D5.7. A two-day Democracy event.

European Democracy Lab

WP5 – Dissemination and engagement

Populism and Civic Engagement

European Democracy Lab

This document reports the key findings of the **PaCE Online European Democracy Lab** carried out on the **19th of November 2021**. The report highlights positive appreciations, critical views, challenges, and recommendations of **forty-nine (49) participants** selected from seven European countries – *initial locations of the local democracy labs* – Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Scotland, and Spain.

The European Democracy Lab is the overall **civic engagement event** on *"Trust in government in the time of Covid-19 pandemic,"* addressing the main challenges and issues outlined by participants at the *local democracy labs.*

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the active presence of **forty-nine (49) participants** and **eleven (11) expert facilitators** for bringing their knowledge and experience to the research on populism and civic engagement and for being committed in such fruitful, constructive and open exchange of **opinions and insights about democracy and trust in administration/public authority in the time of Covid-19 pandemic**.

We would like to acknowledge the generous and professional contribution of the entire team composed of:
– **European and local experts** for sharing their expertise and outcomes of research on topics related to the European Democracy labs.
– **Expert facilitators** that contributed to the organization, implementation, selection of participants and carrying out of the online deliberation.
– **Expert team from Democratic Society** for the creative and professional set up of the entire event.

Team
Facilitators
Mel Stevens, Director of Programmes and Practice, Democratic Society (PaCE project) – lead facilitator of the European Democracy Lab.

Table expert facilitators for cross-countries rounds
Martina Francesca – Local Connector Italy, Democratic Society - Expert facilitator Group A
Sophie Kiesouw, Project Officer, Democratic Society (PaCE project) – Expert facilitator Group B
María Tomé Nuez - Oficina de Innovación Cívica – Expert facilitator Group C
Chris Tuke – Programme Director – Democratic Places, Democratic Society – Expert facilitator Group D
Pandora Ellis – Network and Delivery Manager, Democratic Society - Expert facilitator Group E
Sarah Vanquaethem – Project Officer, Democratic Society – Support Facilitator and Note-taker

Event Manager & tech on behalf of the PaCE project
Aleksandra Zietek, Local connector Kraków, Poland, Democratic Society

Local expert facilitators for specific-countries round
Diana Eftimova and Iva Lazarova - BG - IPED - Institute for public environment development, Bulgaria – Group BG
Ágnes Molnár - HU - Alternative Communities Association, Hungary – Group HU
Bruno Rodi - IT - Associazione Ionio, Italy – Group IT
Finnur Þ. Gunnþórsson – IS, Iceland – Group IS
Krzysztof Leończuk – PL – OWOP, Poland -Group PL
Sophie Kiesouw (PaCE project) & *David McDonald* – Scotland – DemSoc – Group SC
María Tomé Nuez – ES - Oficina de Innovación Cívica, Spain – Group ES

Experts
Istvan Perger and *Matteo Salvai* - European Commission, DG-COMM
Roxana Elena Cziker (PaCE project) - organizer, City of Reykjavik, Iceland

Local experts for supporting the discussion on specific country topics
Kani Cubo, Technical advisor to the General Directorate of Open Government and Social Innovation of the Government of Aragon, Spain
Anna Hrefna Ingimundardóttir, Head of Economics at the SA Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise, Iceland
Miklós Merényi - K-Monitor, Hungary
Piotr Stronkowski, independent policy expert & researcher, Poland
Sylvia Velikova, journalist in the Bulgarian National Radio, Bulgaria
Giuseppe D'Avella, Parliament Watch Italia; Alessio Caspanello, LetteraEmme's editor and journalist, Italy
Doreen Groove, Open Government Partnership for Scotland, Scotland

We are thankful for the cooperation and assistance of every individual and organizations that supported us in preparing, organizing and carrying out the Online European Democracy Lab.

About this document

Task Lead: DemSoc
Contributor: RVK

Dissemination Level		
PU	Public on the www.popance.eu	X
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	

Authors´ contribution to the report

Roxana Elena Cziker, RVK	Qualitative analysis of cross-countries topics, reorganization and analysis of specific-countries topics, extraction of recommendations, writing the report.
Aleksandra Ziętek, DemSoc	Qualitative analysis of participants´ feedback, participants´ recommendations, learnings from the European democracy lab, review of the report.
Diana Eftimova and Iva Lazarova - BG - IPED - Institute for public environment development, Bulgaria	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Bulgarian´s group on specific-country topic.
Ágnes Molnár - HU - Alternative Communities Association, Hungary	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Hungarian´s group on specific-country topic.
Bruno Rodi - IT - Associazione Ionio, Italy	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Italian´s group on specific-country topic.
Finnur Þ. Gunnþórsson – IS, Iceland	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Icelandic´s group on specific-country topic.
Krzysztof Leończuk - PL – OWOP, Poland	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Polish´s group on specific-country topic.
Sophie Kiesouw (PaCE project) & David McDonald - SCOT – DemSoc	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Scottish's group on specific-country topic.
María Tomé Nuez - ES - Oficina de Innovación Cívica, Spain	Draft report containing outcomes of the deliberation of the Spanish´s group on specific-country topic.

A brief summary of revisions will be recorded in the table below.

HISTORY OF CHANGES				
	VERSION	**PUBLICATION DATE**	**KEY CHANGES**	**AUTHOR**
	V0.1	2nd of February 2022	Initial version	Roxana Elena Cziker, RVK
	V0.2	14th of February 2022	Review	Expert facilitators
	V0.3	20th of February 2022	Review	Roxana Cziker, RVK
	V0.4	24th of February 2022	Review	Aleksandra Ziętek, DemSoc
	V0.5	24th of February 2022	Final version	Roxana Cziker, RVK

The working language of this document is English (EN), as required for reporting purposes by article 20.7 of the Grant Agreement.

Disclaimer

The content of this report reflects entirely the authors´ view – as partners of the **PaCE – Populism and Civic Engagement project**. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use made of the information contained herein.

The PaCE consortium designed and implemented the qualitative research with people and protected privacy and security of data (personal data) in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) adopted on the 14th of April 2016 by the European Union.

The key findings and recommendations presented in this report are grounded on the outcomes of the PaCE European Democracy Lab carried out online on the 19th of November, 2021. The report reflects strictly the conclusions formulated on the opinions and insights of *forty-nine (49) participants*. **The findings cannot be extrapolated as representing the general opinion shared by the population in the country of participants´ provenience**.

List of tables

List of figures

Codes applied in this report

Rounds

Round 1 – R1	Round 2 – R2	Round 3 – R3

Groups

Group R1-A	Group R2-A	Group BG (Bulgaria)
Group R1-B	Group R2-B	Group HU (Hungary)
Group R1-C	Group R2-C	Group IS (Iceland)
Group R1-D	Group R2-D	Group IT (Italy)
Group R1-E	Group R2-E	Group PL (Poland)
		Group SC (Scotland)
		Group ES (Spain)

Table of Content

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction

The document reports the outcomes and recommendations of the **European Democracy Lab** organized online on the 19th of November 2021, under the umbrella of the PaCE project. The **goal** of the **European Democracy Lab** was to address and respond to the key findings of *local democracy labs* that emerged from deliberation of participants in **seven European countries** on "*Trust in authorities in the time of Covid-19 pandemic*". The European location of the *democracy labs* were: Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Scotland, and Spain.

The selection of participants to the European Democracy Lab was based on specific criteria *(see criteria in chapter 3. Outcomes of the European Democracy Lab, pp. 21)* facilitating open access for all participants to the *local democracy labs* carried out in seven European countries. Thus, among the total number of one hundred and fifty (150) participants at *local labs*, a group of forty-nine (49) people attended the **European Democracy Lab**.

Key findings of *local democracy labs* revealed both **cross-countries** and **specific countries topics** (see the synthesis [Report outlining the key findings from local democracy labs](#)). Based on agreement between the PaCE partners and expert-facilitators from seven countries, **two cross-countries and seven specific-countries topics** were selected for the European Democracy Lab deliberation.

The selected cross-countries topics were:
  – **Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news.**
  – **Pandemic restrictions long-term consequences: mental health & wellbeing.**

The selected specific-countries topics were:
  – *Bulgaria –* **The disinformation on the Covid-19.**
  – *Hungary –* **Public opinion dialogue and contribution of civic organizations.**
  – *Iceland –* **Protection of economy and employment sector.**
  – *Italy –* **Influence of populist narratives on the public discourse.**
  – *Poland –* **Protection of law and constitution.**
  – *Scotland –* **Trust in government and influence of mass-media.**
  – *Spain –* **Strengthening the role of local authorities.**

The format of the European Democracy Lab proposed both **plenary sessions** and **group rounds**. The plenary sessions were held into the ***"main virtual room"*** allowing the access of all participants, whereas the groups´ rounds were held into ***"breakout virtual rooms".*** In the breakout rooms the participants were divided in smaller groups, of 5 to 6 participants that facilitated the dynamic conversation and equal contribution of participants, under the leadership of an expert facilitator for each group. The format of the group´s rounds was structured as follows:
  – two rounds dedicated to deliberation of ***cross-countries topics*** and,
  – one round with seven parallel sessions, one for each country, dedicated to deliberation of the ***specific-country topics***.

The methodology selected to conduct the **European Democracy Lab** facilitated a **cross-bridge interaction** of *experts' and participants' knowledge and expertise*, creating a dynamic exchange and dialogue. The methodology formula was structured such as each round was started with an expert's presentation related to the topic of deliberation followed by the participants' discussion in small groups. Furthermore, the country expert assisted and addressed the participants´ questions during the entire round.

The executive summary is divided in three main sections:

- The first section (1.2) presents the key recommendations emerged from participants´ deliberation on cross-country and specific-country topics.
- The second section (1.3) reports the key findings and recommendations resulting from the participants´ deliberation on cross-countries topics. The section is divided into two subsections:
  - **Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news** (1.3.1).
  - **Mental health and wellbeing** (1.3.2).
- The third section (1.4) presents the key findings resulting from the participants' deliberation on specific country topics and the joined recommendations. The section is divided into seven subsections:
  - **The disinformation on the Covid-19** (1.4.1)
  - **Public consultation and role of civic organizations** (1.4.2)
  - **Protection of economy and employment sector** (1.4.3)
  - **Influence of populist narratives on public discourse** (1.4.4)
  - **Protection of law and constitutions** (1.4.5)
  - **Trust in government** (1.4.6)
  - **Strengthening the role of local authority** (1.4.7)

1.2. Key recommendations of the European Democracy Lab

The deliberation of forty-nine participants at the **European Democracy Lab** revealed significant key findings and recommendations that might serve as a foundation for future policy innovation and interventions. The recommendations *advocate and encourage* the consideration of a sustainable and effective strategy that cover some issues addressed:

- **Coherent, efficient, and official communication strategies purposefully tailored at the particularities of different groups and communities.**

- **Authority programs that monitor and evaluate the information channels and sources ensuring the tracing of fake news, preserving the right to information and freedom of expression.**

- **Assumed political leadership inclusively addressing the diversity and complexity of society as a part of political agenda.**

- **A robust and strategic economic and social development plan that includes preventive measures and risk-management assessment of crisis.**

– **Personal, financial investment, and infrastructural transformation of health care and welfare services that protect people's mental health in the broader context of general health and wellbeing.**

– **Promote and encourage civic engagement, civic responsibility, and civic autonomy where citizens and residents assume an active role in the development of the community.**

– **Facilitate public consultation and consultation instruments that improve the quality of the decision-making process, appreciate the variety of needs in different population groups, set the foundation for broad-based participation, and assist governments in increasing transparency.**

– **Assume authority measures, strategies, and policies that protect the law, constitution, and human rights.**

1.3. Cross-countries topic

In this section are presented the key findings and recommendations emerged from the participants´ deliberation on public communication strategy and mental health and wellbeing.

1.3.1. Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news

R1: The overall recommendation advocates the development of a more efficient **communication strategy built on a communication plan and goals, procedures and operation, techniques and instruments.** The strategy should include different stages such as **implementation, revision, updating, and adaptation,** resulting from an ongoing evaluation process built on the **dialogue and consultation between authorities and citizens/residents.** Moreover, the information distributed to the public should be provided through **secure communication channels** that are set up based on evaluation of context and particularities of different groups.

To fulfil this goal, participants have recommended the following directions:

a. **Access to information and freedom of expression.**

Nowadays, access to information is considered a straightforward solution since the internet, information platforms, and social media enable individuals to reach information. However, **level of understanding, digital literacy, knowledge, interest and motivation, and digital and technology facilities** are a few explanatory factors that create **unequal public information access**. Therefore, the participants emphasized some actions that might facilitate more efficient public access to information:

– Provide an accessible format of information tailored to individual and community needs, e.g., visuals such as video, images, and text.

– Set up a call center service to address people's concerns and questions.

– Review and adjust the public discourse that might induces emotional and negative attitudes, undermines trust in authorities and lead people to seeking for fake news.

- Make visible the official sources of information provided by authorities.
- Invest in programs and instruments that tackle the sources and channels promoting fake news and conspiracy theories **with the preservation of rights to be informed and freedom of expression**.
- Create OPEN DATABASE sources to provide reliable information on different public interest topics.
- Sustain public education programs for information seeking that equip citizens with mechanisms and strategies of seeking information on multiple and official sources.
- Promote the information based on expertise.
- Create social media platforms that facilitate people's access to information and group dialogue and deliberation.
- Encourage people to corroborate and validate the information from multiple official sources and platforms sustained by recognized experts and authorities.

b. **Cross-sectorial and multidisciplinary co-operation**

- Encourage multi-stakeholder's partnership and networking.
- Improve cross-sectorial collaboration: **administration-politicians-media journalists-experts**.
- Advocate networking and collaboration between different institutions and third sector organizations.
- Set up monitoring and following-up programs of people´s needs to tackle better the complexity and diversity of different groups.

c. **Public education programs and community approach**

- Fund civic education and citizenship programs both for schools and communities that enhance knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for learning process of participatory citizenship and contribution to the decision-making process.
- Target strategies for marginalized groups and individuals at the risk of unemployment, social isolation, and social exclusion, that are less engaged, especially in the crisis stituation.
- Set up critical thinking programs.
- Involve citizens in community projects.
- Public programs for differentiating between fake and authentic information.
- Support public education programs to develop media and digital literacy, especially in schools.
  "…people think that Faceboook is a good source of information – they do not know about fake news."

1.3.2 *Pandemic restrictions long-term consequences: mental health & wellbeing*

R2: The overall recommendation promotes the development of **preventative and support programs for mental health and wellbeing, in the broader context of general health.** The programs should strategically include **public awareness policy on the importance of mental health and impact on different health dimensions, education programs on mental health, monitoring and follow up of people´s mental health status, and counselling and psychological sessions financed by public funds.**

To fulfil this goal, participants have recommended the following directions:

a. **Preventative measures and education programs of mental health for activation of resilience attitudes and coping mechanisms.**
   – Set up public education programs for mental health; mental health campaigns; curricular and extra-curricular health programs; psychological counselling for children supported by public funds (central government and local authorities).
   – Organize public deliberations on mental health as a component of general health and wellbeing.
   – Invest in the **development and consolidation of health care services** *addressing mental health hygiene, prevention, and treatment*, e.g., periodic screening of mental health in the general population, as preventative measure.
   – Favour and facilitate psychiatric and psychological services during the time of crisis.
   – Develop standardized monitoring programs that better identify the groups of individuals at risk of depression, suicide, with a particular focus on young people, people exposed to drug abuse, elderly people, and people exposed to isolation and social exclusion.
   – Engage people in relaxation, physical training, and entertainment programs.
   – Build up **databases containing evidence of individuals with mental health issues** envisaged as preventive measure that prioritize support programs for these individuals in situation of crisis.
   – Integrate digital technology as a facilitation tool for online dialogue and counselling for vulnerable groups.
   – Invest in both individual and group therapy.
   – Develop and expand the body of professionals in the social and welfare sector, e.g., social workers, social education, psychologists, etc.
   – Facilitate groups conversation and dialogue to diminish groups´ division and polarization as a preventive measure for the mental health and wellbeing of larger communities.
   – Public education programs on the role and function of social media to raise awareness about online conversation, information type, narratives, etc.

b. **Focus on local communities and local organizations**
   – Design and implement assessment of community needs.
   – Provide public funds and programs for community development, e.g. projects that encourage and favor collaboration among stakeholders with different knowledge, expertise, and resources.
   – Encourage peer to peer relations, networks, and work environment.
   – Shape the authority intervention and strategies that focus on user-center design and community dialogue.
   – Strengthen the role and contribution of third sector organizations in larger communities and smaller neighborhoods that can create a better overview of needs and interests of individuals and communities.
   – Raise public awareness on existence of official channels for disseminating information in case of emergency.
   – Create official information channels for public access to services in case of threatening events and emergencies.
   – Establish a *"common language"* that facilitates dialogue and shared understanding between authorities and citizens.

c. **Urban design and architecture**
   – Invest more in residential neighbourhoods and suburbs' green and open spaces.
   – Re-build the connection with nature within a city environment.
   – Facilitate programs and local projects that encourage and enable people to build their life in the countryside.
   – Design and build friendly, ergonomic, and healthy environments, including buildings, neighbourhoods, and cities.
   – Expand the neighbourhood facilities, e.g., green parks, green civic spaces, etc.
   – Proper housing to avoid crowding and lack of autonomy.

d. **Digital tools and technology**
   – Facilitate people's access to digital tools to enable distance conversation and dialogue.
   – Re-shape and re-think social media usage, especially Facebook, to be used as an official platform for sharing official information to create support groups.
   – Facilitate access to the internet and digital tools for vulnerable groups and families with low income.
   – Create easy accessing apps containing practical information and news relevant to local communities.

e. **Programs for economy sector**
   – Envisage support programs for unemployment to combat the risk of isolation and marginalization.
   – Support programs for people on long-term unemployment due to age.
   – Re-allocation of the budget appropriations toward social services during the crisis.
   – Design tourism programs.

f. **Civic engagement**
   o Encourage and sustain civic engagement and public dialogue.
   o Encourage groups, organizations, stakeholders and community networking.
   o Create strong communities based on mutual support.
   o Encourage volunteering' programs, civic initiatives and civic autonomy[1] with the support of government.
   o Enhance the citizens´ awareness on public responsibility.
   o Value bottom-up approach in the process of decision making.

1.4. Specific-country topic

In this section are presented the key findings and recommendations emerged from the participants´ deliberation on specific-countries topics.

---

[1] By civic autonomy we are referring to the capacity of individual to get informed and make and uncoerced decision, that requires moral obligations and responsibility, status of being responsible, independent and able to speak for oneself.

