognised but largely passive role.

What emerges most clearly is a call—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—for **more inclusive, regulated and transparent platforms**, able to reconcile openness with deliberative quality and to restore meaning to media-based political participation.

❖ **RQ4: What roles do the media play in people's democratic (participatory) practices?**

Media infrastructures are understood as both arenas and tools of participation. Traditional journalism enables deliberation and accountability when trusted, while digital media facilitate expression and mobilization but risk fragmenting public discourse. Citizens therefore perceive media as ambivalent infrastructures—capable of empowering civic agency only when combined with transparency, literacy, and ethical responsibility.

Table 8. Participants’ reflections on the opportunities and limitations of engaging in democratic life through media channels. It contrasts perceived positive and negative aspects across three main categories — social media, traditional media, and digital platforms — as discussed in focus groups and interviews.

Category	Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
Social media	• Accessible and widely used, especially by young people • Facilitates fast mobilisation, information sharing, and online activism • Enables expression of personal opinions and community fact-checking	• Spread of hate speech, polarisation, and disinformation • Perceived lack of real political impact • Algorithmic manipulation and echo chambers
Traditional Media	• Still relevant for less digitally savvy citizens • Can attract public attention and political responses through visibility (TV, radio, newspapers)	• Seen as distant, non-interactive, and controlled • Limited space for direct citizen participation
Digital Tools & Platforms	• Blogs, petitions, apps, and surveys offer alternative channels for civic engagement • Support self expression and public visibility	• Perceived as fragmented or lacking influence • Risk of superficial engagement without institutional follow-up
Overall Perception	• Media provide diverse tools for democratic participation • Can complement institutional participation when used effectively	• Quality of debate often poor- Participation feels symbolic rather than impactful

INTERWOVEN DYNAMICS: MEDIA, DEMOCRACY, AND THE EUROPEAN PARADOX

The data collected highlighted a key issue: media and democracy are deeply intertwined, shaping citizens' perceptions, expectations and engagement. Across Europe, citizens recognise both the empowering potential of the media and its capacity to distort, polarise or undermine democratic processes. This awareness underscores that democratic life is not just a matter of formal institutions or procedures, but is continually negotiated through information flows, public debates and mediated communications (Habermas, 1996; Keane, 2013).

In the European contexts analysed, the relationship between citizens and democracy emerges as deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, there is a lasting normative attachment to democratic ideals; on the other, a persistent disillusionment with political institutions and processes. It is important to emphasise that this paradox is not external to the media environment but is mediated and continuously reshaped by it. The media act both as a lens through which citizens perceive democratic performance and as an arena in which democratic tensions are enacted, negotiated and amplified (Couldry, 2012; Voltmer, 2013).

This chapter discusses the key findings emerging from the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 2 and 3, situating them within broader theoretical and normative perspectives on democracy and communication. It explores how European citizens articulate the complex relationship between **media, democratic ideals, and lived political realities**, revealing both tensions and opportunities for democratic renewal.

4.1 Democracy and Media Between Idealism and Reality

The qualitative evidence gathered through interviews and focus groups across European countries reveals a recurring and deeply rooted tension: the gap between the *imagined ideal* of democracy and its *lived reality*. This divide, far from being an abstract notion, emerges as a pervasive dimension of citizens' everyday experiences with political institutions and the media. Participants consistently expressed strong normative commitment to democratic values—freedom, equality, participation, and respect—yet their accounts were marked by frustration, disillusionment, and fatigue when reflecting on how these principles are enacted in practice.

This discrepancy between idealism and reality—or, in symbolic terms, between the *imaginary* of democracy and its *material performance*—resonates with longstanding theoretical perspectives that define democracy as both a normative horizon and a continuously contested process (Schumpeter, 1942; Habermas, 1996; Keane, 2013). Derrida (1994) famously described democracy as a “*democracy to come*”—not a fixed political order, but an open promise that can never be fully realised. Similarly, Žižek (2008) interprets democracy as a space structured by its own contradictions, where the ideals of freedom and equality coexist with systemic limitations, exclusions, and ideological distortions. In this sense, democracy in Europe appears less as a stable institutional arrangement and more as an ongoing negotiation between aspiration and implementation, vision and experience.

The media stand at the very centre of this negotiation. They not only mediate citizens' perceptions of how democracy functions but also constitute a space in which democratic ideals and frustrations are publicly enacted, debated, and reinterpreted (Couldry, 2012; Voltmer, 2013). From our data, citizens frequently perceive the media as both *necessary* and *problematic*: indispensable for enabling participation and accountability, yet also complicit in fostering polarisation, simplification,

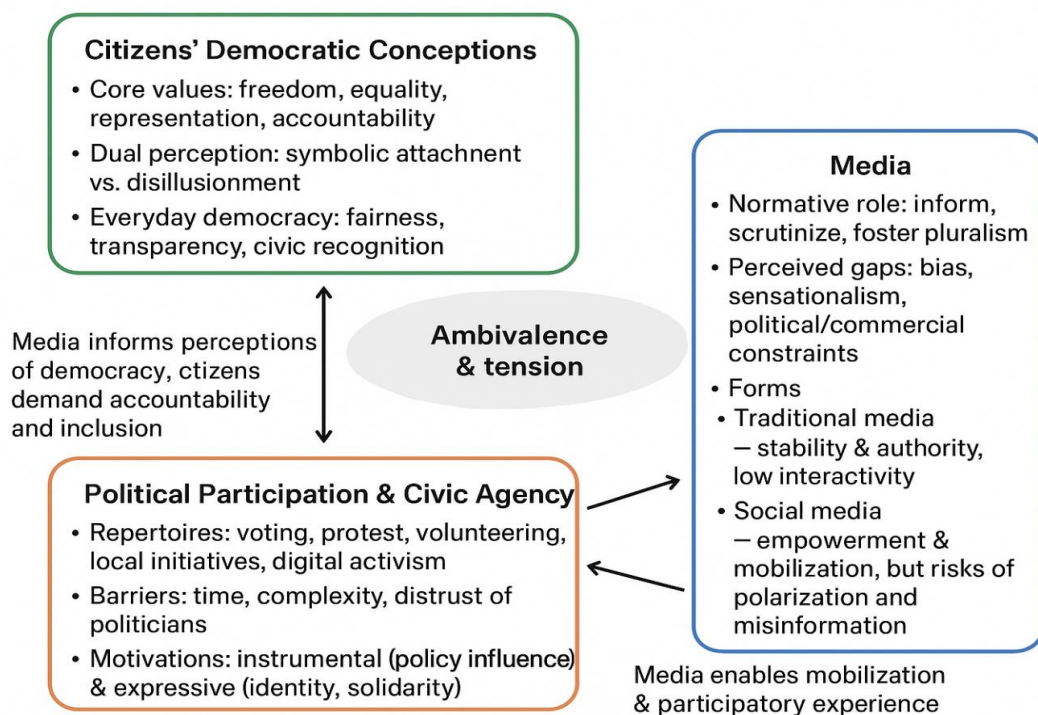
and cynicism. The logic of mediated communication—dominated by personalisation, dramatisation, and the pursuit of visibility (Strömbäck, 2008; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014)—often transforms politics into spectacle, diluting its deliberative dimension.