1.4.1 The disinformation on the Covid-19 (Bulgaria)

According to the Bulgarian group, the underlying premises leading people to seek for fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic reside in:

1. Mainly **chaotic, inadequate, and incomplete communication strategy adopted by the authority** leading people to confusion and sometimes misinterpretation.
2. **Challenging public vaccine campaign initiated by authorities,** conflicting and misleading public information.
3. **Insufficient evidence and evaluation tools for tracing the root causes of public reluctance to get vaccinated**.

R3: The overall recommendation of the Bulgarian group promotes, as measures of prevention and fight against disinformation, the **refinement and adaptation of communication strategy in line with the particularities and profile of the targeted groups and communities.** And to name a few examples: **public information campaigns and education programs** for raising public awareness on the functionality of social media and informational flow**.** Also, the group recommended to recognize and support **research and expertise** as a valuable contribution to public information strategy.

For this recommendation to be fulfilled, participants in this group envisaged some possible directions:

– Raise public awareness and set up education programs that familiarize people with official sources of public information and enable them to make the distinction between various forms of false or misleading content.
– Envisage instruments and strategies for detecting and monitoring fake news and conspiracy theories.
– Proactive and positive communication and public information campaigns.
– Re-shape the functionality of social media as an official platform for dialogue and enhancing of citizens´ resilience attitudes.
– Synchronize and harmonize opinion-leaders discourses and narratives to reach different groups of people.
– Value more the experts´ intervention, set up expertise platforms, and encourage science and scientific research on concrete issues raised into society, e.g., *study on acceptance and perception on Covid-19 vaccine and people´s reluctance and fear for getting vaccinated*.

1.4.2 Public consultation[2] and role of civil organizations (Hungary).

The Hungarian group emphasized two main directions, as possible contribution to strengthening the role of civil organizations and civic participation:

– **political culture** and

---

[2] Consultation is a process through which subjects or topics of interest are discussed within or across constituency groups. It is a deliberation, discussion, and dialogue. Consultations are more formal and interactive than dialogue, and generally vary from consultations on global policies… The objective of a consultation is to seek information, advice and opinion. In any consultative process, the convener is not only gathering input, but sharing information as well. The organizer seeks to identify and clarify interests at stake, with the ultimate aim of developing a well-informed strategy or project that has a good chance of being supported and implemented. Providing and sharing information is seen as the foundation of an effective consultation process. (pp.9, Consultations with Civil Society. A sourcebook working document. February 2007. produced by Civil Society Team of World Bank.

- **civic participation**

that incorporate a *participatory culture*, *consensus democracy*, *advocacy platforms*, and *participatory decision-making*.

The Hungarian group examines the public opinion dialogue from the perspective of **micro-level –** *small communities and town/rural areas* **and macro perspective –** *larger communities, cities, and metropolitan regions*. The micro-level perspective favors the *local authorities, third sector, and civil society networking*. The macro-level is perceived as having more diffuse impact where the community's interest and identity are less considered, fading into a larger city's dimension and complexity.

> **R4:** The overall recommendation of the Hungarian group promotes **policy strategies that encourage public consultation and civic engagement** in the form of **deliberation, dialogue, cooperation, and opinion exchange.** To ensure this desiderate, some preliminary conditions should be guaranteed, and accommodation of both authorities and citizens are required, that should be focused on:
> 1. **Particularities of community needs.**
> 2. **Culture of deliberation acquired through public education programs.**
> 3. **Participatory instruments and design to facilitate public-authority dialogue and cooperation.**

To fulfil this recommendation mentioned above, a few directions have been envisaged by the Hungarian group:
- Multi-stakeholders, public authority and cross-sectorial consultation on policy strategy.
- Civic education that facilitates sharing opinions and knowledge, and promotes cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement of citizens.
- Development of civic skills and responsibilities to fostering civic engagement.
- Inventory of community assets, needs, and resources towards a community transformation and improvement of the safety and the quality of community life.
- Authority intervention based on concrete needs.
- Culture of deliberation that values the role of exchange opinion, inclusiveness, consensus, and mutual respect.
- Consistent civic engagement.

1.4.3   Protection of economy and employment sector (Iceland).

One of the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic tackled by the Icelandic group was predominantly on the economic sector. The unemployment rate escalated, mainly affecting the immigrant group active in the tourism sector and restaurant industry.

> **R5:** The overall recommendation advocated by the Icelandic group as a protective measure of employment sector is the **tripartite contribution of government-organizations-citizens engagement.** The main focus is concentrated here on **marginalized and vulnerable groups of people.** Hence, the sustainable contribution to the employment sector must be addressed from different perspectives: **(a) by facilitating proper access to information; (b) envisaging monitoring programs of marginalized groups; (c) contribution of civil organizations; (d) favouring partnership authority-third sector-citizens; (d) equipping people with resilience mechanisms; (e) creating self-employment programs; (d) developing digital and technology literacy.**

To fulfil this recommendation mentioned above, a few directions have been envisaged by the Icelandic group:

– Advocate and support access of marginalized individuals to the work market, e.g. with the support of civil societies.
– Monitor and follow-up programs to tackle the risk of isolation.
– Encourage and create conditions for government-organizations-citizens partnership.
– Encourage community and multi-stakeholders networking.
– Facilitate independence and self-management.
– Encourage the culture and business and self-employment.
– Invest in public programs to improve quality of life and wellbeing.
– Invest in communication strategy and access to relevant information.
– Implement public education programs for the improvement of digital and information literacy.
– Facilitate inter-group dialogue to enable acceptance of diversity and various opinions.

1.4.4   Influence of populist narratives on public discourse (Italy).

The Italian group tackled the controversial measures and actions adopted by the local government in Messina during the Covid-19 pandemic. The measures were considered by the group as having a ***populist narrative and political propaganda connotation*** that influenced the public opinion, decision-making process, and response to the circumstances created by the pandemic. The public response has been explained from the perspective of the following concrete local issues tackled by the Italian group:

1. **Absence of public deliberation and civic engagement.**
2. **Stigmatization and public propaganda.**
3. **Limited awareness and civic initiatives.**
4. **Low level of educational level and unemployment conditions.**
5. **Political vacuum and abuse of power.**
6. **Violent language.**

The issues exposed above entailed several effects on the public´s perception and representation of political power and civic role as a member of the society:

– Public image of political leaders is projected as *"strongman," "voice of truth," hero, "sheriff," "padre"*[3] that hold the power of decision over the public will.
– Public awareness and responsibility to the development of the community.
– Contribution of local media that favored the mayor´s" voice of truth."
– Election and electorate.

> **R6:** The overall recommendation advocated by the Italian group as a measure of prevention of public opinion influence by political narratives is raising the **public awareness on populism discourse.** The envisaged measures propose three main directions:
> **(a) community and civil society contribution to information provision and group dialogue;**
> **(b) public education programs;**
> **(c) participatory instruments and design.**

---

[3] Concepts depicted from the participant´s statements.

To fulfil this recommendation mentioned above, a few directions have been envisaged by the Italian group:

- Public consultation and groups deliberation.
- Culture of local community engagement, responsibility and initiatives.
- Active and positive presence and intervention of central government in regions with high-risk communities.
- Adaptation of communication strategies for marginalized people.
- Access to the participatory instrument that enables public communication and dialogue.
- Investment in people´s education and civic responsibility.

1.4.5   Protection of law and constitutions (Poland).

The Polish group expressed their concern about the anti-constitutional attitudes of the Polish government enacted in adopted restrictions against the Covid-19 pandemic. The arguments that sustain the group´s concerns consist of:

- **Lack of public engagement and consultation in the process of decision-making.**
- **Poor and incomplete communication strategies.**
- **Deficient access and consistency of shared public information.**
- **Long-term exposure to the severe restriction that infringed people´s freedom and led people to isolation.**
- **Less recognition of experts´ contribution.**
- **Manifestation of political power and influence.**

The practices and measures adopted by authorities entailed several significant consequences that should be considered within the future policy strategies: **trust and security, rights and freedom, mental health and wellbeing, and polarization and society/groups division.**

1.4.6   Trust in government and influence of mass-media (Scotland).

The Scottish group exposed **two contrasting premises** that influenced public trust in government – *making here a clear distinction between the trust in local authority in Scotland vs. the UK central government.* Thus, one premise referred to **mass media attitudes often promoting biased and less consistent information** leading people to confusion and fear. The second premise refers to the positive **contribution of the local authority in Scotland** that adopted a pro-active and supportive attitude towards local communities.

> **R7:** The overall recommendation of the group in Scotland promotes the **active role of the local authority as a binder/connector between central government on one side and civil organization and citizens on the other side.** To ensure and strengthen this connection and, at the same time, facilitate dialogue and consultation, there is a need for:
> 1. **Encouraging and valuing civic engagement and public consultation.**
> 2. **Re-evaluation of existing laws and policy strategy.**
> 3. **Early intervention strategies for insertion of civic education and civic participation programs in schools.**
> 4. **Refinement of communication strategies.**

To fulfil this recommendation mentioned above, a few directions have been envisaged by the Scottish group:

- Investment in civic engagement programs.
- Review and corroborate the law with the complexity and needs of today´s local community and society overall that can facilitate more efficient and prioritised distribution of budget towards risk and vulnerable sectors and groups of people.
- Revision of culture of government, e.g. governance, political culture.
- Create consultation platforms and instruments.
- Consolidate the cooperation between the central government and local authorities that favour consensus and agreement on measures adopted in line with the particularities of different communities.

1.4.7 Strengthening the role of local authority (Spain).

The Spanish group focused on future strategies and actions for strengthening the role of local authorities – *in the context of the decentralized administrative system practiced in Spain* – that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrated a contradictory strategy for management of crisis. The participants´ deliberation was concentrated around two main directions:

1. **Role of local institutions and local communities in the management of crisis.**
2. **Role of innovation of institutions and citizens participation.**

> **R8:** The overall recommendation of the Spanish group advocates the **innovation of local institutions and civic engagement** as a part of the larger concept of **social innovation ecosystem.** According to the Spanish group, the innovation should be based on **consistent administration management, individual and community resilience attitudes, society values, collective creation, and social initiatives. Public education** and **institutional reform** are two instruments that might sustain this process.

To fulfil this recommendation mentioned above, a few directions have been envisaged by the Spanish group:

- Local authorities should be support institutions of citizens´ participation, especially in the time of crisis.
- Local institutions can create collaboration opportunities together with the private and third sector for the re-organization and development of the health care system.
- Local networking can enable dialogue and conversation between members of community.

2. Introduction

2.1   Context of European Democracy Lab

Across Europe, there is a rise of political movements that claim to challenge *liberal elites* and speak for the *'ordinary person'* – *movements* that can be loosely categorized as *'populist.'* Many of these movements have undesirable tendencies.

> **The Populism and Civic engagement project (PaCE) aims to understand and address negative tendencies associated with populist politics, build upon the lessons of positive examples, and play a part in constructing a firmer democratic and institutional foundation for citizens of Europe.**

The PaCE project includes both quantitative and qualitative research. The qualitative research consists of civic participation and deliberative democracy research in order to tackle the citizens' opinions across Europe. The form of civic engagement is set up as *local democracy labs* and European Democracy Lab.

The European Democracy Lab is in line with Objective 5 of the PaCE project:

> **Engage with stakeholders, especially groups under-represented in public affairs, particularly younger citizens, schools, and local communities, in new forms of democratic engagement appropriate in our digital age.**

The purpose of the European Democracy Lab is to assess the public's attitudes to and aspirations for democracy, identify ways of democratic involvement, and understand how traditional and social media influence political and social opinion. The **Democratic Society, Brussels, in collaboration with the City of Reykjavik, and Citizens Foundation, Iceland**, are the leaders in organizing and carrying out the online European Democracy Labs with expert facilitators from seven European countries that support the deliberation on the specific-country topic in the native language of participants.

2.2   Purpose of the European Democracy Lab

The **goal** of the 6-hours European Democracy Lab tying together forty-nine (49) participants from seven European countries, was to address the key findings of the PaCE *Local Democracy Labs* on *"Trust in public administration in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic."* Thus, two cross-countries topics and seven specific-country topics have been selected among the outcomes of the *local democracy labs,* presented in the **table 1**. and **table 2.**

table 1. Cross-countries topics of the European Democracy Lab

Cross-countries topics	
Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news	Pandemic restrictions long-term consequences – mental health & wellbeing

table 2. Specific-country topics of the European Democracy Lab

Specific-country topics	
Bulgaria	**The disinformation on the Covid-19 in Bulgaria** The media disinformation, emerged from the *local democracy lab* in Bulgaria, was selected as the most relevant deliberation topic considered a crucial issue that influenced the people´s opinions and trust in authorities. According to participants in this group, people´s trust in vaccination is shallow due to media narratives. The European statistics confirm it among the countries with the lowest vaccination rate in the last few months and higher mortality rate during the pandemic
Hungary	**Public opinion dialogue and contribution of civic organizations** The communication strategy adopted by the Hungarian authorities, as emerged from the participants´ deliberation in the *local democracy lab* in Hungary, did not include the public dialogue in decision-making process. Thus, the aim of the Hungarian group deliberation was to tackle better the role and contribution of the local and pan-local public participation and civic engagement and public participation in the process of decision-making.
Iceland	**Protection of economy and employment sector** The main consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the Icelandic authorities were reflected in the employment sector, especially on immigrants working in the tourism and restaurant industry. Thus, the specific-country round aimed to better address the employment sector challenges from the perspective of the Icelandic infrastructure and authorities' strategies and support programs in response to raised unemployment.
Italy	**Influence of populist narratives on the public discourse** During the first Covid-19 pandemic wave, the local government of Messina defied the regional and national governments in an open confrontation by undertaking even tougher and somewhat 'spectacular' measures with ample coverage on both traditional and social media. The mayor´s intervention has been considered, in this context, as covered "populist narrative touch" that influenced the public opinion. The local situation has been deliberated in the larger context of national trends and other local experiences.
Poland	**Protection of law and constitution** The Polish group selected protection of law and constitution as a relevant topic due to the far-rights attitudes envisaged, in recent years, by the Polish government, with notoriously demonstrated anti-constitutional attitude. The European Commission and the European Parliament have also signaled this issue which, in response, imposed constraints on the Polish Government to proceed with law compliance. Furthermore, the pandemic situation has demonstrated once more the authorities´ law-abiding attitudes reflected into adopted restrictions against the Covid pandemic that ultimately violated the constitutions and human rights.
Scotland	**Trust in government and influence of mass-media** During the Covid-19 pandemic, mass media has adopted some contradictory communication strategies for public information that, to some extent, were less efficient and consistent, often biased, and most of the time highlighted the negative side of the situation. In contrast, the local Scottish authority had initiated several positive measures to support local communities, distinct from the central government measures that sometimes-lacked efficient communication strategies. These two premises that emerged from the *local democracy lab* in Scotland (April 2021) led the group in selecting the government's communication strategies and information dissemination as the main topic.
Spain	**Strengthening the role of local authorities** The Spanish group selected the topic on the role of local authorities in the management and support of local communities for main deliberation. The selection is due to strongly decentralised local management in Spain that created some decision-making discrepancies during the Covid-9 pandemic, generating citizens' confusion. In addition, the contribution of organisations and the civil sector such as social movements have been included into the group´s deliberation.

2.3   Objectives of the European Democracy Lab

The European Democracy Lab aim at reaching the following key objectives:
- Bring together a selection of participants of seven *local democracy labs* carried out across Europe to address and discuss the most significant and challenging issues emerged from the deliberation on *Trust in authorities in the time on the Covid-19 pandemic*.
- Address the key findings of the PaCE *Local Democracy Labs* and propose recommendations based on *expertise, competences and knowledge* of experts on the one hand and on the *experience, interest and knowledge* of citizens/residents on the other hand.
- Exploit the main key findings of the European Democracy Lab in the research conducted in the PaCE project.
- Reach policy-makers and policy strategy by converting the key findings of the European Democracy Lab into recommendations.

2.4.   Selection Criteria of Participants

The selection of participants of the European Democracy Lab was based on different criteria that enabled the application of all one hundred and fifty (150) participants to the PaCE *Local Democracy Labs* held in seven European countries. Thus, among the one hundred and fifty, forty-nine (49) attended the online European Democracy Lab.

The selection criteria are as follows:
- **Six to eight representatives of each country fulfilling the conditions of gender and age diversity, and work sector.**
- **Attendance to the PaCE *Local Democracy Lab* in the** country where the PaCE *Local Democracy Lab* was organized: *Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Scotland and Spain*.
- **Age**: above 18 years old
- **Demonstrate a good level of English** that ensure the understanding and active participation in the group's deliberation on the cross-countries topics.
- **The application is based on the participant´s interest and motivation** in joining the PaCE European Democracy Lab.

2.5.   Method applied to the European Democracy Lab

The design of the European Democracy Lab is based on the idea of the ***World Café qualitative method***, adapted for the online version. The **World Café** is a tool used widely as a participatory method for citizens participation, engaging participants in an open conversation space, facilitating the access to other peoples´ views and knowledge through deliberation and ideas exchange. The format fits the Positive Psychology frame and creates a welcoming and constructive environment, promoting interactions and equal partnership among participants, and stimulates the peoples´ creativity and freedom of expressing opinions around a topic whilst being guided by questions. The process uses connected conversations to share knowledge, think innovation, and tap into the group's collective intelligence (Löhr K., Weinhardt M. and Siebes S, 2020)[4]. The method encourages *"informal conversation, representing a neutral public space where people feel free to engage with each other."*

---

[4] Löhr K., Weinhardt M. amd Sieber S. (2020). Guide to the World Café method

The World Café process is a simple method for bringing people together to focus on answering key questions. It is founded on the assumption that people have the will and capacity to work together. The process uses connected conversations to share knowledge, ignite innovation, and tap into the intelligence of the group. The key elements of the process include:

- Small groups around table
- Informal conversations focus on key questions.
- Sharing ideas and knowledge as participants move among small groups.
- Opportunities to record ideas in words and images.
- Weaving of emerging themes and insights
- Awareness of social nature of learning
- Noticing that individual conversations are part of and contribute to a larger web through which collective intelligence can become aware of itself. (Löhr K., Weinhardt M. amd Sieber S, 2020; Guide to the World Café method)

Aside from the World Café method, the European Democracy Lab design derives from the **deliberative democracy exercises**, like citizens' assembly, citizen panel, and citizens' jury. The concept assumes **involving citizens in decision-making and developing recommendations** for authorities through informed deliberation. To enable participants to make informed statements and decisions, they discuss given topics with others, hear from the experts and stakeholders from the field and draw on personal lived experience. A simplified structure of deliberative events breaks into three key stages:

- ***Evidence hearing***,
- ***Deliberation*** and
- ***Decision making***.

The process also relies on participants diversity, achieved through sortition, to ensure the representativeness of the group, comprising of all members of the community. For the European Democracy Lab, the principles and structure of the deliberative process were applied. Participants' diversity was achieved by involving citizens of seven European countries and combining them into mixed groups.

2.6. Design of the European Democracy Lab

The format of the European Democracy Lab proposed both **plenary sessions** and **group deliberation rounds**. The plenary sessions were held into the ***"main virtual room"*** allowing the access of all participants, whereas the groups´ deliberation rounds were held into ***"breakout virtual rooms".*** For the breakout rooms allocation, participants were divided in smaller groups, of 6-10 participants that facilitated the dynamic conversation and equal contribution of participants, under the leadership of an expert facilitator for each group. The format of the group's rounds was structured as follows:

- two rounds dedicated to deliberation of ***cross-countries topics*** and,
- one round with seven parallel sessions, one for each country, dedicated to deliberation of the ***specific-country topics***.

a. Format of the plenary sessions

The opening and coordination of the **plenary sessions** and the step by step introducing of participants in each group´s deliberation round was carried out by a **lead facilitator**.

The lab´s formula proposed five plenary sessions as follows:

- **One introductory session** at the beginning of the lab,
- **Two feedback sessions**, one after each group´s deliberation round on cross-country topic.
- **Two expert plenary sessions,** one for an expert´s presentation related to cross-country topics.

In the **introductive plenary session** participants were acquainted with the PaCE project and key findings of the *local democracy labs*, the European's lab agenda, structure and format, conversation guidelines and the rules of groups division per each round. The goal of short introduction of the key findings of the PaCE *Local Democracy Labs'* was to get participants familiar with the **cross-countries**- and **specific-countries topics** selected for the deliberations at the European Democracy Lab.

Two feedback plenary sessions were proposed to participants, after each deliberation round on the cross-country topic. In these sessions, participants were returning from breakout rooms to the main room for a brief reporting (2-3 minutes) on the key points of their group deliberation. The shared key points, as a result of the group´s agreement, were captured by the expert facilitator with the support of one or two participants.

In the **first expert plenary session**, the lead facilitator introduced the first working round and the expert guest speakers. The first working round – **Round 1 (R1) –** proposed a deliberation on the first cross-country topic: *Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news.*

In the **second expert plenary session,** the lead facilitator introduced the second working round and the expert guest speaker. The second working round – **Round 2 (R2) –** proposed a deliberation on the second cross-country topic: *Pandemic restrictions long-term consequences – mental health & wellbeing.*

The experts gave a short overview of research, insights and actions related to each cross-country topic. After the expert´s presentation, the participants were divided in smaller groups based on the mixed-country criteria in order to ensure the diversity of opinion exchange.

b. Format of the group rounds

The **group rounds** were led by experts' facilitators as follows:

- Experts facilitators leading the groups´ deliberation on cross-country topics. The communication language was English.
- Experts facilitators leading the group´s deliberation on specific-country topics. The facilitators were selected from countries of participants´ provenience. The communication language for each group was the participants´ native language.

The role of the expert facilitators was to animate the participants´ deliberation, ensure equal contribution, create a safe and comfortable settings for participants and to capture the key points of participant´s deliberation. The

key points and the participants' insights were captures on the Google digital whiteboard, Jamboard that served for sharing in the feedback plenary sessions and for the preparation of the PaCE report.

The first two rounds enabled the participants´ deliberation on the cross-country-topics that have been presented in the paragraphs above.

The third round – **Round 3 (R3) –** included seven parallel breakout groups, where participants from the same country of provenience were grouped together for deliberation on the specific-country topics. The specific-country topics are presented below:

– *The disinformation on the Covid-19 in Bulgaria (Bulgaria)*
– *Public opinion dialogue and contribution of civic organizations (Hungary)*
– *Protection of economy and employment sector (Iceland)*
– *Influence of populist narratives on the public discourse (Italy)*
– *Protection of law and constitution (Poland)*
– *Trust in government and influence of mass-media (Scotland)*
– *Strengthening the role of local authorities (Spain).*

Each breakout country round was opened by a local expert with competence and experience in the specific-country topic. Each local expert presented a short presentation containing research, experience, findings, measures, and strategies that supported the topic of discussion specific for each country.

2.6.1. Cross-countries rounds

The format of the cross-countries rounds consisted of **15 minutes expert's plenary presentation** followed by **15 minutes of questions and answer session**. By the end of each plenary cross-countries round, the participants were divided in **five mixed smaller groups that enables the participants´ deliberation on the respective topics**. The principle of group division was to mix up people from different countries in order to ensure the opinion diversity. The compositions of groups were kept identical for both cross-countries rounds. The official language selected for participants´ communication was English.

Round 1 (R1): The round started by the experts' presentation that introduced the main outcomes of the European Union research and activities *"The EU response to disinformation",* as a response to the cross-countries topic on *communication strategy for public information.* The presentation was held by Istvan Perger and Matteo Salvai from the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission.

After the presentation and Q&A session, participants were divided into five breakout rooms together with their expert facilitator who led a 40 minutes deliberation, guiding participants by two support questions:

1. **What messages would you put out to counter Covid mis/disinformation and for which audiences?**
2. **What steps should the authorities/decision makers take to ensure that public information is clear & accessible for different groups of people?**

Round 2 (R2): The round started by the expert´ presentation introducing the main research, programs and strategies envisaged by the World Health Organization and the European Union in response to the long-term effects of Covid-pandemic, particularly on people's mental health and wellbeing. The presentation was held by Roxana Elena Cziker, City of Reykjavík, Iceland.

After the introduction of the second cross-countries topic, participants were allocated to breakout rooms together with their expert facilitator, guiding the participants´ discussion by two support questions:

1. **Based on what we learned and experienced in the pandemic: think of and discuss some examples of what worked well to support peoples' wellbeing.** *Prompts: examples from your ground (country, county), positive stories, and things that didn't work, what could have been done better.*
2. **What are the key things that need to be put in place to support people's wellbeing?**

2.6.2. Specific-country rounds

Round 3 (R3) was dedicated to **specific-country topics** where participants were divided in seven breakout groups, reflecting their country origin. Each breakout room took about **one hour and thirty-five minutes,** with the exception of the Italian and Spanish group that needed more time. The participants´ deliberation in each group was animated by an expert facilitator in the local language.

The methodology applied by expert facilitators for guiding the participants' deliberation was different from country to country so that the description of key findings is very distinctive. However, the deliberation´s structure was common for all seven groups and was divided in three sections:

- **Expert presentation associated to the county-specific topic** 30 minutes**.**
- **Questions and answers based on the expert´s presentation.**
- **Deliberation and recommendations.**

Different guiding questions were chosen for each country, formulated in line with the specific-country topic, but also inspired by the expert´s presentation. The questions are presented in the section **3.4** of this report **Key findings of the Round 3 - Specific-country topics**.

2.7.   Examination of Participants´ Statements

The report presents descriptively the opinions, expectations, demands, challenges, and recommendations of participants, based on the examination of the notes available on the Jamboard Google digital whiteboard. After the qualitative analysis of participants´ statements on cross-countries topics, some key points and challenges have been emphasized. The key points and challenges were transferred into recommendations that might be addressed by different stakeholders and policy actors and included in future policy strategies.

3. Outcomes of the European Democracy Lab

3.1.   Description of Participants

A total number of forty-nine (49) participants attended the online European Democracy Lab. The participants range of age is from 18 to 75 years of age. Among the total number of 49 participants, twenty-five (25) were female, twenty (20) male and four (4) declared non-binary gender. The educational profile of participants was mostly with tertiary level of education. The detailed profile of participants is presented in the **table 3, figure 1 and figure 2**.

table 3. Profile of participants to the European democracy lab

Country	Total number	Age range (N)	Gender (N)			Educational level (N)		
			Males	**Non-binary**	**Females**	**Tertiary**	**Secondary**	**Other**
Bulgaria	8	22-51 y	1	0	7	6	2	0
Hungary	8	25-67 y	4	1	3	8	0	0
Iceland	5	37-69 y	1	2	2	2	3	0
Italy	9	18-40 y	4	0	5	8	1	0
Poland	6	18-65 y	3	0	3	4	2	0
Scotland	6	20-75 y	3	0	3	5	0	1
Spain	7	19-60 y	4	0	2	7	0	0
Total	**49**		**20**	**4**	**25**	**40**	**8**	**1**
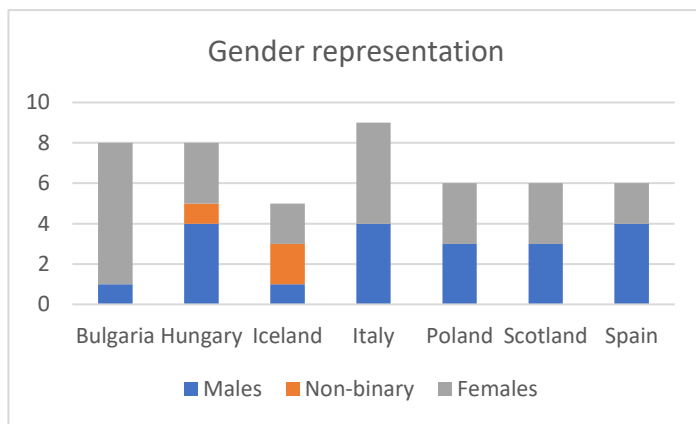
figure 1. Gender representation among participants to the European Democracy Lab
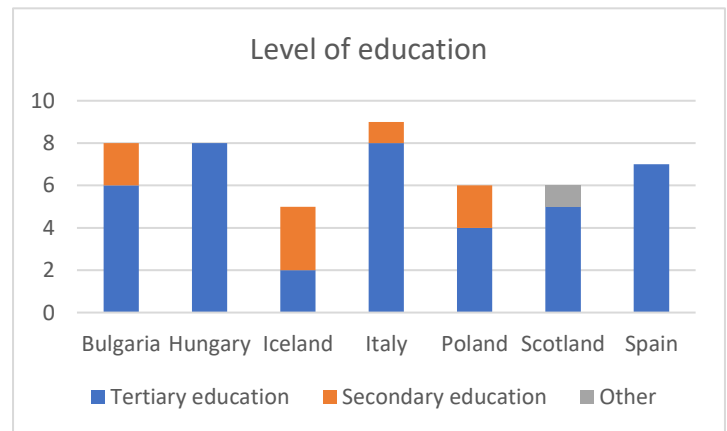
figure 2. Representation of educational level of participants to the European Democracy Lab

3.2.   Key findings Round 1 and Round 2 – Cross-countries topics

3.2.1.   *Round 1. Public communication strategy: disinformation & fake news*

In the first working round (**R1**) participants had the opportunity to deliberate the first cross-countries topic, **communication strategy: disinformation and fake news**. The round was divided in two parts:

   a. **Experts presentation. *Istvan Perger*** and ***Matteo Salvai*** from the EU *Directorate-General for Communications, Fighting disinformation team* presented the **EU response to disinformation,** emphasizing the main *actions undertaken by the EU to tackle disinformation and overview of unprecedent case of "infodemic".*

b. **Participants deliberation.** Participants were divided in breakout rooms, animated by an expert facilitator that guided the participants´ discussion.

a. **Experts´ presentation**

The presentation of Perger I. and Slavai M. on **EU response to disinformation** started by making a distinction between different concepts such as *misinformation, disinformation, information influence operations, and foreign interference,* followed by an overview of false information flow in Europe, extracted from the **Eurobarometer research in 2019-2020.** According to the Eurobarometer, 83% of Europeans consider false information a threat to democracy, and 71% of Europeans encounter false information regularly. Seeking for false information, according to the same research, impacts **election and voting**, **creates space for polarization**, **impacts the citizens´ trust in a democracy** that discourages, among the others, the representative democracy (vote) and trust in vaccination, and overall undermines the reputation of EU institution. The research reports some strategies adopted by fake news devotees when conceiving false information, choosing the spread channels, and reaching the audience:

– *facilitate state propaganda;*
– *develop "persona" such as experts, new sites, social media accounts;*
– *develop networks: audience, channels, create funding campaign, cultivate ignorant agents, hijack legitimate account, social media groups;*
– *develop content: audio, visual-images, conspiracy narratives, distort facts, fake research, leak documents;*
– *channels selection; emails, forum, academia, blog etc.* The complete picture of fake news characteristics is presented in the **figure 3**.
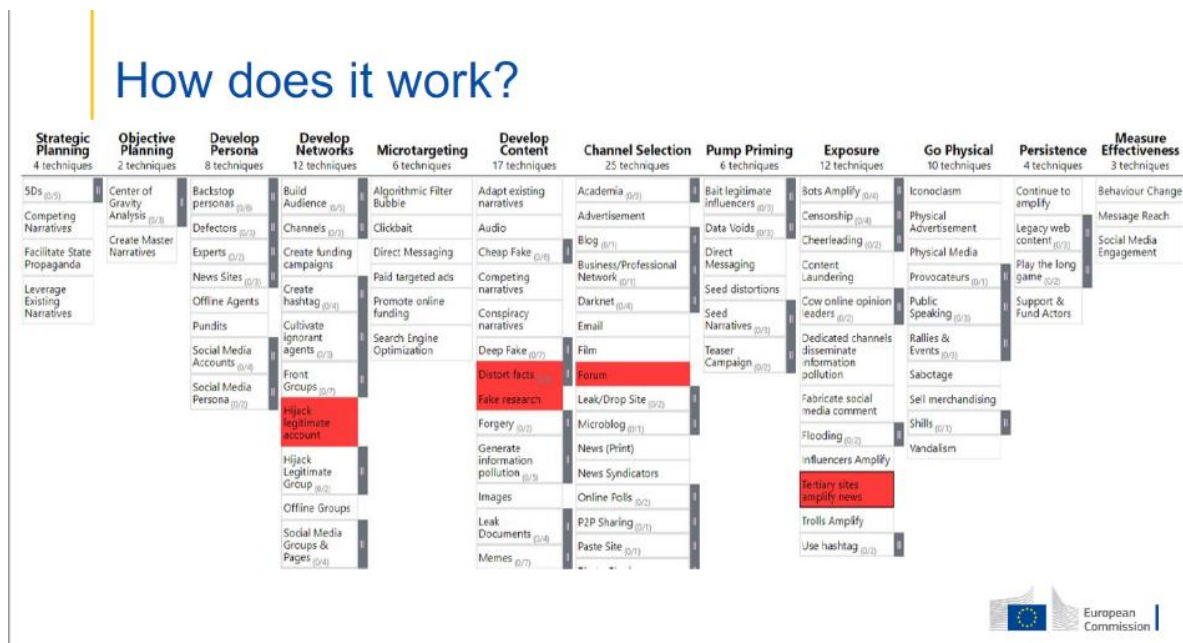

figure 3. Overall picture of the characteristics of fake news. Slide extracted from the presentation of Perger I. and Salvai M., „The EU response to disinformation ", 19th of November 2021, on the occasion of the PaCE European Democracy Lab.

European Union has adopted a strategy to address and combat misinformation, following four main directions:

- **Detection, analysis and exposure –** working with social media by implementing the Code of Practices on Disinformation released in 2018 and updated in 2021.
- **Mobilization of private sector.**
- **Cooperation with Member States.**
- **Policy making.**

In the particular case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the most frequent narratives – *seen from the perspective of disinformation* – have promoted anti-vaccination campaigns, conspiracy theories, and anti-mandatory vaccination narratives.

The presentation of EU representatives echoed the participants' interest, that entangled furthermore a series of questions and challenges regarding the impact of the fake news, which category of people, regions, and European countries are most exposed or willing to seek fake news and conspiracy theories, and what might be the public awareness programs available to combat the fake news spread and media strategies. The participants' questions and the presenters' responses are presented in the paragraphs below.

- *How to bring people back to reality from fake news?*

Among the impacts of fake news on people, presenters underlined the risk of building a different reality, re-shaping of beliefs, which once installed as a pattern of thinking, requires time to undue it. One source presenting the attitudes profile of people who are seeking fake news and conspiracy theories is *"How to talk to conspiracy theorists – and still be kind"* and can be consulted on the Technology review website.

- *What is the motivation of fake news´ devotees to adopt this strategy?*

In the presenters´ view, the reasons for the fabrication and spreading of fake news and information sources are complex. However, various reasons might be emphasized, like gaining economic benefits, causing public harm and influencing the people´s opinions and beliefs, generating insecurity, inciting hostility, and disrupting the democratic process. In return, some companies gain financial profit and reputation advantages.

- *Who is the category of people mostly exposed to disinformation?*
- *Which are the European countries / regions mostly attracted by fake news – comparison between Eastern and Western Europe?*

The risk of exposure to disinformation is a question of debate and research, and difficult to detect which category of people is more exposed. However, different research highlights the risk of exposure of the most vulnerable category of people, such as less informed, people who do not trust news, etc. Lisa Marshall touches on some aspects regarding the attraction to fake news in her article *"Who shares the most fake news? New study sheds light"*. Another sources around the same topic is presented by the Reuters Institute and University of Oxford that gives an overview about the people *who are most vulnerable to misinformation*. In terms of the prevalence of exposure to the fake news of European regions, according to the EU report, some regions can be more exposed compared to the others, depending on political ideology practices, adopted national and regional narratives and particularities of local culture. The *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021* presents a comparative overview of exposure to risk of disinformation of the Central European countries compared with Eastern European countries.

– *What kind of programs or strategies might be used to raise people´s awareness about the fake news?*

As experts emphasized in their presentation, several strategies have been adopted at the European Union level to better tackle and combat the mis- and disinformation. Among the existing initiatives, one was particularly underlined, the [EU Code of Practice on Disinformation,](#) which includes demonetization of information. Based on the signed agreement of the EU code, social media platforms will have limited capabilities of promoting fake news. Another envisaged strategy envisaged by the EU code consists of implementation of public education programs, active involvement of citizens in the development of the society, media literacy that can be included in the school curricula (see the example of Finland), sense the citizens´ empowerment and engagement. Also, the political side might be adopted some ethical actions to use political advertising within certain boundaries. Recently, the *[European Commission proposed new laws on political adverting, electoral rights and party founding](#)*.