Digital platforms intensify this paradox. On one hand, they expand opportunities for civic engagement, self-expression, and horizontal communication, enabling citizens to challenge established narratives and institutions. On the other hand, they accelerate dynamics of disinformation, fragmentation, and mistrust, reinforcing the perception that democratic discourse is increasingly shaped by algorithms rather than by reasoned debate. This ambivalence confirms what our participants articulated across contexts: the same tools that empower citizens also erode confidence in the systems meant to represent them.

Empowerment and distrust, therefore, are two interwoven expressions of the contemporary European democratic condition. Citizens' capacity to critically navigate information ecosystems coexists with a growing awareness of their structural limitations. In Derridean terms, this tension is not a flaw but a *constitutive openness* of democracy—its very vitality lies in being always unfinished. Žižek, conversely, would suggest that this awareness exposes the ideological dimension of democracy: its promise of universality masking deep-seated inequalities and contradictions.

In this light, the European democratic experience is best understood not as a failure to live up to its ideals, but as a constant negotiation between symbolic aspiration and pragmatic reality. Media systems, in turn, act as both the mirror and the medium of this negotiation—amplifying the contradictions of democratic life while keeping alive its imaginative potential. The “European paradox” thus lies precisely in this coexistence: a strong collective belief in democracy's ideals, sustained alongside a lucid, and at times painful, awareness of its real-world fragilities.

Figure 1. Schematic synthesis of the study's interpretative findings, illustrating the interrelations between citizens' democratic conceptions, their participatory practices, and their perceptions of media. The model highlights how these three domains—democracy, media, and participation—are interconnected through dynamics of ambivalence and tension.



4.2 Critical Pedagogy and the Democratic Imagination

If the gap between democratic ideals and democratic realities defines the contemporary European condition, the responses voiced by citizens across our fieldwork point toward a crucial educational force. In interviews and focus groups conducted across multiple European contexts, participants repeatedly emphasised the *educational role* of both the media and social institutions—schools, families, and communities—in sustaining a reflective and participatory democratic culture. This collective emphasis reveals an underlying intuition: democracy does not simply function through institutions and procedures, but must be learned, interpreted, and continually re-learned through mediated experience.

This perspective resonates with the tradition of *critical pedagogy* (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011), which conceives education as a process of emancipation and empowerment rather than transmission. Within this framework, media are not neutral channels of information but spaces of meaning-making, where citizens learn to decode, question, and re-signify the narratives that shape public life. Our data show that many European citizens demand precisely this kind of pedagogical engagement from the media—an active role in fostering *critical literacy* and providing tools to interpret democratic reality beyond superficial representation or polarised discourse.

At the same time, participants stressed that the capacity to read the media critically must be socially cultivated. Families, schools, and civic institutions were identified as key environments for developing what several respondents described as “*the ability to read democracy through the media*”. Rather than envisioning a top-down model of civic instruction, citizens articulated a circular vision of learning: the media educate citizens to democracy, but citizens, in turn, must be educated to read the media. This reflexive loop—between learning democracy and learning the media—constitutes what can be described as a *pedagogical ecology of democracy*.

Within this ecology, the tension between idealism and reality, highlighted in Section 4.1, acquires a new meaning. Rather than producing disillusionment, the awareness of democracy’s imperfections becomes a stimulus for vigilance, dialogue, and participation. In the words of Freire (1970), *conscientização*—critical awareness—emerges when individuals recognise both the limits and the possibilities of their sociopolitical environment. European citizens’ call for media and institutional accountability thus reflects not cynicism but a demand for critical co-responsibility: a form of engagement that keeps democracy alive by questioning its own conditions of existence.

Media literacy and civic pedagogy, in this sense, become democratic practices in themselves. By nurturing analytical capacities, empathy, and reflexivity, they bridge the distance between the imaginary and the real—transforming idealism into an active, self-aware vigilance rather than naïve belief. The ideal of democracy “to come” (Derrida, 1994) finds here its practical corollary: a society of citizens capable of interrogating not only power, but also the ways in which power and meaning are communicated.

In sum, critical pedagogy emerges from our research as both a condition and a catalyst of democratic renewal. It connects citizens’ symbolic investment in democracy with their practical capacity to participate and deliberate responsibly. By fostering *critical awareness*—a topic explored in the following section—such a pedagogical approach transforms the tension between idealism and reality into a productive dynamic, sustaining democracy as a living, learning process rather than a static system.

4.3 Critical Awareness and Functional Scepticism

Building upon the reflections on critical pedagogy, the notion of critical awareness represents a further stage in understanding how European citizens navigate the complex interplay between democratic ideals and everyday realities. Across the interviews and focus groups, participants often articulated a form of awareness that is neither naive optimism nor cynical detachment, but rather an alert consciousness—a reflective stance towards both democracy and the media that could be described as *functional scepticism*.

This functional scepticism emerged as a recurrent pattern in our qualitative data. Citizens across different national contexts expressed doubts about political actors, media institutions, and even democratic procedures themselves; yet these doubts were not necessarily corrosive. Instead, they often functioned as mechanisms of vigilance and self-correction—what participants described as “staying awake,” “keeping an eye on power,” or “not taking democracy for granted.” In this sense, scepticism operates not as rejection but as a mode of democratic care. It is the capacity to question, to withhold blind trust, and to demand accountability precisely because democracy is valued and desired.

In this perspective, critical awareness becomes both cognitive and ethical: a learned disposition to interpret media and politics through a lens of informed doubt and active engagement. The development of this disposition, as our previous chapter highlighted, relies on critical pedagogy—on educational processes that nurture the capacity to question without withdrawing, to critique without collapsing into cynicism. This awareness allows citizens to sustain a dynamic equilibrium between belief and critique, imagination and realism.

From a sociocultural standpoint, functional scepticism serves as a bridge between idealism and reality. It transforms the recognition of the gap between them into a generative force—a motivation to improve institutions, demand transparency, and sustain participation. Citizens who display this form of awareness are not disengaged; rather, they embody what could be termed reflexive loyalty: commitment to democratic ideals precisely through the practice of critique.

In media terms, this corresponds to a form of reflexive media citizenship (Livingstone, 2004; Carpentier, 2011), where individuals engage with information not as passive consumers but as evaluators, interpreters, and co-authors of the democratic narrative.

Ultimately, critical awareness encapsulates a mature democratic attitude: a capacity to live with uncertainty and contradiction without abandoning commitment. It transforms the tension between the imagined and the real into a productive dialectic, keeping democracy open, self-critical, and alive. In this sense, functional scepticism represents the most tangible expression of the European paradox identified throughout this report: a democracy sustained not by blind faith, but by conscious vigilance—by citizens who, precisely because they doubt, continue to believe.

4.4 Challenges and Opportunities for Democratic Renewal

The analysis presented across this chapter reveals that European democracies today inhabit a condition of simultaneous fragility and resilience. Citizens' narratives expose a persistent gap between democratic ideals and lived democracy: while values such as freedom, equality, participation, and transparency remain widely endorsed, everyday experiences are marked by disillusionment, unkept promises, and a growing sense of political distance. This tension—between *imagined democracy* and *experienced democracy*—is amplified by the mediated nature of contemporary politics, where media systems function both as vehicles of empowerment and as sources of polarisation, disinformation, and mistrust.