– *Media strategy and conspiracy theories; how it can be explained – the effect on the democracy; whether a correlation between politicians/organizations and ideologies can be found.*

The distance between measures adopted to combat the disinformation and possible effects on the freedom of expression, human rights, and technology innovation can be limited and challenging. Therefore, the preservation of freedom of expression can be "creatively" envisaged in order to avoid the risk of the reverse of shield and turn it against and harm the democratic expression of public opinion. Different organizations, institutions, and NGOs have already adopted "creative" strategies of tackling disinformation by preserving free expression.

As has been already mentioned before, online disinformation entails many negative impacts such as on **human rights**, **rights to hold opinions without interference**, **right to privacy**, **freedom of expression**, **vote in the election**, and so forth. Overall, the effect of fake news might be reflected in the democratic process and institutional trust, distort the electorate process, and foster incivility and polarization online, but also offline. A right to opinion, a divergent opinion must be respected but should be based on a pitch of truth, not on complete falsehood, as ***Matteo Salvai*** highlighted. More details about this issue can be found on the European Parliament site.

b. Participants deliberation

After the presentation of experts, the participants were invited to deliberate the communication strategy and fake news in smaller groups. Thus, they have been divided into breakout rooms led by an expert facilitator that guided the participants' discussion using two questions:

1. **What messages would you put out to counter Covid mis/disinformation and for which audiences?**
2. **What steps should the authorities/decision makers take to ensure that public information is clear & accessible for different groups of people?**

Group R1-A reflected mainly on the accuracy and accessibility of existing information and instruments or strategies available for diagnosing the configuration of information, raising the question of *"who can decide what biased info-/misinformation is?"* and how to enhance people's awareness of reliable information. The participants in this group emphasized the reconsideration of **top-down and bottom-up approaches** and **valuing more the people´s dialogue and consultation,** as a part of the decision making process. They recognized the essential role of authorities in tracing the misinformation spread, addressing people's needs, and identifying vulnerable and marginalized people (as confirmed by research as a category of people more exposed to seeking fake news).

By pinpointing marginalized groups, the attraction poll towards the fake news and *"periphery of internet conversation,"* – where the level of polarization is high – can be prevented and reversed. The European Commission could invest more in the bottom-up decision-making process and public dialogue.

Group R1-A was also addressing the **freedom of expression** in the contemporary world. According to the presentation of the EU experts, monitoring and supervision actions of information provision on the internet and social media will be envisaged. Thus, this issue raises how freedom of expression might still be ensured in these circumstances.

Overall, participants in this group made some suggestions regarding the measures that safeguard and ensure the clarity and accessibility of public information provision to different groups. Thus, the core recommendation emphasized the experts' contribution and application of scientific methods. Thus, a few viewpoints emerged:

- Enable the experts (as representative figures in the society) to take the lead in providing public explanations and ensure the information credibility, whereas the politicians *"(…) should take a step back in a situation like pandemic (…)";*
- Reconsider the role of experts in the politicians´ view.
- Consider the bottom-up approach and open for dialogue rather than focusing only on the top-down approach.
- Ensure the freedom of expression and public deliberation by facilitating the contribution of different actors/stakeholders.

Group R1-B

Participants in Group R1-B considered challenging foreseeing measures that address the **needs of diverse groups with different economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds**. Moreover, in the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, the **trust in authorities and the EU has registered a decline**. This issue led participants to question *"(…) why people don´t trust the government and the EU?"* The lockdown, strict restrictions imposed by authorities in some European countries, such as in ***Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary***[5] on the one hand, and the lack of accessibility, coherence, and clarity of information on the other hand, created the premises of uncertainty, as was underlined by this group. For instance, in ***Poland***, due to only main TV channels available for distribution of public information, *"(…) one controlled by the ruling party (…)",* was noticed a **polarization opinion among people**, dividing Poland into *"two tribes."* The information provided by private TV channels mainly emphasized the regulations and restrictions but never raised public awareness about the importance of *"obeying the rules, wearing masks, getting vaccinated."*

In ***Hungary***, mass media initiated public street interviews aimed to challenge the reasons for people´s reluctance to get vaccinated. Scientists contested and evaluated this approach as an inefficient strategy to motivate people to be vaccinated. In Bulgaria *"…disinformation on Covid went with political crisis, parties used it to spread misinformation and use it for election."*

The examples of Poland, Hungary nd Bulgaria mentioned above were exploited by some politicians and converted into opportunities for building up the political narratives, preparing the electorate, and attracting more votes.

---

[5] referring to these three countries because of representation of participants to the European democracy lab

The participants in Group R1-B reflected as well on the impact of *"mis-/disinformation, frequent public exposure to the negative side of the Covid (on TV and social media),"* overlapped over the *"inappropriate communication strategies adopted by authorities with emotional impact."* These circumstances were considered as possible *"fake news hookers"* as public distrust response to the strict restrictions adopted by authorities in different ocunties. However, in their view, fake news spread cannot be stopped; therefore, understanding the *"root causes"* of misinformation, *"provision of tools for tackling fake news,"* and *"collaboration among different kinds of organizations and institutions"* might be some strategies to be considered by authorities. Also, (official) social media platforms and the contribution of experts might add to raising public awareness about the fake news phenomenon, especially among young people, and combat misleading people through fake news.

> *"From my observations, it appears that social media (and TV) plays citizens faster that the opinion of specialist. Faster than the lawyer´s opinion. Then people act on that information. We run everywhere, we do not have time. People want to know, but they are looking for quick answers. Social media gives them that. It is a response to their needs."*

Group R1-B considered relevant the **partnership authorities/administration-politicians-media-experts**, with the contribution of citizens that think preventively in tackling better misinformation. Thus, some practical recommendations emerged:

– Provide digital/specific tools that tackle false news.
– Set up platforms that ensure access to official information.
– Introduce public education on media literacy and fake news. Otherwise *"(…) people think that Facebook is a good information source; they do not know about fake news."*
– Introduce school deliberations about fake news.
– Organize workshops with journalists, civic education events and deliberative discussion.
– Decompose elements of conspiracy theories.
– Organize critical thinking courses and public education programs.

Group R1-C

The participants in Group R1-C envisaged a combination of approaches that might prevent and combat the extent and effect of mis-disinformation: **science and expertise, selection of various sources of information**, e.g., social media, newspapers, **evaluation tools for tackling false news**, **OPEN DATABASE source** providing reliable information on vaccination. Participants advocated the contribution of research in detecting the causes of people´s fear and reluctance to get vaccinated. The research outcomes can be exploited to develop vaccination campaigns for motivating people to get vaccinated.

The **amount of information and complexity of selected language** were some of the issues people contested in the communication strategy adopted by authorities. Thus, the contribution of scientific intervention has been considered essential in facilitating the public understanding, e.g., a short scientific video presenting briefly and simply the effect of Covid. The chosen language used for public information should be adapted according to **people´s needs, interests, and level of understanding**, e.g. language adapted for speople with different disabilities. The communication strategy can be thought of in the context of collaborative networks such as organizations, associations, NGOs, and different actors aiming to support a particular category of people and know better their target groups and associated needs.

The contribution of expertise and experts has also been acknowledged as a public communication strategy. The government collaborates with experts who demonstrate competencies and know-how in the areas covered by the government strategy.

Group R1-D emphasized the public influence of the internet and information shared through different sources and channels. Information for public should be simple, based on the principle of minimum time and energy consuming and addressing different people´s needs and level of understanding. However, the people should become aware and responsible of information selected from different sources and channels; for instance, do not seek information only on the BBC, Russian or Chinese channels, and be aware of other official sources. Thus, a few approaches were envisaged by participants in Group R1-D, such as education programs and the promotion of media literacy, especially for young people.

Group R1-E

The participants in Group R1-E focused on two directions as preventive and combative measures for misinformation spread, mainly when addressing information available for pro and contra vaccination against the Covid-19: **trust in science and scientists** (officially recognized – dilemma about recognition of scientists from the western or eastern European countries) and **provision of different accessible and coherent sources of information**. When people face uncertainty and unknown, the decision-making process can be even more challenging, as participants shared their experience about taking decision on getting vaccinated. For example, some participants in this group considered vaccination safe, and others considered *"vaccination experimental, so you cannot say it is safe – people should be able to make their own decisions. Governments should talk about the benefits and risks."* Participants demanded more attention paid by experts and authorities.

Regarding accessibility and clarity of information for different groups of people, this group emphasized that a *"Simple communication strategy (*adopted by authority) *cannot address a complex situation."* Therefore, multilevel approach should be considered. They underlined here a collaborative approach between experts and political representatives. Also, when politicians are involved in events like the Covid-19 pandemic, they *"… should have one voice – united messaging."* The public communication strategy should set clear goals and objectively reflect reality rather than outlining a dramatic and black side that generates emotional attitudes. Information shared publicly should also enable the access and understanding of different groups of people, e.g., visual and audio format might help people with different disabilities. In some situations, a single "impersonal" text-instructions format does not address the people´s needs and concerns; therefore, **peer-to-peer and human-based conversation counseling on the phone** where people can express their concerns might be also considered as an opportunity.

3.2.2. Round 2. Pandemic restrictions long-term consequences – mental health & wellbeing

The second working round (**R2**) on cross-countries topic was dedicated to mental health & wellbeing. The round was divided in two sections:

  a. **Expert presentation,** giving participants a short overview about the long-term consequences of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing, risk factors of declining mental health, and presenting some strategies adopted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for prevention and preserving mental health and people´s wellbeing. The presentation was held by **Roxana E. Cziker,** Research project manager at the City of Reykjavík, Iceland.

> b. **Participants deliberation.** Participants were divided in breakout rooms, animated by an expert facilitator that guided the participants´ discussion.

> a. **Expert presentation**

The main impact of Covid-pandemic and restrictions imposed by authorities had long-term consequences on the following sectors: **health, domestic life, and economy**. The consequence on **health** is reflected both on the health care system with its infrastructure and staff and on the general people´s health and wellbeing, especially for people with chronic diseases and other illnesses. Therefore, the access of this category of people to medical services was restricted due to the transformation of hospitals and clinics into reception centres for people infected with Covid-19, that directly impacted on their general health status. Moreover, the restricted access to regular medical care affected also the emotional status of people, led people to fear and anxiety of using medical services because of risk of infections with Covid-19 and overall, diminished their trust in public health services. Secondly, the long-term isolation of people at home entailed some consequences reflected in **domestic violence**, isolation and loneliness, depression, and suicide. Thirdly, the restrictions have also affected the **general economic balance** of some countries and, in particular, the **economic status** of some people who lost their jobs, business, and professional status. Among the others, all these factors are considered determinants in deteriorating people´s mental health and wellbeing.

The category of people mostly exposed to the risk of decline of mental health[6] and wellbeing[7] are:
- Elderly people, especially living alone;
- People affected by Covid-19;
- Children spent a long-time home;
- People with chronic diseases and other illnesses;
- People with economic issues and unemployment;
- Minority groups;
- People with mental health issues;
- Minority groups – people with disabilities, homeless.

WHO and other organisations adopted a series of measures for the prevention and protection of mental health:
- *World Health Assembly envisaging the reinforcement of measures to protect mental health during public health emergencies*.
- *WHO European Framework for Action on Mental Health 2021-2025.*
- *Toolkit to help older adults to maintain good mental health and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic.*
- *Social isolation and loneliness outreach toolkit.*
- *My Hero is You. 2021: ow kids can coop with Covid-19.*

---

[6] According to WHO, mental health is determined by a range of socio-economic, biological, and environmental factors, and it is essential and fundamental component of health. It is a state of wellbeing in which individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the everyday stresses of life (resilience and coping mechanisms), can work productively, and can contribute to his or her community.

[7] According to WHO, wellbeing is a multidimensional state of being comfortable, health and happy and exists in two dimensions: objective ad subjective. It comprises an individual´s experience of their life as well as a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values. The component of wellbeing is influence by the individual health´s status which is considered by WHO as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and the absence of disease or infirmity.

Among the recommendations adopted by WHO as a preventative and prevention measures for mental health issues, there are a few to mention:

– Allocate and invest in mental health at local, national, and international services.
– Enhance multisectoral coordination between different stakeholders – government, private sector, civil society, 3rd sector, donors, academia, etc.
– Enhance national capacity for the delivery of distant psychotherapy counselling psychological interventions.
– Empower mental health service users and carers through involvement in designing and monitoring policies, services, and resource mobilization.
– Conduct research on the impact of Covid on mental health, substance use, and other mental health risk factors.

b. Participants deliberation

After the expert´s presentation, the participants were invited to small groups deliberation on mental health & wellbeing in smaller groups. Two guiding questions were used:

1. **Think of what steps authorities/decision makers should take to ensure that public information is clear & accessible for different groups of people? How do we communicate this so that it's clear and accessible?** *Prompts: examples from your ground (country, county), positive stories, and things that didn't work, what could have been done better.*
2. **What are the key things that need to be put in place to support people's wellbeing?**

Group R2-A

The group emphasized the necessity of holistic approach when addressing people´s health status, considering **mental health** as a relevant component of **general health** and **wellbeing**. A few recommendations have been made by the group, as instruments of strengthen the people´s wellbeing: networking and dialogue among people, support programs adapted to the community needs, access to quality medical services, preventative measures for isolation and loneliness and social exclusion, access to official information, support phone calls and video chats.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people in different countries demonstrated resilience attitudes in their communities expressed as volunteer actions, as have been confessed by participants in this group. In **Madrid**, for instance, neighborhood associations have initiated online and in-person conversations for the support of vulnerable groups of people such as elderly people, people with mental health issues, etc. Vulnerable people in **Reykjavik** received support through the volunteered family's initiatives. Digital solutions have been used as communication instruments, for instance to support young people with mental health issues. Civil protection organizations celebrated children´s birthdays by organizing street events, especially in complete lock-down.

The examples mentioned above demonstrate that – *at least as has been illustrated by the actions initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic* – local communities and organizations had a significant impact at the community level. However, group mentioned the limited financial resources of third sector organizations. Thus, the group of participants underlined the authority´s effort in strengthening the third sector organizations at the community level that can invest their knowledge and expertise in tackling marginalized groups, people exposed to loneliness and social isolation and provide services and support programs in line with their particular needs.

The group suggested some actions that might be envisaged by authorities for strengthening the people´s wellbeing. For example the group recommended to enable the access of people to resources and financial support programs, e.g. for people affected economically, preventive programs for social isolation and marginalization; psychological support for people with mental health issues; revision and re-allocation of local budget into social services and family support; provision of free internet and digital resources for families with low income that facilitate children´s access to online education; dialogue and peer to peer conversation; online community events and video programs where people share exercises, bake together, watch films and discuss on different subjects.

Group R2-B
Four main directions have been recommended by this group, as future actions for enhancement of people´s mental health and wellbeing:
   – *Standardized mental health service.*
   – *Governmental assistance mental health programs.*
   – *Neuro-diversity programs.*
   – *Individual approaches and tips.*

Standardized mental health service
In many countries, mental health is still stigmatized and not yet taken seriously into consideration, people not being encouraged to ask for assistance. As participants in this group emphasized, **public information campaigns on mental health**, **evaluation and monitoring programs for people at the risk of suicide** and **awareness programs on the importance of seeking help** are some measures to be considered. These programs can prevent and combat the main consequences of mental health issues: increased rate of suicide, primarily registered in elderly men and young people.

Governmental assistance mental health programs
In some countries, no screening programs that monitor the number of people with mental health issues are available that should be into the authorities´ focus. In this regard, a few programs supported by the central government and local authorities were recommended:
   – Group therapy for people with anxiety.
   – Annual monitoring programs of general health and mental health status.
   – Provision of psychology service for children in schools.
   – Promotion campaign on mental health among students.
   – Mental care programs in schools.

Neuro-diversity programs

The group considered the psychological approach one strategy that enables a better understanding of people's diversity, e.g. mindset change that values people based on their type of intelligence, as emphasized in the Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence. (see **figure 4**)

Also, based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health of the WHO (World Health Organisation), people's behaviour and wellbeing are influenced both by personal and environmental factors. Thus, the individual should be placed in the center of the design and evaluated in the context of particularities of the system, restrictions, and norms that they are

figure 4. Theory of multiple intelligence by H. Gardner.

living in. The contribution of mental health preventive measures, the development of individual and community resilience strategies, coping mechanisms of stress, and combat negative thinking were also emphasized.

Individual approaches and tips

The group shared some good practices experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as morning debrief at work where employees had the opportunity to talk about life and other things which are not connected with the professional activity; young people living in shared apartments; phone reminders to inspire the others; Zoom meeting with friends if the restrictions were severe and complete lockdown.

Group R2-C

The participants in this group shared some actions, as measure of support of people's wellbeing:

- *Empower the peer to peer relations, networks and work environment.*
- *Re-consider the importance of environment and common spaces.*
- *Strengthen the role of technology and digital devices/space.*

In the group's view, the consolidation of people's wellbeing can be strengthened by focusing on **networking, working environments, and volunteer programs,** where people can create connections, networks, and relationships. The group also mentioned the facilitator role of companies in development of connection among employees. Volunteering and civic engagement can be encouraged and supported for addressing the people in need.

The participants in this group also underlined the importance of **the urban landscape concept** as a shared space that shifts people's focus, especially those living in cities, by spending more time in nature, going for a walk, etc. Thus, one of the authorities' center points could be **urban building design** and how cities, neighbourhoods, streets, buildings, houses are designed and constructed in harmony with the whole environment.

People's wellbeing might be sustained by consolidating people's **access to new technology and digital solutions** for fostering communication and people's networking. To facilitate access to technology, people

should improve their digital literacy skills and authorities should invest in financial programs that sustain disadvantage group.

Some recommendations emerged in this group as preventative measures are:

- Re-construction and organization of neighborhoods, e.g., more green spaces, civic spaces.
- Public education programs that focus on the role of nature in strengthening the mental health and wellbeing.
- Access of people to culture.
- Facilitate conversation and dialogue among people.
- Facilitate the public deliberation about the importance of mental health.
- Facilitate access to online therapy, free of charge for the public, including psychological counseling and support for children, teenagers, and other vulnerable groups.
- Education programs on access and accessibility of social media, online conversation, information seeking and tackling negative narratives.
- Education programs that focus on strengthening people´s skills and abilities, e.g., reading books, searching for information and news in line with own hobbies and interests.

Group R2-D

Participants in this group shared the experiences and challenges emerged as aftereffects of **imposed restrictions** and **actions** introduced by authorities, that both positively and negatively impacted people's wellbeing.

In the participants' view, communities *"are the logical place to start"* when envisaging support programs for mental health and wellbeing, e.g., the **Glasgow fund** that provides financial resources for community projects, available for people across Scotland. In contrast, the **Polish experience** unveiled less involvement of local authority where the people´s health and wellbeing were not a priority, whereas, a great local initiative of people and teenagers has been emphasized. To support this statement, a few examples were mentioned: the funding available for people at the risk of suicide was cut, the psychiatry departments in the hospitals have been transformed into sectors for Covid. In consequence, the suicide registered a 40% higher rate than before the pandemic. However, as positive initiatives adopted by people and local communities in Poland, the group emphasized one teenager's initiative who set up an internet page advertising cosmetic. The *under-covered purpose* of the site was, in fact, **reaching people with different needs, e.g., women exposed to the risk of domestic violence.** Another initiative mentioned is the Polish group set up on Facebook to help people do shopping. At the pandemic's beginning, the measures have been effectively implemented in **Iceland**. Still, as the pandemic has evolved, more strict measures have been imposed so that people become afraid to go to hospitals. However, positive initiatives have also been experienced, such as delivering food to people isolated at home.

The overall group´s deliberation led to formulation of some recommendations that might be addressed by authorities as measures of mental health support, with the main focus on *communities, vulnerable and marginalized groups, young people, and other vulnerable groups*:

- *Invest in tools, toolbox and local spaces that enable communication and dialogue, bearing in mind the particular needs of people.*
- *Put more focus on people since the pandemic crisis has demonstrated that "people are getting invisible."*

- *Pay more attention to the remuneration of medical staff and invest more in the health care system.*
- *Invest in psychological support programs for children and their families.*
- *Provide financial support for companies affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and impose restrictions.*
- *Envisage support programs for unemployment, especially for people at the risk of getting jobs based on the age criteria.*
- *Strengthen civic engagement and participation and involvement of communities in the development of the local services.*
- *Emphasize the responsibility and contribution of each individual to the development of community and society.*

Group R2-E

The participants in the group emphasized the need of **self- and community empowerment** programs with the support of local authorities and central government.

a. **Individual level** – create lists of hobbies and skills such as sport activities, open air activities, walk in the nature, etc.

b. **Community level** – strengthen communities' networks and neighbourhood, relationships with neighbours and public dialogue. For instance, people can prepare in advance a contact list with people to be contacted in case of emergency. Encourage people who are living alone and feeling lonely to get more often in contact with close friends.

c. **Local authority level** – psychological programs for vulnerable and marginalized with limited financial resources.

Further strategies unfolded from the group´s deliberation, as protection measures of people´s mental health and wellbeing:

- *Re-consider support programs of people´s mental health.*
- *Public deliberations around the importance of mental health and its impact on the general health.*
- *Policy strategy and political narratives.*
- *Strengthen support programs for citizens' autonomy and civic engagement.*
- *Re-consider and improve the communication strategies adopted by authorities.*
- *Develop a "**common language**" that facilitates understanding between authorities and the public.*
- *Government investment in professional branches such as social workers, psychologists, educators to intervene and prevent mental health issues.*

3.3. Key findings – Round 3 - Specific-country topics

In the round 3 (**R3)** participants deliberated the specific-country topics emerged from the *local democracy lab* carried out in each country. One topic was selected for each country, considered as a relevant issue experienced by participants to their country of origin. The round R3 included seven parallel sessions, one for each country, where participants were clustered in country groups as follows:

- Group BG – Bulgaria
- Group HU – Hungary
- Group IS – Iceland
- Group IT – Italy
- Group PL – Poland
- Group SC – Scotland

    – Group ES - Spain

The key findings emerged from the translation of the Jamboard Google digital whiteboard and support-reports provided by expert facilitators were the foundation of this report. In the subchapters below are presented the outcomes arising for each group.

3.3.1. *Breakout-group BG - Bulgaria. The disinformation on the Covid-19 in Bulgaria*

The **media disinformation**, selected as high interest topic after the qualitative analysis of the outcomes of the *local democracy lab* in Bulgaria, was perceived as a crucial issue that **influenced the people´s opinions and trust in authorities**. According to participants in this group, people´s trust in vaccination is shallow due to media narratives. The European statistics confirm it among the countries with **the lowest vaccination rate in the last few months and higher mortality rate during the pandemic**[8]. According to participants, the media played a decisive role in the public disinformation, influencing especially the public opinion in vaccination against the Covid-19 virus, as has been demonstrated by practices adopted by media:

    – *Anti-vaccination rhetoric perceived as a media predisposition to the promotion of sensational news.*

    – *Promotion of opinion-leaders and political interests.*

    – *International media image reported at the European Union level as the country with lower international rank for freedom of mass media expression ([Reporters without Borders, the 112th place, ranking -1, in comparison with the Global score of +2.23](#))*[9].

The discussion on media disinformation and public opinion influence was animated by the local expert facilitator from the Institute for Public Environment Development (IPED) in Bulgaria by emphasizing **three main issues** (also considered essential points in the local expert´s presentation):

    – *Mechanisms applied for acquainting and spreading fake news through social and traditional media.*

    – *What makes people easily attracted to seek fake news and believe them?*

    – *Strategies to be envisaged to counteract the "infodemic" phenomena.*

The main issues were also corroborated with the key points emerged from the expert's presentation ensured by **Mrs. Silvia Velikova, a journalist at the Bulgarian National Radio**:

    – *Influence of disinformation on trust in vaccination.*

    – *Available sources of information about vaccines.*

    – *Identification and counter of public's doubts and insecurities?*

Mrs. Silvia Velikova is a prominent journalist. She is a radio editor, working at the Bulgarian National Radio and she is hosting the morning panel ***"Before All (in Bulgarian "Преди всички")***. She is also hosting her own publicity show every Sunday and is one of the top journalists covering the work of the judicial system. Mrs.

---

[8] **Vaccination rate**: https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/country-overviews
https://www.statista.com/statistics/1196071/covid-19-vaccination-rate-in-europe-by-country/
Mortality rates: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1111779/coronavirus-death-rate-europe-by-country/
[9] According to the website Reporters without borders (www.rfs.org) *"the situation of media is very worrying because no one is interested in investigating or condemning violence against journalists.* The police manifest violent attitudes and behaviours against journalists, they are often *"summoned and questioned by police about their activity, while politicians and oligarchs maintain relations marked by corruption and conflicts of interests in the pro-government media"*.

Velikova is also a guest lecturer in the Journalism Faculty at the Sofia University.

As a preamble of the participants´ deliberation, the group declared that the **public disinformation** issue emerged from the **strategies adopted by authorities in Bulgaria** that were evaluated as being

- *Chaotic, inadequate, and incomplete.*
- *Lacking of coherence in prompting public vaccination campaigns.*
- *Lacking of evidence and evaluation tools for tracing the public reluctance of getting vaccinated.*

The authorities´ strategies mentioned above were 'translated' by the group into concrete actions that might be considered:

- **public information and awareness campaigns** to **prevent and combat seeking fake news;**
- focus on **available sources and channels of information** to better tackle the conspiracy theories sources;
- identify the rationale behind fake news seeking;
- **synchronize the discourses and narratives of opinion-leaders** as additional support measures in combating disinformation and switching the public interest towards the official information channels.

The group evaluated Bulgaria's public information thoroughly and analytically based on their experience. Thus, the group **positively appreciated** the role of social media, especially Facebook, that has been **exploited by medical experts as a platform of dialogue** that could not access (due to no political affiliation and influence) the traditional media outlets, e.g., the Facebook group called *"Vaccines,"* created by medical staff and doctors in Bulgaria. In contrast, the Bulgarian group critically evaluated the **communication strategy** adopted by the authority that, in some circumstances, *'favoured the promotion'* of conspiracy theories and fake news leading the population to disinformation and confusion. Some circumstances encountered by the group as contexts that favour the seeking for fake news are: **the deficiency of public campaigns and clear explanation**; **conflicting and misleading public information from medical and pharmaceutic companies**, e.g., the effect of Astra Zeneca vaccine; and the **passive role of GPs in Bulgaria**: (**fig. 5**. presents the main key findings of the Bulgarian group).

> *"There is a lack of information on vaccines and the distinction between different types, and the GPs haven't played an active role in the vaccination process."*

According to the Bulgarian group, robust, coherent and organized communication strategy plays an essential role in public information and in combating fake information seeking. From the participants´ deliberation on this topic, a few recommendations emerged:

- Evidence-based communication and information policy emerged from collaborative effort of authorities and research institutions that enable the evaluation and causes analysis of low vaccination rates.
- Tackle better people's reluctance to vaccination against the Covid-19 and promote better vaccination campaigns targeting different categories of people.
  > *"To look for people who are hesitant (to get vaccinated) and to target them by information campaigns, because it is too late to influence those who have radical attitudes."*
  > *"To aim towards a cleaner information environment."*
- Address the public questions and concerns by strengthening the positive example of the proactive institutional role responsible for the vaccination process.

− Foster critical thinking programs within the young population, where educational institutions and media should play an important role.
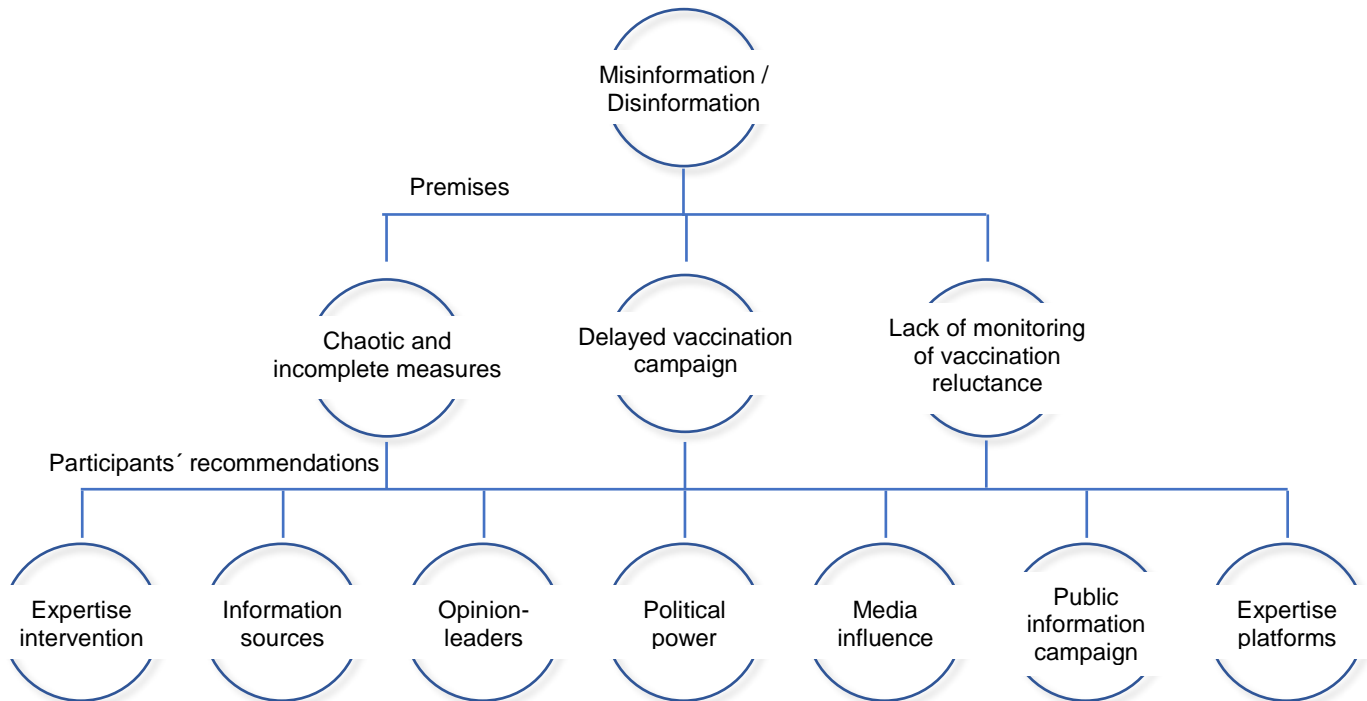− Promote science and scientific research and innovation, e.g., mRNA vaccines.

figure 5. Main key findings of Bulgarian groups on disinformation about the Covid-19

3.3.2. Breakout-group HU - Hungary. Public opinion dialogue and contribution of civic organizations

The communication strategy adopted by the Hungarian authorities, as emerged from the participants´ deliberation on the *local democracy lab* in Hungary, did not include the **public opinion dialogue in decision-making process**. Thus, the aim of the Hungarian group deliberation was to tackle better the **role and contribution of the local and pan-local public participation** and **civic engagement and public participation in the process of decision-making**.

The topic of deliberation was sustained with data and information provided by the expert's presentation ensured by **Mr. Miklós Merényi**, **expert at K-Monitor Watchdog for Public Funds, Budapest**. Miklós has expertise and experience in application of direct democratic tools and budget literacy due to his collaborations with local governments in Hungary.

The expert presentation has tackled the **context, characteristics and effect of participatory and direct democracy**. Also, a few discrepancies have been underlined in regard of **authorities' infrastructure and procedures** which **do not effectively favour the democratic participation**:
− *Lack of resources, capacities and co-participation of local and civic ecosystem.*
− *Inadequate inventory of needs of different groups.*
− *Lack of coherence, transparency and strategic support of civic organisations.*

- *Need of objective processes and advocacy frames.*
- *Deficiency of open platforms for public opinion dialogue.*
- *Deliberative culture.*
- *Transfer of knowledge.*

The presentation rose up a series of questions that guided the group´s discussion:
- *What is the meaning of "participation" in the social and political perspective?*
- *What is the difference between real and fictious participation?*
- *In the context of social events, are the community practices institutionalized and maintained? How this process can be long-term secured? What would be the contribution of civic society?*
- *How democratic participation is perceived at the local level? Is there any difference in terms of local representation?*

Bearing in mind the questions above, the group reflected on **public opinion contribution and dialogue to the decision-making process** from two perspectives:
- **micro-level perspective – small communities and towns** and,
- **macro-level perspective – larger communities, very big cities and country-communities**.

In the group´s view, **small communities** advocate networking, closer relationships and collaboration between local authorities and civic organizations, where active citizens are voiced and find their place within the system. In contrast, **larger communities** imply a diffuse role and contribution of citizens to the authority´s decision-making process. This approach led the group to a conceptual framework incorporating the **political culture** and **democratic participation** underlying the support of partnership citizens-authorities:
- *Participatory culture*
- *Consensus democracy*
- *Advocacy platforms and participatory decision-making.*

Participatory culture advocates civic engagement that enables creation and sharing of different views and opinions, social connection with one another that facilitate a lot of opportunities such as peer to peer learning, diversification of cultural expression, development of skills, empowering conception of citizenship.

Consensus democracy, as integrative-indirect democracy, enables citizens participation and contribution to political agenda, consensus on decision-making process that encounters diverse opinions from different groups and communities.

Participatory decision-making is a collaborative approach in which superordinate and subordinates work together as equal in an attempt to identify, analyze and solve problems that face an organization, a community or society as a whole. The process requires a common grounds and solutions that are acceptable to all and best for different groups.

The Covid-19 pandemic raised awareness and deepened the need of people for public engagement and participation to the community, becoming an obvious necessity to better understand and contribute to the strategies adopted by authorities. In this context people became aware that some authorities' measures are lacking of general overview of community´s needs and in this regard civic engagement might play, in some circumstances, an essential role. According to the Hungarian group, civic participation needs to be re-shaped so that participation become a habit and better contribution to the decision-making process.

From the group´s perspective, the public opinion dialogue requires **cooperation**, **opinion exchange**, **dialogue**, a *"civic arena"* between citizens/residents and authorities in order to address the needs and concerns of different

groups. However, the **authority-public dialogue** is a challenging and a long-term process, requiring skills, knowledge and communication strategies on both sides. On the public side, the process can be made less effortless by strengthening community programs and initiatives such as *public education, evaluation and inventory of needs, resilient attitudes and individual and community responsibilities*. Hence, some examples were underlined e.g. *family's initiatives to ensure food for students during the lock down; medical services and assistance granted to patients in the vicinity of rural areas when some local medical offices were closed* (**fig. 6** presents the main key findings of the Hungarian group).
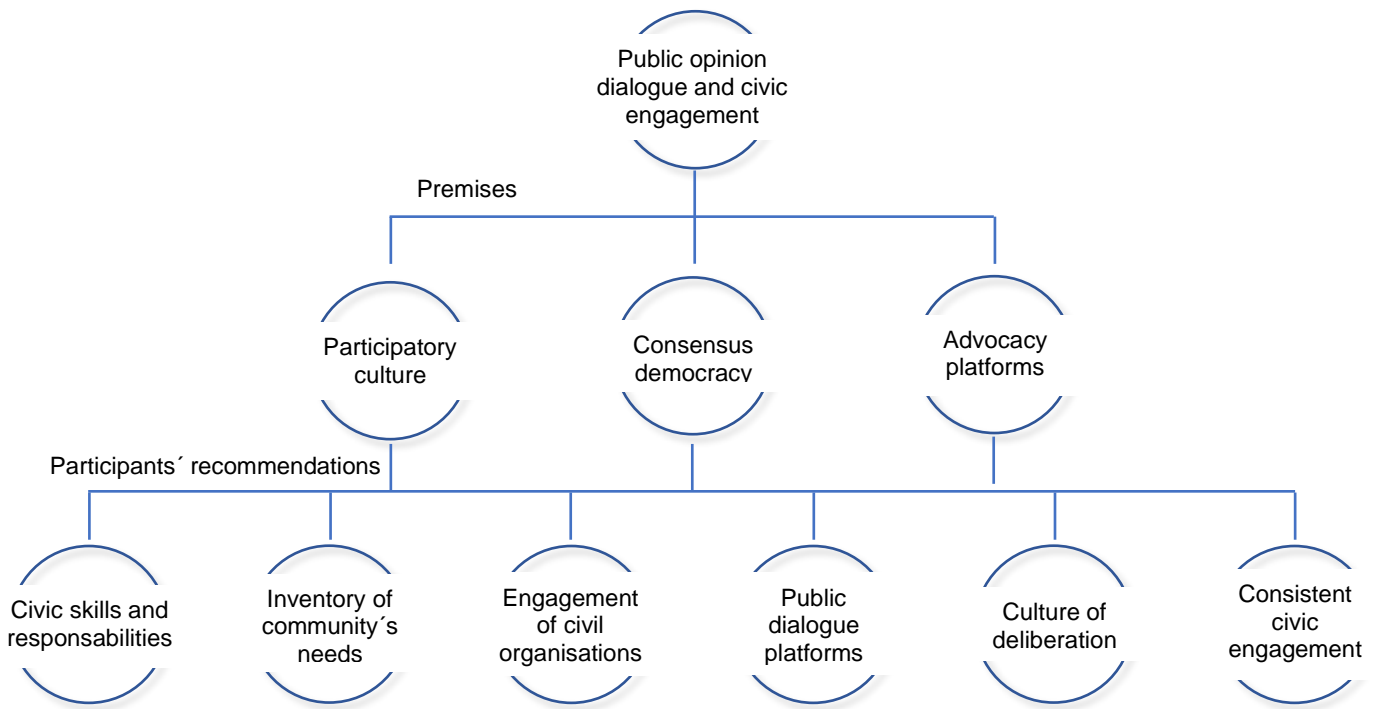

figure 6. Main key findings of the Hungarian group on public dialogue and civic engagement

The overall lessons emerged from the experience of the Hungarian group during the Covid-19 pandemic is to **strengthen the trust in local communities** and **value the role and responsibility of citizens/residents** to the community life and civic engagement. Also, the group give priority to the **development and implementation of participatory tools**, which at the moment are very fancy but do not necessary serve and respond to actual needs and critical issues of different groups. Civic engagement is considered by the group as challenging and long-term process that requires implication and responsibility of members of the community on one side and authorities on the other side. Citizens/residents should be encouraged to respectfully and responsible express their needs and offer their contribution, insights and knowledge to building constructively the authorities' strategies.