The structural challenges emerging from the data are multifaceted. They include intensifying political and media polarisation; the erosion of social capital and interpersonal trust; the dominance of technocratic and economic rationalities that marginalise citizens' voices; and persistent digital inequalities that translate into uneven access to knowledge, skills, and civic opportunities. Together, these dynamics feed a widespread perception of a *democratic deficit* and weaken identification with representative institutions.

Yet, amid these challenges, our research also reveals important opportunities for democratic renewal. Citizens across contexts demonstrate enduring normative commitment to democracy, coupled with growing expectations for more inclusive, transparent, and participatory practices. Emerging forms of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) illustrate new models of mobilisation based on fluid, networked collaboration. Deliberative experiments (Fishkin, 2009; Landmore, 2020) offer pathways to strengthen both inclusion and legitimacy. Local and community-based initiatives, aligned with bottom-up models of trust-building (Putnam, 2000), show that democratic vitality often re-emerges from proximity, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

Equally, the hybridisation of media systems (Chadwick, 2013) provides opportunities to reconfigure the public sphere as a space of *co-production* rather than competition. If governed transparently and inclusively, digital and hybrid media environments can nurture the kind of critical pedagogy and awareness highlighted in this report—empowering citizens to move beyond cynicism toward functional scepticism, vigilance, and reflexive participation.

In this light, **European democracy appears neither in crisis nor in consolidation, but in transformation.** Its renewal depends on bridging the distance between ideals and realities through education, communication, and participation. As the data indicate, citizens' ambivalence does not express rejection but rather *critical loyalty*: a demand for institutions that listen, include, and empower. Democratic resilience, therefore, lies in aligning democratic promises with the everyday experiences of citizens—transforming scepticism into engagement and fragility into a source of adaptive strength.

The diagram summarises the conceptual framework emerging from sections 4.1–4.3. It illustrates how the civic, political and media dimensions intersect through *critical pedagogy*, leading from the tension between *idealism and reality* to the development of *critical awareness* and *functional scepticism*. These dynamics foster a more reflective and participatory form of democratic engagement.



4.5 Policy and Practice Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that the sustainability of European democracy depends on its ability to renew itself at institutional, social, and cultural levels. Evidence gathered across multiple national contexts reveals a **paradoxical combination** of strong normative attachment to democratic ideals and growing frustration with their practical realisation. Rather than signalling democratic decline, this ambivalence may reflect a transitional moment in which citizens seek forms of governance that are more transparent, participatory, accountable, and emotionally resonant.

Supporting such aspirations calls for moving beyond a purely diagnostic understanding of “democratic fatigue” towards a shared commitment to democratic resilience. This involves not only institutional adaptation but also cognitive, communicative, and educational renewal. A reflexive and learning democracy cultivate capacities that enable **citizens and institutions to co-evolve**—to acknowledge mistakes, deliberate on competing visions, and continuously negotiate the meaning of collective life.

The following recommendations aim to translate these insights into constructive and feasible orientations for policy and practice. They combine empirical findings with theoretical perspectives on reflexive, deliberative, and communicative democracy, and are organised around three interdependent dimensions:

- ✚ **Institutional** – fostering adaptive legitimacy, procedural fairness, and accountability.
- ✚ **Social** – rebuilding trust, solidarity, and civic participation.
- ✚ **Communicative** – renewing the public sphere through education, media, and dialogic infrastructures.

Together, these directions outline a roadmap for democratic renewal in Europe—a project in which citizens and institutions act as co-creators of a shared, learning, and self-reflective political community.

1. Strengthen Substantive Democracy

Democracy’s legitimacy ultimately depends on its ability to deliver fair, inclusive, and meaningful outcomes. Across Europe, participants expressed concern about the gap between formal representation and lived experiences of justice, equity, and well-being. Strengthening substantive democracy thus implies complementing institutional design with a stronger emphasis on **social policy, distributive fairness, and civic equality**.

At the European level, it may be valuable to consider integrating democratic **performance indicators** within instruments such as the **European Semester**, cohesion policy, and **social inclusion programmes**—aligning democratic legitimacy with tangible social outcomes. Substantive democracy can be viewed not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic resource for fostering trust, participation, and collective belonging.

2. Rebuild Social Capital and Trust

Trust constitutes the invisible infrastructure of democracy. Citizens in many contexts report disconnection not only from political elites but also from one another, reflecting a decline in associational life and shared civic spaces.

Rebuilding trust could involve greater investment in **social capital and local cooperation**. Mechanisms such as **participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies**, and neighbourhood fora might be institutionalised as regular components of collaborative governance. When citizens experience that their deliberation has a tangible influence, their sense of efficacy and belonging tends to grow. European, national, and municipal authorities might explore ways to **co-finance community-based initiatives** that promote mutual learning, intergenerational dialogue, and cross-cultural exchange. Partnerships between municipalities, NGOs, and universities could help create “**civic laboratories**”—spaces for collective problem-solving that reconnect institutions and everyday life.

4. Foster Responsible Governance of the Digital Media Ecosystem

The digital environment has become a central arena of democratic communication, yet its governance remains complex and often commercially driven. Ensuring that digital infrastructures support democratic life requires a balanced and multi-layered framework.

European institutions could continue to strengthen the implementation of the **Digital Services Act** and the **AI Act**, enhancing transparency, accountability, and data accessibility. Independent auditing of recommendation systems, labelling of synthetic content, and access to platform data for public-interest research would help safeguard democratic deliberation. At the same time, policies that **reinforce media pluralism** and the sustainability of independent journalism—especially investigative and local media—could be further supported through the **European Media Freedom Act**. Complementary initiatives in media literacy and digital citizenship education remain essential to enable citizens to navigate complex information environments with critical and ethical awareness.

4. Cultivate Democratic Awareness and Lifelong Learning

Education systems play a pivotal role in sustaining democratic vitality. In many contexts, civic education remains limited or overly formalistic. A renewed approach could integrate democratic competences across all educational stages—from primary schooling to adult training—linking them with media literacy, digital competence, and civic imagination.

Collaborations among schools, universities, cultural institutions, media organisations, and civil society could foster ecosystems of lifelong democratic learning. Embedding democratic competences within the European Education Area, **Erasmus+**, and lifelong learning strategies would demonstrate an ongoing commitment to democratic capability-building as a cornerstone of European citizenship.

5. Recognise and Engage Civic Plurality

The empirical evidence highlights diverse civic orientations—idealists, critical realists, disillusioned citizens, and pragmatic local actors. Recognising this plurality is crucial for designing inclusive and responsive strategies.

Engagement policies could therefore adopt a differentiated approach: providing accessible entry points for disengaged citizens, co-creation opportunities for idealists, and structural support for local actors who act as democratic intermediaries. Mechanisms such as the **European Citizens' Panels** might evolve into permanent platforms for plural civic dialogue, ensuring that varied forms of voice continue to inform European policymaking.

6. Promote Democratic Innovation and Reflexive Governance

A resilient democracy is one that learns. Encouraging democratic innovation—through deliberative mini-publics, participatory platforms, and co-designed policymaking—can foster this reflexivity.

European and national institutions might consider supporting frameworks for democratic experimentation, funding **cross-national pilot projects**, and facilitating knowledge exchange. Building a European ecosystem for democratic innovation would enable learning across contexts and continuous adaptation. By transforming criticism into collective learning, democratic systems can embody the principle that democracy is not a finished architecture but a living process of ongoing self-correction and shared improvement.

Table 7. Main insights emerging from the qualities analysis into key challenges, citizen perspectives, and corresponding policy recommendations. It translates the empirical findings into actionable reflections for policymakers, highlighting the tensions between citizens' democratic expectations and their lived experiences.

Challenge	Citizen Perspective	Policy Recommendations
Democratic gap	Democracy valued as freedom and participation — but lived as distant, elitist, unresponsive	Substantive democracy (justice, inclusion, accountability)
Fragile trust	Unreliable institutions; trust restored only in local, transparent practices	Rebuild social capital via participatory budgeting, civic forums, community initiatives
Media ambivalence	Media as watchdogs and educators, but also as biased or sensationalist	Govern media ecosystems: algorithmic transparency, media literacy, independent journalism
Digital inequalities	Unequal access and skills hinder fair participation; polarization.	Invest in digital inclusion , critical literacy, and plural participation
Need for innovation	Citizens call for more direct, informed and collaborative participation	Promote democratic innovation: deliberative platforms, collaborative governance, digital democracy tools

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

The research findings presented in this report provide a comprehensive understanding of how European citizens perceive, experience, and imagine democracy in a period marked by institutional uncertainty, technological disruption, and social transformation. Across countries and demographic groups, **participants articulated both a profound attachment to democratic ideals and an acute awareness of the gaps between these ideals and contemporary practices.**

By combining qualitative evidence with theoretical insights, this study has illuminated the cultural, communicative, and affective dimensions of democratic life that often escape conventional institutional analysis. It demonstrates that democracy is sustained not only by formal mechanisms of representation and accountability, but also by trust, critical awareness, and social solidarity—elements that must be continuously cultivated to ensure **democratic resilience.**

The policy and practice recommendations outlined in the previous section provide a strategic roadmap for democratic renewal in Europe. They call for an integrated approach that links **institutional innovation with civic empowerment and communicative transformation.** Strengthening substantive democracy, rebuilding social capital, governing digital infrastructures, and fostering critical pedagogy are mutually reinforcing actions that can help transform democratic fatigue into democratic reflexivity.

From a policy perspective, the study contributes to ongoing EU priorities such as the European Democracy Action Plan, the Digital Services Act, the European Education Area, and the Conference on the Future of Europe. Its evidence-based recommendations align with the broader objectives of Horizon Europe Cluster 2 by promoting inclusive, participatory, and trust-based governance. Looking ahead, further research and experimentation are needed to:

- ✚ Evaluate the long-term effectiveness of participatory and deliberative mechanisms in diverse local contexts.
- ✚ Explore innovative forms of civic learning and media literacy adapted to digital environments.
- ✚ Strengthen cross-national collaboration among policymakers, educators, and civil society organisations to exchange best practices in democratic innovation.

Ultimately, the future of European democracy will depend on its ability to learn from critique, adapt to change, and build bridges between institutions and citizens. A **living democracy**—self-reflective, inclusive, and responsive—can remain the most legitimate and resilient form of collective life in an interconnected, plural, and uncertain world.

POLICY INTEGRATION AND DISSEMINATION

- The findings and recommendations of this report will feed into **Dissemination and Exploitation Activities**, including policy briefs, stakeholder workshops, and high-level dialogues with EU institutions and civil society partners.
- Results will also contribute to **academic publications, conference presentations**, and open-access datasets in accordance with the project's data management plan.

APPENDIX

A. INTERVIEW GRIDS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Interview proposal

Warm up questions

- Introduction and icebreaker questions;

1/ Political attitudes

- If you would have to describe to a class of students what democracy is, how would you describe it [In other words: What is democracy for you?]
- How do you perceive democracy in your country? Do you feel satisfied? Why?
- Are there any challenges and problems are you concerned with? Which one? Why?
- Do you trust the democratic system in your country? Why? [Follow-up: Who do you trust? In political institutions? And in others? Has your trust changed over the years? If yes, how?]

2/ (Political) Participation

- If you have to think to people participation in democracy, what actions comes to your mind? [In other words: How can people participate in democracy?]
- Did you/ were you tempted to take part of any of these actions? Why? Do you have the impression that you can make a difference with your actions? [If little or none action, let's ask: What is your opinion of the people who do take such action? What impact would make in democracy?]
- What might discourage people's participation in democracy? [Follow up: Conversely, how could people's participation be promoted?]

3/ Attitudes towards media's role in democracy

- In your opinion, what role and responsibility do the media have in democracy?
- How do you perceive the role and work of the media in your democracy? Why? [if they are not satisfied, investigate what do they think inhibits the media from supporting democracy]
- Which media do you trust the most? Why? [Follow-up: Do you perceive any differences, in terms of trustworthiness, between the news you find online and those you find on TV, radio or in newspapers?]

4/ Media use and participation

- When it comes to political news, where do you get your information? Do you use the media you told me you trust? If not, why? [Follow up: Would you say that your use of media has changed over the years? If yes, how?]
- Do you agree with what the media show you? [Follow-up: On what other issues should the media focus? Why?]
- Do you think people can use the media to participate and be heard in democracy? How and why? Which media would work better?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Focus group proposal

Introduction and Warm-up question

- Can each of you briefly introduce yourself and choose an adjective to describe yourself? If you could describe yourself in one word, what would you say?

1/ Political attitudes

- What is democracy for you?
- How is democracy in your country doing? Why? Where is it working and where not?
- How much trust do you have in your democracy? In politics? In other parts of society?

2/ (Political) participation

- How much should people participate in democracy? In what way? In politics? In other parts of society?
- What could hinder people's participation in democracy? Conversely: How could it be promoted?

3/ Attitudes towards media's role in democracy

- How do you think media can contribute to a functioning democracy?
- Do media always play these roles well? What is hampering them from supporting democracy? Which media work better, are there any differences?
- Do you trust what media publish? Why? Which media are most reliable for you?

4/ Media use and participation

- Where do you usually get your (political) news? Do you agree with what media show you? How and why?
- How much influence do the media have on people participation in democracy? Why? [If yes, how? Which media in particular?]
- How can you participate in democracy through media? Which media work better?

Wrap – up and Conclusion

- Recap the points of the discussion and ask if they want to add something;

B. CODING STRUCTURE AND ANALYTICAL PROCESS

Name	References
Democracy	1827
Democracy expectations	157
Better information	5
Better welfare	3
Citizens	70
Be informed	3
Civic education	9
Dialogue with the journalist	1
Family responsibility	3
Less complains	1
Media education	11
Military service	2
More participation	26
Direct democracy	1
Mandatory elections	2
More Referendum	7
Ongoing consultation	7
Permanent consultation	1
Younger participation	1
Pluralism opinions	4
Political education	9
Political interest	1
Community interest	6
Equality	4
Free to protest	1
Human rights concerned	3
Institutional educational campaign	1
More laws	1
New democracy	1

North countries model	2
Politics	50
Active listening	8
Change politicians	2
Collaboration	4
Direct democracy	1
Equal representation	1
Fulfil promises	4
Honesty	5
Impartiality	2
Local policy	7
More control	1
More women	1
Mutual Respect	3
National interest	1
political agreement	1
Political Education	2
Regulation	5
Post capitalism	1
Revolution	1
Transparency	8
Voting participation	2
Democracy idea	482
Abstract concept - Label	8
Access to media	1
Best possible solution	1
Community	60
Civic responsibility	5
Inclusivity	2
Mutual respect	37
Shared decisions	9
Equality	37