3.3.3. Breakout-group IS - Iceland. Protection of economy and employment sector

The main consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the authorities were mainly reflected in Iceland on the **employment sector, especially the immigrant-workers active on the tourism sector and restaurant industry**. Thus, the round aimed to better address the employment sector from the perspective of the Icelandic infrastructure and authorities' strategies and support programs in response to raised unemployment.

The participants´ deliberation was supported with a few examples of strategies and programs envisaged by the government and the authorities in Iceland in response to long-term effects on employment and business sector and also some initiatives adopted by the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise's initiatives to assist people in starting up a business. The examples were included into a short presentation ensured by **Anna Hrefna Ingimundardóttir, Chief economist from the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise**.

As a response to the experts' presentation, a few discussion topics have been acknowledged by participants:
  – *Contribution of civil organizations.*
  – *Role of public networking.*
  – *Consideration of people's needs.*
  – *Contribution of corporations, private sector and business.*
  – *Benefit of public dialogue and communication.*

The Icelandic group emphasized the role of **civil organizations in advocating and supporting the access of vulnerable and marginalized groups to the work market**, e.g., programs dedicated to people with disabilities, to young people with a high educational level for whom the job market offer does not match their educational profile. Furthermore, the group highlighted the need for better **monitoring and follow-up strategies of individuals at risk of isolation** and empowering their role in society. In the group view, a **partnership government-organizations-citizens** might improve the situation of the business and economic sector through public-institutions partnership and networking. Investment in employment support programs for marginalized groups with different needs and educational backgrounds is reflected in **diminished resources (financial and personal) allocated to the unemployment sector, facilitating independence and self-management and enhancing the people's wellbeing and quality of life**.

The group also considered relevant the **development of business culture**, **promotion of innovation**, and **reinforcement of business capacity**, as factors that contribute to the support of the economic sector and development of the society. The business sector might facilitate **people's inclusion on the work market** in line with the society's needs and educational profile by valuing individuals' values, skills, abilities.
    "Do not allow people to be excluded – evaluate their needs – help everyone to find a place of purpose."

In this regard, one example of a governmental support program of unemployment sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic was the creation of 7.000 temporary short-term jobs.

Another factor the group considers relevant in strengthening the employment sector is the **investment in communication strategy and access to information**. In the group view, exposure to various sources and categories of information might lead people to confusion and anxiety, especially in a time of crisis. Moreover, access to information might be challenging, especially for **people with different disabilities**, **different levels of understanding**, and **poor digital and information literacy**. Therefore, some strategies enabling the access to information recommended by the group are **accessibility of information according to people's needs**; **active participation of citizens/residents in inter-groups dialogue**. (*fig. 7* presents the main key findings of the Icelandic group).
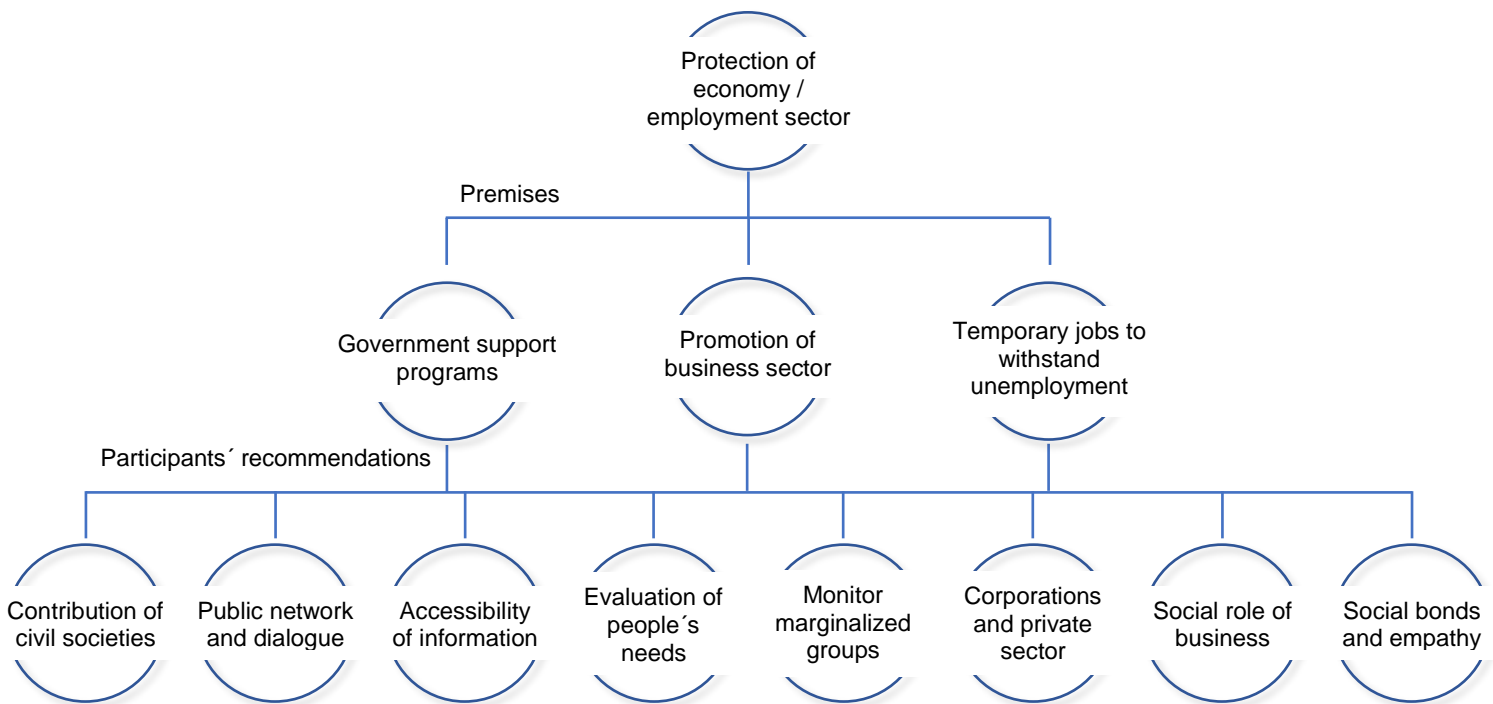
figure 7. Main key findings of Icelandic group on protection of economy and employment sector

3.3.4. Breakout-group IT - Italy. Influence of populist narratives on the public discourse

During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, the local government of Messina defied the regional and national governments in an open confrontation by undertaking even tougher and somewhat *'spectacular'* measures with **ample coverage on both traditional and social media.** The mayor´s intervention has been considered, in this context, as covered *"populist narrative touch"* that influenced the public opinion. The local situation has been deliberated in the larger context of national trends and other local experiences.

Two experts´ presentations ensured the introduction on the populist narratives influence on public discourses:
-   **Giuseppe D'Avella**, co-founder of the Messina-based no-profit organization Parliament Watch Italia (PWI). PWI promotes civic engagement through Open Government and participatory practices in collaboration with local governments, institutions, and community organizations. PWI took part in the Messina Democracy Lab in 2019. For more information, please visit: http://parliamentwatch.it/;
-   **Alessio Caspanello**, editor and journalist of the local online newspaper LetteraEmme. For more information please visit: https://www.letteraemme.it/editoriale-presentazione/.

The presentation briefly introduced the most controversial measures and actions undertaken by the local government of Messina during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, mainly pointing out on local authorities' populist narratives and political propaganda strategies:
1. **'Protection' measures –** pejorative connotation – **against external virus-spreaders,** *e.g., people coming to Messina from other Italian regions or other nations.* Therefore, the port of Messina was closed to 'prevent' the entrance of people from the continent and police started to "chase" the group of street artists from France who entered the country during the Covid-19 pandemic[10].

---

[10] https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/24/news/coronavirus_reanault_r4_villa_san_giovanni_messina-301024392/;
https://www.letteraemme.it/coronavirus-tutto-quello-che-non-torna-nella-storia-della-renault-4-nella-versione-di-de-luca/;

2. ***Lockdown public enforcement initiatives*** employing *loud street propaganda technique* through a "mobile carousel equipped with a loudspeaker display"[11] that publicly spread the mayor´s voice transferring the message of the complete prohibition of recreational walking and/or sport activities in public spaces.

3. ***Daily public Facebook live streams of the mayor "war cabinet"*** created as a public channel of information sharing about the virus and adopted restrictions, with no public consultation access.[12] The Facebook stream has gradually brought the people´s attention, reached even hundreds of thousands if not millions of views.[13] As the interest of audience have gradually grown, the mayor of Messina, Cateno de Luca, defied ever boldlier the regional and national governments to the point that the Intern Ministry of the Interior Luciana Lamorgese sued him for libel.[14]

4. ***Political vacuum,*** practiced by the mayor of Messina for promoting himself as reference citizens´ advocate. While the mayor took the responsibility of substituting higher levels of governance arbitrarily, he ended up **abusing his power** and getting in conflict with other authorities.

5. **Construction of the consent** through the institution of the 'war cabinet.'

6. **Absence of public deliberation** and collaboration of authorities with other institutions and civil societies.

Thus, according to experts´ presentation that painted the controversial measures and actions adopted by the local government in Messina, three core topics were raised for guiding the participants´ deliberation:

   a. ***Populist narratives and language.***
   b. ***Role and contribution of local media.***
   c. ***National trends.***

a. Populist narratives and language

The mayor's discourses and communication style conveyed the populist narrative towards the image of a ***"strongman*** *willing to protect his people,"* performing like a ***"hero"*** that offers public protection in response to the regional and national government's incompetence that do not understand and address the people's needs. According to this group, the Covid crisis created *"for the mayor an opportunity to use the stage for himself where he can act as the one and only hero."* The mass media conversation strengthened this image. In the group's view, the mayor was perceived as a *"…dad telling you what you need to do, so you do not need to make choices by yourself…."*

The Italian group also emphasized **the concept of 'scapegoating' and stigmatization of potential Covid-spreader coming from the continent**, as a propagandist political narratives practice used for enforcing exceptional strict measures. Sometimes, participants experienced the turn of narratives into **violent language** against ***"individuals and community,"*** where 'colourful expressions', insults, and shouting ruled the **one-way conversation strategy**. The communication strategies adopted by the local government were experienced by participants as being especially tailored to reach the far-right audience.

---

[11] http://www.strettoweb.com/video-gallery/pasqua-a-casa-per-il-coronavirus-il-nuovo-audiomessaggio-del-sindaco-di-messina-io-rustu-a-casa-pi-cazzi-mei/id/406531488/

[12] https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=163546144759725

[13] https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=505679646777710

[14] https://messina.gazzettadelsud.it/articoli/cronaca/2021/06/15/insulti-alla-lamorgese-il-sindaco-de-luca-condannato-a-pagare-1500-euro-05b629c8-f972-4f5d-8480-069dfd297364/;
https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto.dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2020-04-10&atto.codiceRedazionale=20A02168&elenco30giorni=false

b. Role and contribution of local media

In the group´s opinion, the position of **local media** in the first wave of the Covid pandemic was **more bonded and aligned with the populist narratives**, following the successful trends of the local government. In this context, no public opinion exchange and deliberation were encouraged as a measure of *"politicians' accountability"* evaluation.

The circumstances of crisis emergencies created the perfect premises for favouring the **major´s 'voice of truth',** while the government was struggling with the complex situation in the background, and the local city council was suspended due to the Covid containment measures in force. Furthermore, media has promoted *"his pervasive communication."* (**fig. 8** presents the key findings of the Italian group)
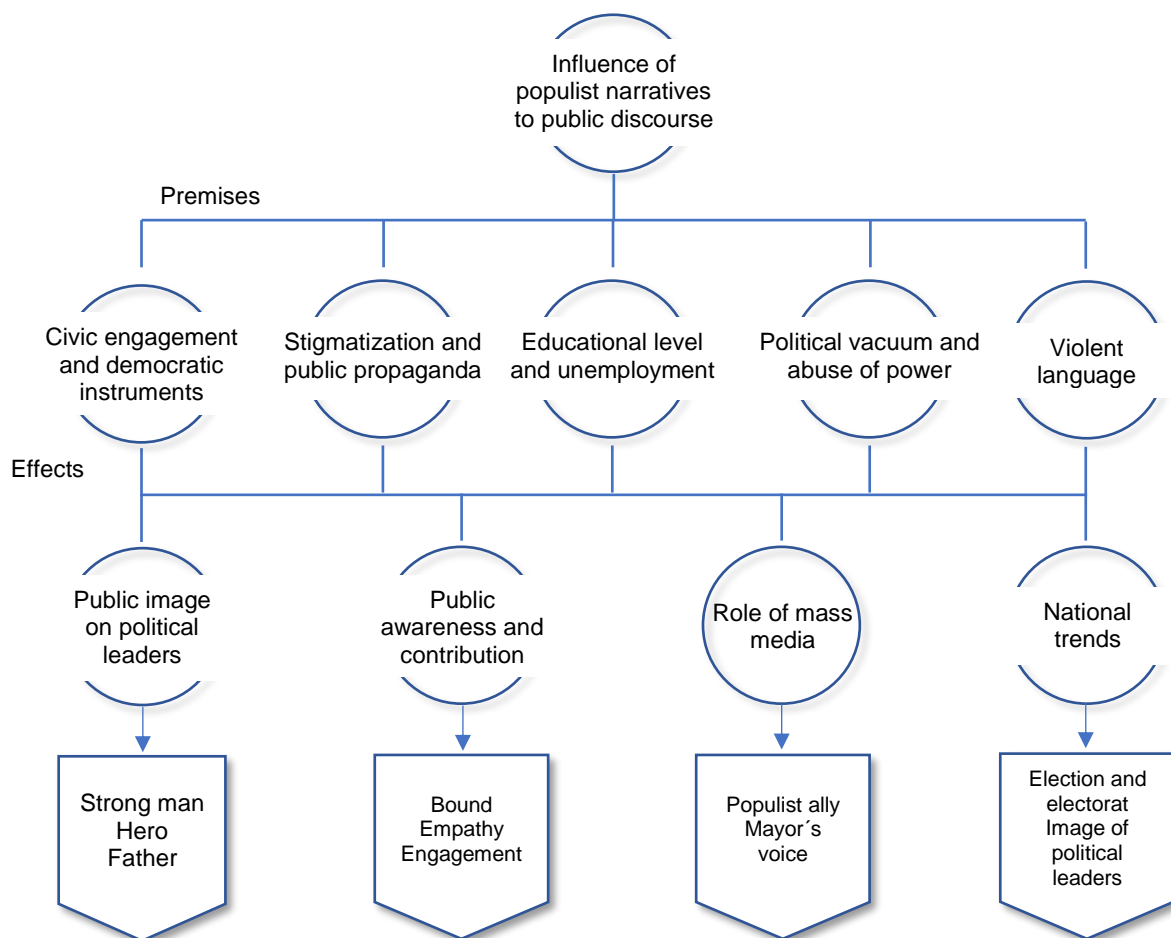

figure 8. Main key findings of the Italian group on influence of populist narratives to public discourse

c. National trends

The Italian group also underlined that lock down status generated optimal conditions for regional presidents and local mayor to adopt the **"strongman in charge narrative."** Hence, they used the Facebook Live stream tool as a platform for getting the people´s attention, *"mirroring the prime Minister Giuseppe Conte."* The direct effect of this strategy was reflected in strengthening the regional political position and attracting more sympathizers, which consequently led to an increase in the number of votes. Thus, the president Veneto Luca Zaia and President of Campania Vincenzo Luca won the regional election in 2020 with 76.79% and 69.48%, respectively.

Furthermore, one of the local phenomena observed by participants of this group was the so-called **'sindaci sceriffi – Sheriff mayor,'** image adopted by the mayor that used his power to 'persuade' the 'police forces/actions' to enforce the lockdown measures. Thus, the media coverage designated the mayor of Messina as the most popular 'sindaci sceriffi' in Italy and the most ever in Sicily.

The political strategies and restrictions adopted by the local authorities during the Covid-19 pandemic, as were shared by the group and by the experts' presentation raised two main questions:

1. *What are the main concerns about the phenomena took place in Messina? (populist narratives)*
2. *What would be the individuals and civil organizations' reaction and contribution to addressing Messina's phenomena?*

1. *What are the main concerns about the phenomena took place in Messina? (populist narratives*
   In the group´s view, the Covid pandemic circumstances were exploited by the local authorities in Messina and shifted to populist narratives. One of the examples that can illustrate the populist narrative is for instance the strategy of the mayor´s cabinet that 'shared publicly' the political propaganda through live stream discourses, with exclusion of **public deliberation/consultation –** *considered by the group a threat to the democratic culture of the city*. Secondly, **civil societies –** *perceived by participants in Italy as a "social fabric"[15]* **– did not have a contraposition role.** The lack of civil society consultation in the region entailed the following consequences:
   - Loneliness and encirclement generated by the pervasive propaganda.
   - Interiorized rule of silence *"omertá"* towards the authorities´ measures.
   - *"Scarcity"* of cultural instruments of a population with a low percentage of graduates and high unemployment and **emigration rate**[16].
     "No work means exposure to blackmail, exposure to blackmail means silence, and silence means no opposition."
   - Despite the populist language, mayor Cateno de Luca may have gained credibility by showing a higher administrative competence and spirit of initiative than his last three predecessors, two of which were allegedly linked with the mafia and represented the centre-right and centre-left establishment parties.