Protection of minorities	4
Freedom	152
Free Media	8
Freedom of choice	24
Freedom of expression	82
Freedom of participation	10
Freedom to travel	2
Liberation from fascism	3
Internationality	1
Justice	1
Laws	4
Luck	2
People power	65
Decision	28
Participation	22
Trust	1
Plurality of views	6
Process	8
Confused Process	1
Fluid Process	2
Historical Process	2
Slow process	2
Representative system	111
Majority choice	37
Political delegation	16
Rights and duties	19
Separation of power	3
Transparency	3
Democracy opinion	818
Negative	672
Bureaucracy	11
Censorship	57

Btw citizens	13
BTW parties	2
From the State	21
Citizens	121
Closed mindset	11
Controversial discussion	4
Divided	7
no mutual respect	2
Lack of civic sentiment	7
Lack of participation	23
Lack of political identity	16
Slogan choices	6
Lack of political memory	1
Old mentality	1
Old voting	1
Pointless complaints	12
Political disinterest	15
Selfish	13
Wrong political choices	10
Citizens Disempowerment	5
Constitution not respected	5
Democracy mediatization	7
Disinformation	6
Extremism	18
General system that does not work	4
Generational clash	3
Ignorance	29
Inadequate news	2
No media education	4
No political education	13
Immigration	8
Inequality	42

Discrimination	15
Elitism	4
Struggle	1
International conflicts	1
Justice system	13
Lack of transparency	1
Low-turnout government	5
Mutual interferences	14
Church	2
Corporation influence	2
EU dependence	7
Politics	261
Broken promises	35
Communication	35
Disrespectful communication	24
Ineffective communication	5
No dialogue	5
Corruption	27
Lobbies influences	15
Political patronage	1
Scandal	3
Disillusionment	10
Distant - selfish	80
No help for people	18
No results	4
Divide society	9
Fragmented parties	18
No equal representation	1
No ideals	9
No leadership	4
No representatives	8
Red herring	8

Unprepared	9
Small dictatorship	1
Too much freedom	21
Crime	3
Extreme opinions	3
Misinformation	1
Violence	3
Weak police	1
Utopia	2
Voting system	24
Difficulty voting for non-residents	3
External influence	2
Not enough referendum	4
Not for all	2
Propaganda choice	1
Too much referendum	1
Vote not respected	4
Welfare system	13
Positive	146
Accessible news	2
Better than before	4
Better than others	21
Better than dictatorship	5
Citizens help	1
Citizen's participation	4
Civic Awareness	1
Constructive scepticism	2
Electoral system	24
Freedom of speech	22
Freedom to participate	9
General surveillance	1
Inclusion	3

Justice	1
Local politics	2
New generations	1
No corruption	1
Open-mindedness	2
Pluralism	8
Politicians	6
UE	2
Working system	29
Democracy threats	96
Abstentionism	5
Passive participation	2
Censorship	2
Critical events	4
Denial voting	1
Digital age	5
Digital divide	1
Drift in values	7
Aggressiveness	3
Lack of cohesion	1
Lack of respect	2
Superficiality	1
External pressures	3
Lobbies	2
Extremism	21
Foreign aggressor	1
Ignorance	1
Incoherent welfare	1
Lack of listening	1
Media	37
Disinformation	11
Echo chambers	1

Manipulated communication	5
Media ownership	1
Social media	16
Misunderstanding	1
Polarization	1
Popular uprising	2
Structural instability	1
Violence	2
Democracy distrust	154
Abstentionism	1
Citizens disinterest	2
Covid	1
Discrimination	1
E-voting	1
Extreme opinions	3
General distrust	5
Hate speech	2
Justice	3
No citizens power	3
No future	2
Polarization	1
Politics	116
Absenteeism	1
Broken promises	28
Corruption	14
Denigration	2
Discrimination	1
Disinterest in people	18
Divisions	1
Instability	2
No accountability	6
No common perspectives	5

No real changes	3
Old politicians	1
too many alliances	1
Politics & Media	11
Fake news	1
Populism	1
UE	1
Democracy trust	120
Better than totalitarian	13
Citizens	7
Associations	1
Constitution	3
Democracy's ideal	12
Education	1
EU	2
First responders	5
Freedom	6
General system	8
Generational change	1
Hope	8
Justices	3
Media	1
Naive trust	1
NGO	1
Politics	31
Active listening	2
Benefit of the doubt	8
Control	1
Free	1
Gut feeling	3
New politicians	1
Politics preparation	2

Proximity	3
Republic president	2
Similar ideals	1
Science	1
Technical commission	1
Transparency	2
Voting system	9
With critical eye	4
Media Habits	1028
Habits	219
Always check	24
Avoid news	7
Critical eye	38
Diversification	97
Different perspectives	22
Multiple outlets	72
Faster option	2
Independent research	31
Media bubbles	2
Passive consumption	13
Subscription	5
Media distrust	83
AI	3
Clickbait	1
Controlled	1
Fake news	1
General scepticisms	31
Mistakes	2
No references	1
Partiality	14
Eco chamber effects	4

Sensationalism	3
Social media	12
Traditional media	12
TV	11
Private channel	3
Too negative news	1
Unprecise	2
Media trust	215
Authority	7
Critical consumption	10
Foreign media	6
General trust	3
Headlines	2
Impartiality	13
Inclusivity	1
Independence	20
Institutional sources	4
Journalist	23
Personality	4
Professionalism	18
News agency	4
Private media	4
Professional Sources	1
Public media	29
Scientific sources	4
Selective exposure	2
Social media	32
community check	2
Institutional social media profiles	1
Professional media profiles	2
YouTube	6
Tabloid	2

Traditional media	34
Local papers	1
Print	8
Radio	11
TV	13
Website	14
Sources	511
Apps	11
Books	1
Digital Newspaper	59
Foreign media	27
Institutional sources	7
Internet	49
News agencies	2
Newsletter	1
Podcast	14
Public debates	3
Public media	30
Social	122
Specialist sources	3
Traditional	154
Print	25
Radio	44
TV	78
Teletex	1
Word of mouth	28
Media's role in democracy	1647
Expectations media work	323
Accessibility	25
Accessible political news	23
Attention on ordinary people	8
Constructive discussions	4

Diversification	15
Educational programmes	10
Fact checking	7
Honesty	3
Impartiality & objectivity	53
In depth journalism	16
Independence	11
Economic independency	1
Institutional channel	5
International news	1
Journalism identity	1
Journalism training	3
Local news	2
More citizen participation	16
More political participation news	3
More political news	8
More political debates	4
Uncomfortable questions for politicians	2
More solution	6
More welfare indication	2
No polls	1
Plurality	8
Public media	4
Apolitical public media	2
Free public media	2
Quality	41
Better news order	1
Details - Data	1
Gender sensitive approach	3
Higher quality programmes	11
Less commercial	7
Less humour	1

Less negative news	16
Regulation	19
Referendum	1
Scientific sources	2
Social media	22
Free comments	2
More political info	2
No political info	1
Regulation	6
Responsibility	2
Young target	7
Specialization	1
Transparency	24
Watchdogs	5
Idea media's role	132
Apolitical	2
Community sense	2
Free	6
Impartiality	40
Independent	4
People voice	8
pluralism voices	3
Political education	10
Professionalism	3
Promote critical thinking	7
Properly informing	30
Social Cohesion	1
Watchdog	16
Opinion media work	1011
Negative	906
Censorship	25
Difficult information	10

Digital poverty	2
Discrimination	8
No minorities attention	4
Earning logic	76
Advertisement	1
Clickbait	24
Precarious work	2
Echo chambers	15
Emotional impact	14
External control	12
Lack of reliability	85
Contradictory news	7
Corporate scandal	1
Data privacy	2
Disinformation	31
Extreme narration	2
Lack of credible sources	2
Manipulation	25
Opinion makers	5
Pre-established discussions	5
Low quality	87
Boring programmes	4
Confusion	2
Controversial guests	5
Disrespectful discussions	19
Generalizations	3
Lack of political tribunes	2
No dialogue	2
No quality control	3
Subdued election info	1
Superficial news	37
Unprepared journalists	4

Media barriers	2
Media education	3
No citizen participation	1
No help for citizens	12
Ignoring people's reality	11
No transparency	13
Not enough expert	1
Not enough political info	18
Minimized political participation coverage	12
Not enough local info	2
over political coverage	3
Partiality & lack of objectivity	219
Corporate control	27
Imbalanced coverage	26
Print	1
Public media	31
Public funding	1
Social media	120
Addiction	2
Adv board	3
Algorithms	28
Bias	1
Censorship	3
Eco chambers	17
Fake news	6
Hate speech	4
Lack of professionalism	1
Not accessible	1
Privacy data	2
Sensationalism	4
Superficiality	13
Too negative	2

Unreliability	26
Useless discussions	1
Subscription	12
Too local perspective	3
Too many newspapers	1
Too much freedom	2
Too much news	15
Too negative news	48
TV	66
difficult debates	3
no dialogue	7
Not enough politics	1
Old format	6
Partiality	27
Poor formats	8
Populism	1
Sensationalism	5
Superficiality	6
UE negative	1
Positive	104
Citizens participation	9
Citizens support	7
Clear information	5
Critical trust	2
Democracy representation	1
Electoral surveys	2
Free	7
Institutional control	2
Local news	2
Neutrality	11
Balanced partiality	6
News on protest	1

Online news	1
Podcast	2
Political investigation	4
Print	2
Public awareness campaigns	2
Public media	13
Radio	2
Slow news	3
Social media	20
Easy political info	5
Encourage discussion	1
Fast	6
Freedom of expression	5
Impartiality	3
Pluralism	2
Young target	3
TV	5
Fact checking	2
Political debates	3
Social impact	181
Democracy influence	110
Citizen opinion	54
Citizens engagement	15
Citizens Participation	28
Demotivation	2
Education	7
emotional impact	4
Extreme opinions	2
Fear Mongering	1
Manipulation	9
No impact	1
Political bubbles	4

Politics	5
Prejudices	4
Social media	21
Echo chambers	8
Resentment	1
Young generation	6
Social struggles	2
TV - Old generation	5
Participation through the media	268
App	1
Blog	2
Community fact checking	4
Contact newsrooms	7
Economic donation	2
Local newspaper	1
Negative	42
Avoid the media	1
No dialogue	1
Social media	31
Algorithm disincentive	3
Censorship	1
Dangerous	1
Hate speech	11
Limited power	10
Polarization	5
Useless power	9
Online Comments	4
Online newspapers	7
Online petitions	4
Online platforms	11
Podcast	2

Social media	138
Surveys	5
Traditional	35
Radio	9
TV	21
Political participation	1133
Activities	442
Activism	5
Boycotting	4
Avoid the media	2
Citizen consultations	16
Conference on the Future of Europe	3
Civic associations	70
Citizens 'committees	12
Community life	20
Volunteering	22
Contacting politicians	12
Contacting the media	2
Critical perspectives	3
Cultural discussion	4
Debunking populists	2
Discussing with others	29
Education	7
Financial support for independent entities	3
Focus group	1
Following the rules	5
Getting heard	2
Informing yourself	34
Involvements in politics	20
Non voting	5
Personal choice	5

Petitions	18
Protests & Strikes	82
Social responsibility	8
Solidarity	5
Spreading knowledge	5
Surveys	1
Trade unionism	2
Voting	93
Referendum	12
Work	3
Encouragements	241
Anonymity	2
Constructive discussion	7
Education	39
Debate education	2
Family education	1
Political education	31
Younger education	5
French participation model	10
Incentives	4
Justice	2
Living in the city	1
Media	51
Accessibility	2
ADV democracy	2
Balanced news	1
Fair debates	3
Institutional campaigns	1
Iterative communication	1
News on citizens activities	7
News transparency	3
Pluralism	1

Positive news	2
Simple and better	14
Social media	11
younger target	2
More citizen power	2
More cohesion	8
More time	1
More visibility	1
Motivators	3
Mutual respect	2
Non-partisan activities	1
Political Monitors	1
Politics	52
Accessibility	2
Active listening	19
Clearer communication	1
Collaborative debates	1
Know the politicians	4
Less fragmentation	2
Minority representatives	1
More local debates	3
New politicians	3
Political personalities	1
Political Transparency	6
Professionalism	1
promises kept	5
Realistic goals	2
Support citizens participation	1
Populism	1
Positive gathering	1
Proximity	13
Results	11

Solidarity	3
Volunteering adv	3
Voting	21
Better choices	1
Different electoral system	1
Direct democracy	4
Electronic voting	1
Facilitate voting	7
Mandatory elections	2
Maximum age	1
Referendum	4
Written protest	1
Obstacles	450
Bureaucracy	1
Censorship	3
Politically correct	2
Confusion	4
Controversial topic	6
Depopulation	1
Difficulties in voting	21
Backlogged voting system	1
Difficult communication	6
Economic gap	1
Time constraints	6
Voting away from home	6
Digital divide	2
Disrespect election choice	3
Distrust of unions	7
Economic situation	6
Elitism	2
Family education	2
Fear	48

Critics	7
Hate speech	14
Legal repercussions	7
Personal safety	4
Prejudices	2
Shame	6
State violence	6
To do the wrong choice	1
General frustration	9
General well-being	4
Ignorance	12
Inequalities	2
Loss of Values	5
Media	48
Exaggeration	1
Insufficient political info	34
No news on citizens activities	8
No young target	5
Too biased information	2
Low quality	3
Negative news	4
Partiality	1
Slogan information	2
No political education	9
No strike tradition	1
No time	9
Non organization	1
Political compromises	3
Political disinterest	32
Polls	1
Privacy	2
Selfishness	24

Social distance	2
Scepticism	182
Citizen power	71
Politics	110
Broken promises	36
Citizens not listened to	18
Corruption	6
Disrespectful	3
Distance	12
Europe far away	7
Lack of representation	17
Mutual polemics	4
Unprepared representatives	4

C. ETHICAL PROTOCOLS AND CONSENT MANAGEMENT

The data collected are managed according to both the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) and the indications provided in Deliverable 1.2 - Data Management Plan.

Specifically, since the qualitative study involved the collection of sensitive data from participants, including the use of video/audio recordings, it was necessary to provide interviewees and focus group participants with:

- Informed consent to participate in the activities,
- Information on the protection and use of personal data (information note pursuant to art. 13 and 14 of EU Reg. 2016/679- GDPR)
- Consent declaration for the video/audio recording of the activity.