2. *What would be the individuals and civil organization reaction and contribution to address the Messina´s phenomena?*
   To combat the influence of populist narratives and political propaganda on public opinion, the Italian group focused on **strengthening the individual, community, and civil society role and contribution** by:
   - Developing the **culture of local community engagement, responsibility, and initiatives**.
   - Calling for an **active and positive intervention of state (central government)** in regions with high-risk communities.
   - Developing **communication strategies adapted for marginalized groups**.
   - Implementing **civic education programs** for people at the risk of marginalization.

---

[15] Social fabric, in this context, is perceived as the relationships and connections we make with one another, making us all a part of the common thread of society as a whole.

[16] Emigration. Messina is facing significant depopulation and brain-drain trend. https://landgeist.com/2021/08/05/population-change-of-europes-major-metro-areas/

As emerged from the group´s deliberation, the low rate of civic engagement registered in Messina can be explained by:

(1) ***Low level of people´s education, unemployment, high rate of emigration.***
The local and regional social and economic issues entail consequences on the civic engagement and social participation, decline of empathy and sympathy for other individuals, poor resilience mechanisms and attitudes, and lack of interest, as was reported by some participants in the groups:

"If I have no work, I live on meal vouchers and my parents´ pension, if my life sucks, my apartment sucks, everything around me sucks, why should I care about such things (…civic engagement…)?"

"If people have no work, they are less likely to think independently."

(2) ***Lack of participatory instruments available to facilitate public communication and dialogue***.
The group was focused on a different form of democratic engagement that mainly favours representative democracy, whereby people exercise their right to vote. However, the participatory and deliberative democracy are less encouraged due to also lack of instruments and strategies that enable this form of participation, as have been underlined be some participants in the group:

"We do not have a public discussion, we do not have assemblies, protests are stigmatized and disparaged, strikes have been deprived of their meaning, and there is little effort to understand the reasons behind them."

"We have strongmen because our democracy doesn't offer enough participation instruments…", where even available instruments like Facebook failed offered *"just an illusion of participation."*

3.3.5. Breakout-group PL - Poland. Protection of law and constitution

The Polish group selected the topic of *protection of law and constitution* as a relevant issue due to the far-rights attitudes envisaged by the Polish government in recent years, that has notoriously demonstrated an anti-constitutional attitude. The European Commission and the European Parliament have also signalled this issue which, in response, imposed constraints on the Polish Government to proceed with law compliance. Furthermore, the pandemic situation has demonstrated once more the authorities´ law-abiding attitudes reflected into adopted restrictions against the Covid pandemic that ultimately **violated the constitutions and human rights**.

The deliberation topic was backed with data and information provided by an expert´s presentation ensured by Mr. **Piotr Stronkowski.** Mr. Stronkowski was an evaluator and consultant since 2008, an expert on the labour market, education, social integration, social cohesion. He also has expertise in public administration consultancy of projects. He is affiliated to different European and international organizations and institutions such as Collegium Civitas, UNDP, OECD, World Bank, KSAP, MRPiPS, MIiR, MEN, Batory Foundation, etc. His intervention on the European Democracy Lab was on *"The Covid-19 pandemic and the protection of constitutional rights and freedoms."* The Piotr´s presentations raised a series of questions among participants regarding the legitimacy of authorities to restrict citizens´ rights and freedom in situation of threaten situation and how the restrictions are distributed among population. Also, participants in this group where concerned about the manner the strict measures have been implemented by inducing fear and anxiety to determine people to follow the restrictions.

Are there any restrictions that we can consider unacceptable in an emergency situation? If so, what should they be? What if experts recommend restrictions and the government does not implement them?

In addition, the group was wondering how the restrictions might be publicly introduced in order to limit the risk of excessive infringement of citizens´ rights and freedom and what the relation with the law should be in order to ensure monitoring of measures´ effect on different population, who should have access to those data and how data are processed.

The group also underlined the role of civil society in supporting different groups facing the situation of crisis and preventing people from seeking for false information. Should civil society organisations have the means to monitor and report possible violations of rights and freedoms?

The expert's presentation together with the group experience regarding the effect of authorities' restrictions on the law and constitution aroused some questions that guided the group deliberation:
- *Were the restrictions adopted by authorities in Poland justified, necessary, and proportional in respect of the citizens´ rights, liberties, and freedom?*
- *Were the communication strategies well selected in line with the context?*
- *What could be done better/differently?*
- *What are the lessons learned for the future?*
- *What strategies can be envisaged for strengthening and empowering civil society participation concerning protecting citizens´ rights and freedoms, especially in the time of crisis?*

The Polish group emphasized the deficient **strategies adopted by authorities** reflected in:
- **(1)** Absence **of public engagement and public consultation**.[17]
- **(2)** Poor **and incomplete communication strategies**.
- **(3)** And **deficient access and consistency of shared public information** experienced by people at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the participants´ experience, people did not receive enough official explanation about the Corona virus and its effects in the preliminary stages of virus. In consequence, people felt unprotected, could not understand the situation, and, in consequence, did not know how to react and respond, deepening people´s uncertainty and fear. Furthermore, **(4) long-term exposure to severe restrictions**, **social (home) isolation**, and **people´s concern** influenced the people´s compliance with the imposed restrictions and *"voluntary gave up on our freedom."*

Also, the group found the **(5) contribution and intervention of experts** in adopting measures as **not enough considered and recognized** by authorities. In contrast, in the group´s view, the **(6) political power and influence** in Poland exploited the Covid-19 pandemic as a platform for raising the electorate and strengthening the political position of some politicians. Also, the pandemic situation and border restrictions have created **(7) optimal government control circumstances**.
> *"Pandemic and border situation was like a golden chicken for the government."* [18]

---

[17] *"The good Polish people"* were not included in the government.
[18] Golden chicken is a Polish expression meaning "golden egg" meaning in this context that the circumstance of Covid-19 pandemic has been used by Polish government to switch the public opinion from the already existing internal issues.

The Polish group also highlighted the **(8) inconsistently and unequally restrictions distributed to public**, where some privileged groups received preferential treatment, e.g. category of professionals such as athletes, escalating in group polarization and Polish society division. This circumstance led thousands of people in Poland to 'creatively" escape actions from lockdown so that they signed up for sport clubs. The measures and actions adopted by the Polish government created the premises of society division, braking down the people´s rights and freedom for the security sake.

Altogether, in the group´s view, the strategies adopted by authorities, lack of civic engagement, and all circumstances underlined above had a significant consequence on:

– **people´s security,**
– **people´s trust and confidence in public authorities,** e.g., undermined police image,
– **human rights and freedom**,
– **people´s emotional reactions** and
– **directly impacted on the people´s wellbeing.** (**fig. 9** presents the main key findings of the Polish group).
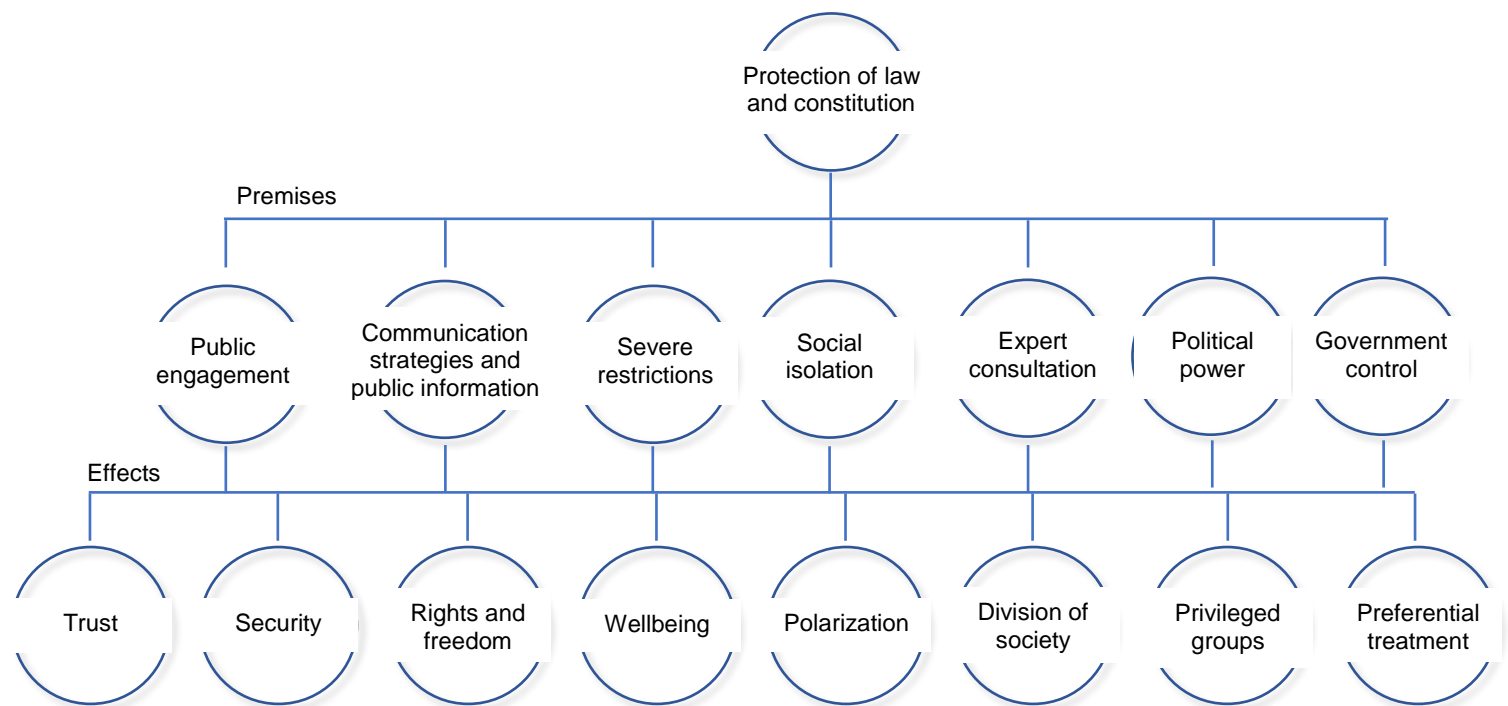

figure 9. Main key findings of the Polish group on protection of law and constitution

The group emphasized that the two years Covid-19 pandemic experience, the authorities/government decisions, and response to crisis entangled some valuable lessons. In their view, one-way solution and centralized decision might not adequately and broadly address and answer to a complex crisis that threatens people´s health and life. Therefore, the multiple **expertise and knowledge** should be considered by authorities in future policy.

People need to be **informed and notified in advance** about implementing new rules and regulations. **Restrictions must be decided legally based on the law and constitution** by respecting **human rights and freedom**. Also, the decision-making must reflect the knowledge and expertise of different actors such as experts, different organizations, central government, local authorities, and civil society consultation.

3.3.6. Breakout-group SC - Scotland. Trust in government

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the participants of this group experienced that mass media has adopted some contradictory communication strategies for public information that, to some extent, were **less efficient and consistent**, **often biased**, and most of the time **highlighting the negative side of the situation**. In contrast, the local Scottish authority had initiated several **positive measures to support local communities**, distinct from the central government measures that sometimes-lacked efficient communication strategies. These two premises emerged from the *local democracy lab* in Scotland (April 2021) led the group in selecting the **government's communication strategies and information dissemination** as the main topic. The guiding deliberation question formulated by the Scottish expert facilitator is:

– *How did government communication, ethics, and openness play out in your region during the pandemic? What went well, and what can be improved?*

The topic of deliberation was backed by an expert´s presentation ensured by **Doreen Grove**, Director of Open Government Scotland of the Scottish National Government. Doreen leads the Scottish Government's involvement in the Open Government Partnership at both a National and International level. In Scotland, Open Government supports the reform of public services, the renewal of democracy, promotes openness, transparency, and innovative participative processes to help transform how people interact with public services. Doreen´s presentation raised some relevant points:

– *Needs for more community engagement/participation.*
– *Public consultation.*
– *Review of existing policy and laws.*
– *Active involvement of the health care sector.*
– *Active cooperation and collaboration between Government and trusted community members*

Community engagement, **public participation**, and **contribution to the decision-making process**, e.g., the assistance of service provision strategy, have been considered factors influencing government trust. The group emphasized that government did not invest in community programs to empower the active participation and to strengthen the awareness of citizens' participation in the local community's development. The role of local authority and local community were already demonstrated as trustworthy during the Covid-19 pandemic, to the detriment of the central government. However, in the group's view, the government feels nervous about giving power and money to communities. And from here, the following question raises up

"What is community empowerment, what does it mean? How does it work?"

The laws and policy strategy must be the subject of re-evaluation, e.g., review of the [Community Empowerment Act](#) since the basic version does not answer anymore to the complexity and needs of the actual society. Also, the budget should be better planned and accessed in order to be efficiently invested, avoiding the situation of PB in Glasgow that inefficiently distributed the money and, consequently, a part of the budget remaining unspent. The group considered relevant the government support of volunteer programs, re-evaluation of the third sector from the perspective of public involvement, overall there is a need for a culture of governmental change from the perspective of priority allocation of funds to different sectors. The [Participative Democracy Certificate of young people](#) has to be efficiently exploited, enabling the young people´s engagement in the process of decision making. The group also emphasized the requirement of **government data transparency** that could be, for instance, repackaged to a desktop database by using the available modern technology.

In the group's view, **public consultation** should become a government's priority, creating space and platforms for more dialogue and consultation platforms along the decision-making process. Thus, by active citizens' contribution, the rationale behind the strategies and measures adopted by authorities and the impact produced to different sectors might be better understood and valued by people. The Scottish group underlined the civic engagement contribution to the process of Scottish authorities' strategy and decision-making. However, in their opinion, the people are consulted sometimes by the end of the process when the decision is already taken, or people are just partially involved in consultation. Still, their voice is not always heard or reflected in the undertaken decision. In consequence, inconsistency in civic engagement might be reflected in the motivation and interest of people to engage (*based on the principle that if the voice-opinion is not considered, what for to invest effort?*).

The lesson learned from the Covid-19 pandemic regarding the strengthening of civic engagement is to start by implementing **the educational program for civic participation in schools** and **plan for school councils**. Furthermore, the decision-making process should be based on the principle of **coherency and clarity**, tailored to different individuals' needs.

The health care system needs more attention and investment. The access to health services is prolonged because of a lack of staff and financial support.

The **role of central government and local authorities' leadership should be strengthened** to ensure access to official sources of information and people´s trust since the practice demonstrated that most of people do not seek for official information sources. Instead, they are looking for information and trust religious and civic leaders. In the group´s view, the government should encourage the community to get involved, e.g., the Preston model that emphasizes the community wealth building and tracing of official found investment (**fig. 10** presents the main key findings for the Scottish group).
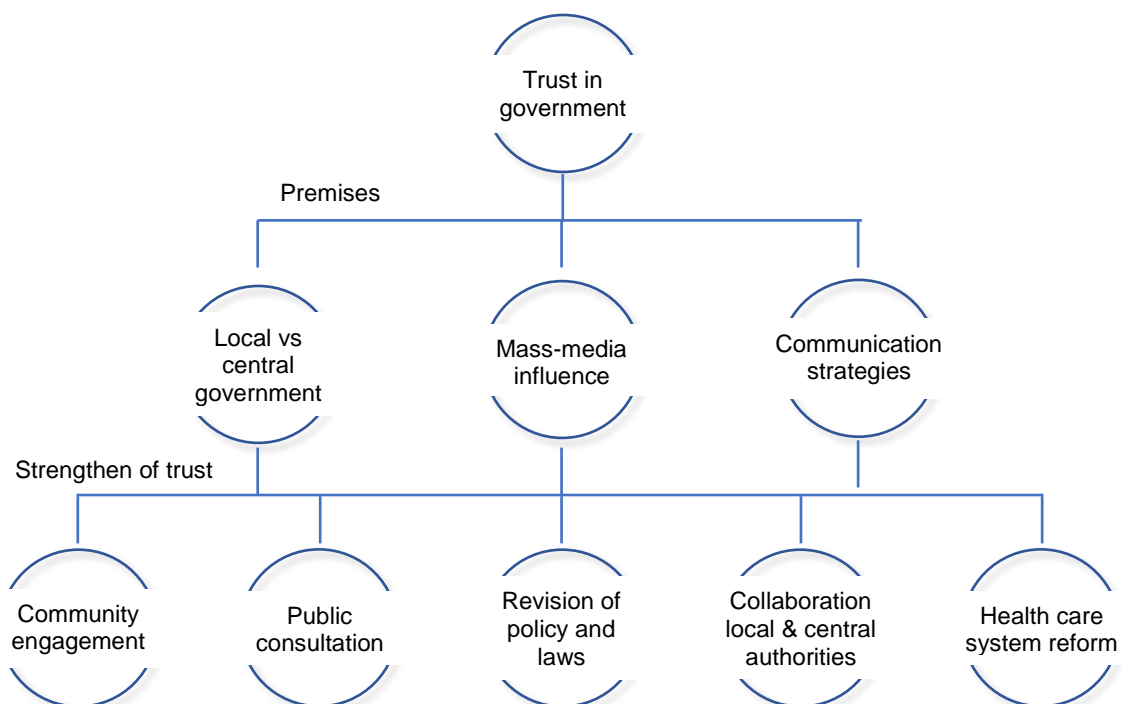

figure 10. Main key findings of the Scottish group on trust in government

3.3.7. Breakout-group ES - Spain. Strengthening the role of local authorities

The main selected topic of the Spanish group was the role of local authorities in supporting local communities. The topic selection is due to strongly decentralised local management in Spain that created some decision-making discrepancies during the Covid-9 pandemic, generating citizens' confusion. In addition, the contribution of organisations and the civil sector such as social movements have been included into the group´s deliberation.

The topic was backed by an expert´s presentation ensured by **Kani Cubo**, a Technical advisor to the General Directorate of Open Government and Social Innovation of the Government of Aragon. Promoting ecosystems (Libros que unen, plataforma #CVOL, Comunidad Aspasia) at LAAAB, Laboratorio de Aragón [Open Government]. She graduated Social Work from the University of Zaragoza, being focused mainly on social education. After managing various spaces for youth participation in Aragon and inter-associative projects, she took a tour as a social educator through different centres for minors serving adolescents under the supervision of the Administration. In 2007 she began to work in the Government of Aragon, as an educator at the Aragonese Institute of Social Services, in care teams for minors at risk of exclusion, and later managing work camps and European programs of non-formal education for young people such as Youth in Action and Erasmus plus at the Aragonese Youth Institute.