Due to the different recruitment choices made by each project partner, it was not possible to provide an unique format for all. The data protection office of the WP.5 team leader - IULM University - shared the documents previously mentioned, on the basis of the specific recruitment dynamics adopted by each team. Each team adopted translated versions in their local language, adapted according to the legal and bureaucratic requirements of their university and the chosen recruitment methods.

Below, only for reference purposes, we report the models that were adopted by IULM team, which proceed with the recruitment as follows:

- a. Focus group: collaboration with an external agency that will recruit participants and provide demographic data.
- b. Interviews: recruitment by the research team through snowball sampling.

Research Project: Horizon Europe Research Project - Mapping Media for Future Democracies

Team Leader: Prof. Andrea Miconi

Data collection managers: Prof. Elisabetta Risi, Giulia Ferri

Dear participant,

With the following form we would like to ask you to participate in the research project Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP). Please read carefully the following information about the aims of the research and how it will be carried out before deciding whether or not to give your consent. Please take the time to read the following information and do not hesitate to ask for clarification or further information.

Aim of the research

The MeDeMAP project, carried out in collaboration with ten European institutions, aims to understand the role and influence of the media in European democracies, particularly when it comes to citizens' political participation. By combining different research techniques, the study aims to identify ways to strengthen democracies through more transparent and accountable media practices.

Activities

The activity involves the use of a focus group, a research technique that brings together a small group of participants around a table to talk about one or more issues. The group is facilitated by two researchers. The whole activity takes about two hours.

Participation and withdrawal

Participation in focus groups is voluntary. You have the right not to answer and/or not to continue with the research and to withdraw at any time. At the end of the activity you will receive financial compensation in the form of an Amazon voucher worth EUR 30. If the number of people attending the activity exceeds the number required, our team reserves the right to dismiss one or more people before the activity starts, although they will still receive financial compensation in the form of an Amazon voucher worth €15.

Audio/Video Recording

For the purposes of the study, the activity will be audio recorded. Audio and transcripts of the activity will be for the exclusive use of the research team, who will guarantee the complete confidentiality of the data collected.

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

The undersigned declares by signing the following form:

- That I have read the contents of this form and that I understand them;
- That I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received appropriate answers;
- That I understand that participation in this study involves information being collected by audio recording and transcription;
- That I give my consent to the processing of my personal data collected as part of this research in the manner and for the purposes described above;
- That I agree to take part in the research.

1. DATA PROCESSORS

THE DATA CONTROLLER, pursuant to Articles 4 and 24 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 is Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione IULM located in Via Carlo Bo, 1 - 20143 Milan, represented by its pro-tempore legal representative. In compliance with Articles 37-39 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the University has appointed a Data Protection Officer (DPO) who can be contacted at the following email address: dpo.iulm@dpoprofessionalservice.it.

2. DATA PROCESSED AND SOURCES

IULM University will acquire some of your personal data (name, surname, age, gender, educational qualification, email address, telephone number) subject to your consent, from partners operating in the marketing sector, such as agencies for the recruitment of subjects for market. During the Focus Group the Data Controller, with your consent, will be able to take photos and videos and thus process his voice and image taken, individually or in a group.

3. PURPOSES OF PROCESSING AND LAWFUL BASIS

Personal data, including of a particular nature, will be processed, in accordance with the conditions for lawful processing set out in article 6, paragraph 1, letter a) of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, for the following purpose: Subject to Your consent and until its revocation, participation in the study and activities of the Scientific Research Project issued by the European Commission entitled "Mapping Media for Future Democracies- MeDeMaP" through participation in Focus Groups. It is specified that the final results of this research will be disclosed anonymously and in an aggregate manner. It will therefore no longer be possible, following the outcome of the research, to trace the personal data, even particular ones, to a recognized and recognizable subject.

4. COMMUNICATION, TRANSFER AND DISSEMINATION OF PERSONAL DATA

The data collected will be processed by University researchers and researchers involved in the project, who act on the basis of specific instructions provided regarding the purposes and methods of the processing itself. During the Focus Group, organized as part of the European research project called MeDeMaP, the participants' interventions will first be audio or video recorded and then transcribed and archived in text format. In this last phase, participants will be given pseudonyms in order to anonymize the data that will be disseminated. The video footage will be stored in the University's computer archives to which only the researchers involved in the Project will have access. The data may be communicated to third parties belonging to the following categories:

- entities that provide services for the management of the information system and communication networks (including e-mail and web);
- competent authorities for the fulfilment of legal obligations and/or provisions of public bodies, at their request.

The subjects belonging to the above-mentioned categories will act as Data Processors, or they may operate independently as autonomous Data Controllers. The list of the Data Processors for each Controller is constantly updated and available at their respective offices and at the contacts indicated in point 1 of the policy. Your personal data will not be transferred abroad except for possible revisions by the other partners of the Project. This transfer will in any case take place within the European Economic Area - EEA.

5. PROCESSING PROCEDURES AND DATA STORAGE

The processing of personal data will be carried out using IT tools, adopting adequate technical and organizational measures to protect them from unauthorized or illicit access, destruction, loss of integrity and confidentiality, even accidental. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, the

data will subsequently be deprived of directly identifying references (e.g. name and surname, etc.), so that they are no longer immediately attributable to the subject to whom they refer, and analyzed for the sole purpose of the implementation of the aforementioned project. Personal data will be kept for a maximum period of 5 years from the end of the project and subsequently destroyed.

6. NATURE OF THE CONFERMENT AND REFUSAL

The provision of your personal data for the purposes referred to in paragraph 3 of this policy is optional. Any refusal to provide data will make it impossible for the Data Controller to use your image and your voice collected during the event for the intended purposes.

7. RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS

You may exercise your rights in accordance with the provisions set out in articles 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, by contacting the Data Controller, or the Data Protection Officer under article 38 paragraph 4, by contacting the Personnel Department. You have the right at any time to ask the Data Controller for access to your personal data, rectification, erasure, restriction of processing, as well as the portability of your data. Without prejudice to any other administrative or jurisdictional appeal, should you believe that the processing of your data violates the provisions of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, pursuant to article 15 letter f) of the aforementioned Regulation (EU) 2016/679, you have the right to make a complaint to the Guarantor for the protection of personal data and, with reference to article 6, paragraph 1, letter a) and article 9, paragraph 2, letter a), you have the right to revoke the consent given at any time. In the case of a request for data portability, the Data Controller will provide the personal data regarding the data subject from an automated device in a structured format which is legible and in common use, without prejudice to paragraphs 3 and 4 of article 20 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679.

Consent To The Processing Of Images Collected At The Event

Pursuant to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 I, the undersigned, declare to have read the Privacy Policy of IULM University regarding the processing of personal data (voice and images collected during the production of the arts documentary as part of the YAW scientific research project). and I express my consent to the processing of your voice and image (photos and videos) for scientific purposes as indicated in the information.

I, the undersigned, (hereinafter, for the sake of clarity, also referred to as 'the recorded person'), born in, Province of....., on....., resident in.....Post Code, Province of, street/number.....,TaxCode,

AUTHORIZE

1. IULM University to carry out, by whatever means, filming of my image and/or recording of my voice, granting to the same the right, but not the obligation, to record, reproduce, disseminate, print, publish and project by any means currently known or that will be available in the future, in any form whatsoever, without limitation of time, throughout the world, even through total and/or partial transfer to third parties, my image, my voice and my opinions, disseminated by any of the above means, provided that this is done in contexts and in ways that do not affect my personal dignity and decorum. The images, in particular, may be used as part of the European research project, called MeDeMaP, and may be stored in the University's computer archives.