The insights emerged from the expert´s presentation corroborated with the outcomes of *local democracy lab* in Spain (March, 2021) created the framework for group´s deliberation, guided by two main questions:
   – *Deliberation 1: What do you think the impact of authority´s measures would be considering the adoption of more self-organized and citizen-led initiatives in Spain?[19]*
   – *Deliberation 2: Do you envisage institutions seeking to promote this type of of more self-organized and citizen-led initiatives in Spain? If so, how? If not, why not?*

The Spanish facilitators applied an innovative deliberative format – in the form of a **creative exercise -** where participants were invited to start reflecting on the topic by formulating statements with given key words. Thus, two separate deliberation exercises have been proposed to the Spanish group:
   – **Deliberation 1 –** Key words: **Role, Local institutions and Health crisis.**
   – **Deliberation 2** – Key words: **Institutions, Innovation and Citizen participation.**

Deliberation 1 creative exercise: The statements gathered from participants´ deliberation are presented in the **table 4**.

table 4. Group´s statements emerged from the Creative exercise of Deliberation 1

Key words: Role – Local institutions – Health crisis
Local institutions should serve as the main informational channel and support of citizens participation, especially in the time of a health crisis.
The health crisis determined me to take action and employ an active initiative driven by the slow local authorities' actions.
Local institution plays a decisive responsibility in a situation of health crisis.
The decentralised model, in the context of crisis with health consequences, expressed in the form of a collaborative contribution of community initiatives and local authority strategy, lead to more effective interventions based on the community needs rather than centralised bureaucratic strategy.
Local authorities play an essential role in carrying about citizens, not only in the time of crisis.

---

[19] LAAAB https://www.laaab.es/

The health crisis demonstrated the essential role of local authorities in supporting citizens-community initiatives.
The multiple roles of local authorities in a health crisis from managing private initiative challenges, initiative of local organizations, social movements until the re-evaluation and re-organization of the health care services in relation to the given situation.

The group statements led to several recommendations that might be considered for the support of local communities during the time of crisis.

–   **Consistent management** – more coherent, consistent, and better organized strategies for management of crisis. Management of crisis strategies adopted by other countries can be consulted and taken as models, e.g. the management strategy adopted by authorities during the La Palma volcano eruption (Canary Islands).

–   **Resilience attitudes** – collaborative authority and community-voluntary initiatives to support the members of community. Reinforcing the role of local community could heal and rebuild a healthy society that has become individualistic and selfish by force. Re-building communities must be the priority of authorities and institutions.

–   **Business context** – local community support through the business's mission and plans.

–   **Shifting the values of society** – during the Covid-19 pandemic citizens demonstrated support initiatives for the members of their community. No haters have been noticed during the crisis situation.

–   **Collective creation** for community development, bringing more the focus on small towns, rural areas and regions far away from the large urban areas.

–   **Social initiatives** – community collaboration with administrators during the time of crisis was not a success, but other forms of government have been tested as the work that is made by the Open Government Laboratory of Aragon (LAAAB)[20], which is a good example about this citizen-administration collaboration.

–   **Institutional innovation - Outsourcing of public services** – Public-private collaboration should be strengthening not only from the perspective of the financial benefit, but also for the perspective of community support.

–   **New space** can be created for mutual support, participation, sharing experiences, citizens empowerment and dialogue like the one proposed by the PaCE project. Public administration-community agreement might be recommended to avoid the politicisation of crisis as was happened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Creative exercise for the Deliberation 2: The statements gathered from participants´ deliberation are presented in the **table 5**.

table 5. Group´s statements emerged from the Creative exercise of Deliberation 2

Key words: Institutions – Innovation – Citizens participation
Citizens participation can be and innovative solution for the institution's lever.
Innovation and institution crate and develop without the contribution of citizens participation.
The innovation process of public institutions is challenged in the time of crisis. Therefore, the citizens participation e.g. contribution of experts such as medical staff, social groups can bring an added value.
To increase citizens participation, social innovation at institutions is a fundamental feature, considering also the diverse opinions.
Innovation is a right of institutions in order to promote and encourage citizens participation.
Innovation from the perspective of connectivity with the local and global issues, institutions at local, regional and national level have to value and consider the fundamental role of citizens participation.

---

[20] https://www.laaab.es/

The participants´ discussion revealed a few relevant insights regarding the positive impact of local initiatives in supporting the members of local communities during the time of crisis.

– **Administrative support** considered from the perspective of strategies to be envisaged for strengthening the trust in authorities.
– **Self-imposed limits** – verbal communication is not the only tool that empower the citizens´ collaboration. Social networking might be a relevant solution to promote citizen collaboration.
– **Catalyst, mediator, facilitator role** of local authority, as a member of social ecosystem, where administration can support and promote the local community projects, initiate open public dialogue for public consultation, enable the citizens´ and experts´ contribution to the decision-making process.
– **Open spaces** – facilitate the public environment that enables dialogue and communication among different members of the community.
– **Authority suspicion** – strengthen the authority's trust in the contribution of social movements.
– **Social and institutional ecosystem**
– **Mental health**
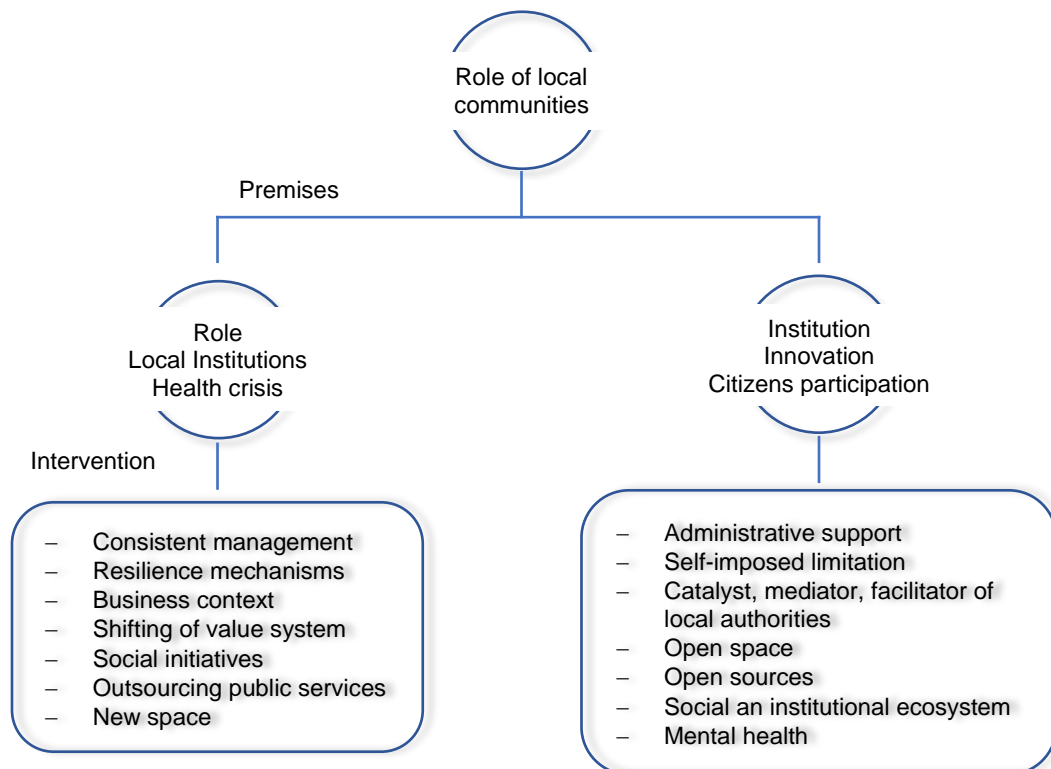– **Open sources** (**fig. 11** presents the main key findings for the Spanish group).

figure 11. Main key findings of the Spanish group on strengthening the role of local authorities

4. Participants´ Feedback

4.1. Participants´ Feedback

After the event, a feedback survey was distributed among participants to learn about the participants experience on this exercise. We aimed at gathering people's insights on the organisational aspects on the one hand and recommendations on how the outcomes should be used on the other. Overall, 28 participants filled out the survey, which represents 57% of participants attended the European Democracy Lab. The identity of participants was kept anonymous.

The overall evaluation of the event's organisation and facilitation question revealed a proportion of 67,9% of participants appreciated the lab as very good, 28,6% as good and 3,6% (which accounts for one respondent) as bad. The visual presentation of responses is presented in **_figure 12_**.

How do you rate the event organisation and facilitation on a scale from 1 to 5? Think of the hosts, the programme and how it was run (1 very bad - 5 very good)
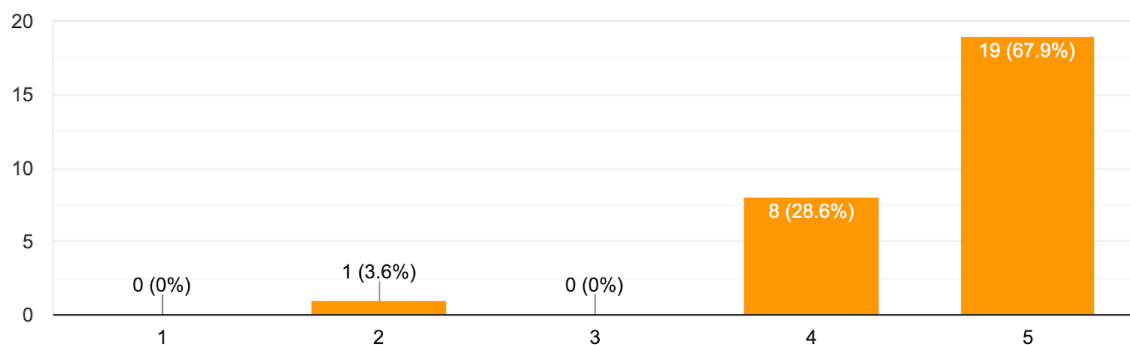28 responses

**figure 12**. Participants' responses to the question on the event organisation and facilitation.

In the paragraph below, there are presented evaluation statements of respondents – what participants liked and suggestions for improvement – and some recommendations of exploitation of the European Democracy Lab outcomes.

4.2. Feedback on the event organisation

Based on participants evaluation and feedback regarding the organization of the European Democracy Lab, the outcomes of the survey can be clustered into four categories:
  – **Structure of the event and diversity of participants**
  – **A welcoming and respectful atmosphere**
  – **Smooth organisation**
  – **Quality of information provided by experts**

1. **Structure of the event and diversity of participants**
   Participants acknowledged the structure of the lab, the division into informative/presentation and deliberative sessions. They appreciated the deliberation in smaller and cross-country groups which facilitate the learning process from diverse perspectives.

   Participants´ quotes:

   'I liked the dynamism, the shift from collective environments to work groups.'

   'I like the most the opportunity to chat with people from different European countries; it was very refreshing experience.'

   '[I like] Exchange of opinion with diverse people.'

   'The organisation was nearly perfect, since we could split into different groups so that we all had the possibility to express our thoughts on a certain topic. It made it possible to communicate more efficiently. I also appreciated that we shared the results of our debate at the end, so that we had the full picture of how the different groups approached the same problem, embracing different perspectives.'

   '[I like] The event plan, the breaks in good time, the presentations.'

   'It was diverse and it made really interesting."

   '[I like] Work in group, discussions.'

2. **A welcoming and respectful atmosphere**
   Participants drew attention to format and structure of the European Democracy Lab, positively appreciating the contribution of hosts and facilitators, acknowledging their enthusiasm and skills that creating a welcoming and trusted environment.

   Participants´ quotes:

   'That it was a safe place to discuss ideas.'

   '[I like] the enthusiasm of the hosts and moderators.'

   '[I like] The way many different points of view were heard, accommodated, put into context.'

   'Great facilitation, good discussion timing.'

   '[I like] Time managing and host.'

   'I enjoyed [..] the capability of our facilitator to improve the quality of our groups debate'.

   '...facilitators were great!!'

3. **Smooth organisation**

The participants´ evaluation praised the smooth organization and flow of the event, handling technicalities, and the overall logistics and preparation.

Participants´ quotes:

'I liked […] the timings were respected'

'It was very well organized. Everything went smoothly. I've received every necessary information on time, and it was always clear what is going to happen next.'

'Everything about the organization of the event was perfect!'

'It was very well prepared and run smoothly'

'Very good organized meeting!'

'I do think that the event had very well timings, no problems with technicalities, the information provided during the meeting was comprehensive, facilitators were great!!'

'The logistic aspects were well taken care of.'

'[I like] The issues addressed, the expositions of the experts, and the remuneration for the participation'

'Good organisational aspects'

'I really liked the organization…'

'Everything was great.'

4. **Quality of information provided by experts**

Another frequently mentioned aspect of the organisation was the quality of the invited experts and the information they provided.

Participants´ quotes:

'I liked the information provided by the experts'

'I liked information provided by experts and a great discussion in the small groups.'

'[I like] The issues addressed, the expositions of the experts, …'

'I enjoyed how informative the experts' presentations were…'

'Experts were really good'

The survey required the participants´ opinion about improvement or changes in the organization of the European Democracy Lab. Most of their remarks touched upon the length of the event - some noted that the event could have been longer and split into two days due to the importance, complexity and heaviness of the discussed topics. They would have appreciated it if would be allocated more time for discussing particular questions and issues emerged from the experts´ presentation for a better understanding of problems. On the other hand, some participants evaluate the European Democracy Lab as being too long, probably because of its intensity.

Participants´ quotes:

'Spread it over 2 days to give people more time to digest information and to let people deepen some aspects when needed.'

'More time for the break room conversations.'

'The time of the experts were short considering how much information they tried to give us. This could be improved if they get more time, or they try to cover less, but more deeply.'

'It's really good to talk about more subjects, but the time was short for them.'

'The length of the whole event was too long.'

'I think it was really perfect. I learned a lot overall. the time was a bit long with the organization of the two sessions, in English and afterwards in Spanish.'

'Perhaps a more concise way of presenting slides would be better, so that we grab the most important concepts, and it does not feel rushed.'

'The third session was elongated too much because one of the journalists brought up so many arguments related to the main topic.'

While most of participants positively appreciated the role and contribution of expert facilitators, still some recommendations have been made for the improvement of the facilitators´ contribution, e.g. more active involvement of facilitators in motivation and prompting the active participation of each group´s member.

Participants´ quotes:

'I really liked the facilitators. I think, however, that they could have offered more stimulating inputs.'

'In the breakout room, more guided and directed warm up.'

'Discussion was too uniform - we were agreeing to the same points and (while I appreciate this is not easy to do) facilitators could have been better in fostering an actual discussion by "throwing a wrench", challenging us and even to an extent playing devil's advocate.'

Whereas participants' diversity was recognized by many, some voiced not sufficient variety of perspectives brought either by attendees, or experts, causing conversations to be too 'uniform' or not deep enough.

Participants´ quotes:

'Maybe groups should be mixed before every room meeting this way we could meet more people and knew more points of view.'

'The depth of discussions would benefit if the participants represent a greater variety of views, outlook, political ideologies.'

'The presentations should bring opposite views. If only one side is presented, it does not promote intellectual, debate and political tolerance (hence, it does not favour democratic values).'

'I think the topics were not explored with the required depth and contrasting views…'

4.3. Next steps recommendations

The survey enabled participants to share some recommendations and suggestions in terms of exploitation of the European Democracy Lab outcomes and to which category of stakeholders should be shared these outcomes. Among the target groups mentioned by respondents there were mentioned civil society and public authorities. This refers both to local/national public bodies, and European ones (the European Union officials). also, participants recommended the sharing of the lab´s outcomes with broader audiences, like the general public and the media. Finally, one participant suggested that findings should be communicated to young people ('*school students*').

Some participants suggested that processes like Democracy Labs should take place more often and at different levels of governance, giving people more agency in decision-making and creating better opportunities for civic education. There were recommendations on engaging more often and in a diverse way with different social groups. One respondent would like to see the continuation of the Democracy Lab in the form of a 'working groups.

Selected answers to the question of the target audience to be reached with event's findings and the next steps:

'Such events should take place regularly and also be advertised in more "layers" of society. Organize seminars, Youtube videos (not necessarily with citing individuals, but in a way that democracy education can reach a broad audience).'

'I would like to find local application of the proposal, with the birth of real working groups.'

'I think that this project needs more visibility and do surveys so that more people can say what they think'.

'Each country´s government and civil organizations.'

'The outcomes should be disseminated by host organizations from different countries as wide as it is possible among NGOs for instance.'

'The outcomes should reach to the political makers on European and National level.'

'The outcomes might be having to reach the politicians (local and national) and citizens.'

'It's not the results that interest me more, is the process. A process like this should be held at different levels of democratic governing, local, regional, state and interstate.'

'I would like to see that the outcomes influence and promotes better relations between public institutions and civil society organisations.'

'Administrations, specially local ones, and people who "work" with people.'

'They should be made public and delivered to the media.'

'More and more high school students maybe.'

'A better acknowledgement from the European institutions, of the need to tackle the issue of misinformation and populism, from the perspective of the vulnerability of the people who end up believing in false information.'

'All citizens in general should be informed of the possibility to be heard and to speak about serious problems that affect our society, in order to give their contribute. Also, decision makers and politicians should be informed.'

4.4. Learnings from running European Democracy Lab

Based on participants' and facilitators' feedback there were formulated some conclusions and recommendations to be shared and exploited by other organization interested to organized similar events. A list of few recommendations and lessons learned are presented in the paragraphs below:

1. The selected topics of the European Democracy Lab, **misinformation** and **mental wellbeing** were highly appreciated by participants that were very interested to getting familiar with the expertise and experience of experts presented at the event. However, the time allocated for the deliberation in each round was too short for people to dive deeper into those topics. Therefore, the participants´ recommendation was to either focusing on one key topic so that people have enough time to get informed and digest information, talk to the experts and discuss the issue, or design a longer event, split into two days so that participants can rest between rounds and have some quiet time to think through of what they have learnt.

2. A skilled expert facilitation team is a key and crucial element when organising such an event, especially in the concrete situation of the European Democracy Lab that brought together people from different countries with diverse backgrounds and various language capabilities. Therefore, the facilitators must

handle such a diverse group of participants, ensuring everyone can be heard and creating a safe and respectful atmosphere.

3. Ensure the participants' group is diverse to have a rich spectrum of perspectives. For the European Democracy Lab, we invited participants who took part in local events (*Local Democracy Lab*), and the key criterion was a good command of English. However, regardless of the evident geographical and demographic differences, the group was not that diverse, which echoed in participants' feedback. We decided on this solution due to budget constraints; nevertheless, a sortition process and interpreters would be recommended to ensure better participants diversity and richer outcomes.