2. I hereby state that the above authorization is granted completely free of charge and that, therefore, IULM University shall not pay me any fee or reimbursement of expenses in relation to any filming or recording of my image or voice, nor in relation to any subsequent use or exploitation of the same filming or recordings.

3. release IULM University from any and all liability arising from any statement I may have made during the filming of my image and/or the recording of my voice which may infringe the rights of third parties;

4. expressly renounce any claim, even of a compensatory nature, against IULM University for any damaging consequences, of any kind, that may occur to me as a result of the recording, diffusion or use of my voice, my statements, my image and/or my name IULM University;

5. with regard to the processing of personal data, reference should be made to the specific privacy policy attached to this Declaration.

Pursuant to and for the purposes of Articles 1341 and 1342 of the Civil Code, I specifically approve the following clauses:

- no. 2: relating to the waiver of any remuneration or reimbursement of expenses;
- nos. 3 and 4: relating to the indemnity and waiver of any claim or compensation;

Research Project: Horizon Europe Research Project - Mapping Media for Future Democracies

Project Leader: Andrea Miconi

Data collection managers: Elisabetta Risi; Giulia Ferri

Dear participant,

With the following form we would like to ask you to participate in the research project Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP). Please read carefully the following information about the aims of the research and how it will be carried out before deciding whether or not to give your consent. Please take the time to read the following information and do not hesitate to ask for clarification or further information.

Aim of the research

The MeDeMAP project, carried out in collaboration with ten European institutions, aims to understand the role and influence of the media in European democracies, particularly when it comes to citizens' political participation. By combining different research techniques, the study aims to identify ways to strengthen democracies through more transparent and accountable media practices.

Activities

The activity involves one-to-one interviews with a researcher, lasting one hour.

Participation and withdrawal

Participation in interview is voluntary. You have the right not to answer and/or not to continue with the research and to withdraw at any time.

Audio Recording

For the purposes of the study, the activity will be audio recorded. Audio and transcripts of the activity will be for the exclusive use of the IULM research team, who will guarantee the complete confidentiality of the data collected.

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

The undersigned declares by signing the following form:

- That I have read the contents of this form and that I understand them;
- That I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received appropriate answers;
- That I understand that participation in this study involves information being collected by audio recording and transcription;
- That I give my consent to the processing of my personal data collected as part of this research in the manner and for the purposes described above;
- That I agree to take part in the research.

1. DATA PROCESSORS

THE DATA CONTROLLER, pursuant to Articles 4 and 24 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 is Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione IULM located in Via Carlo Bo, 1 - 20143 Milan represented by its pro-tempore legal representative. In compliance with Articles 37-39 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, the University has appointed a Data Protection Officer (DPO) who can be contacted at the following email address: dpo.iulm@dpoprofessionalservice.it.

2. DATA PROCESSED

The processing concerns the following personal data of the participant: personal data (name, surname, age, gender, educational qualification, email address, telephone number) and, subject to your consent, may consist of recording your voice. As part of the interviews, "particular" personal data will also be collected, i.e. data capable of revealing racial or ethnic origin, religious and philosophical beliefs and political opinions.

3. PURPOSES OF PROCESSING AND LAWFUL BASIS

Personal data, including of a particular nature, will be processed, in accordance with the conditions for lawful processing set out in article 6, paragraph 1, letter a) of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, for the following purpose: subject to Your consent and until its revocation, participation in the study and activities of the Scientific Research Project issued by the European Commission entitled "Mapping Media for Future Democracies- MeDeMaP" through interviews. It is specified that the final results of this research will be disclosed anonymously and in an aggregate manner. It will therefore no longer be possible, following the outcome of the research, to trace the personal data, even particular ones, to a recognized and recognizable subject.

4. COMMUNICATION, TRANSFER AND DISSEMINATION OF PERSONAL DATA

The data collected will be processed by University researchers and researchers involved in the project, who act on the basis of specific instructions provided regarding the purposes and methods of the processing itself. The interviewees, organized as part of the European research project called MeDeMaP, will first be audio-recorded and then transcribed and archived in text format. In this last phase, participants will be given pseudonyms in order to anonymize the data that will be disseminated. The audio recordings will be stored in the University's computer archives to which only the researchers involved in the Project will have access.

The data may be communicated to third parties belonging to the following categories:

- entities that provide services for the management of the information system and communication networks (including e-mail and web);
- competent authorities for the fulfilment of legal obligations and/or provisions of public bodies, at their request.

The subjects belonging to the above-mentioned categories will act as Data Processors, or they may operate independently as autonomous Data Controllers. The list of the Data Processors for each Controller is constantly updated and available at their respective offices and at the contacts indicated in point 1 of the policy. Your personal data will not be transferred abroad except for possible revisions by the other partners of the Project. This transfer will in any case take place within the European Economic Area - EEA.

5. PROCESSING PROCEDURES AND DATA STORAGE

The processing of personal data will be carried out using IT tools, adopting adequate technical and organizational measures to protect them from unauthorized or illicit access, destruction, loss of integrity and confidentiality, even accidental. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, the data will subsequently be deprived of directly identifying references (e.g. name and surname, etc.), so that they are no longer immediately attributable to the subject to whom they refer, and analyzed for the sole purpose of the implementation of the Project. Personal data will be kept for a maximum period of 5 years from the end of the Project and subsequently destroyed.

6. NATURE OF THE CONFERMENT AND REFUSAL

The provision of your personal data for the purposes referred to in paragraph 3 of this policy is optional. Your refusal to provide the data will make it impossible for the Data Controller to allow you to participate in the Research Project.

7. RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS

You may exercise your rights in accordance with the provisions set out in articles 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, by contacting the Data Controller, or the Data Protection Officer under article 38 paragraph 4, by contacting the Personnel Department. You have the right at any time to ask the Data Controller for access to your personal data, rectification, erasure, restriction of processing, as well as the portability of your data. Without prejudice to any other administrative or jurisdictional appeal, should you believe that the processing of your data violates the provisions of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, pursuant to article 15 letter f) of the aforementioned Regulation (EU) 2016/679, you have the right to make a complaint to the Guarantor for the protection of personal data and, with reference to article 6, paragraph 1, letter a) and article 9, paragraph 2, letter a), you have the right to revoke the consent given at any time. In the case of a request for data portability, the Data Controller will provide the personal data regarding the data subject from an automated device in a structured format which is legible and in common use, without prejudice to paragraphs 3 and 4 of article 20 of Regulation (EU) 2016/679.

CONSENT TO THE PROCESSING

Pursuant to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 I, the undersigned, declare to have read the Privacy Policy of IULM University regarding the processing of my personal data during the interviews organized by University as part of the the Scientific Research Project entitled "Mapping Media for Future Democracies- MeDeMaP

- ☐ I express my consent to the processing of my voice for scientific purposes, as indicated in this information note.
- ☐ I express my consent to the processing of my particular personal data, as data capable of revealing religious and philosophical beliefs and political opinions, for scientific purposes, as indicated in this information note.

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