D5.6:

Synthesis Report Outlining the Key Findings from Local Democracy Labs

"Trust in public administration in the time of Covid-19 pandemic"
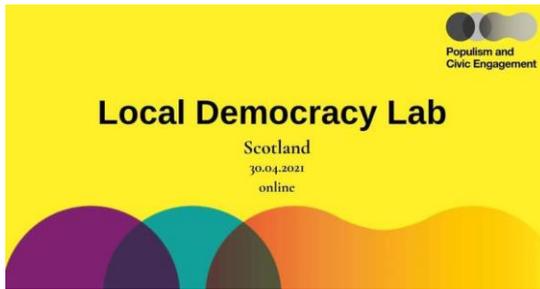
WP5 – Dissemination and engagement

Populism and Civic Engagement

Local Democracy Labs
Trust in public administration, in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic

The report presents the key findings of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs conducted in seven European countries, based on the opinions and insights of **150 participants** on *"Trust in public administration, in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic"*. Established on participants´ experience and deliberation, a few recommendations are advocated that could be considered for future policy strategies to help mitigate the impact of a crisis on different sectors and groups of people at the risk of marginalization.

Acknowledgments

The organizing team on behalf of the PACE project, contributing to the organization and carrying out of the local democracy labs, includes Sophie Kiesouw, Project Lead from the Netherlands and Aleksandra Ziętek, Project Lead from Krakow, Poland, both from Democratic Society Brussels, Roxana Cziker, project manager and Magnús Yngvi Jósefsson, program manager at the City of Reykjavík, Iceland. Many thanks to Róbert Bjarnason, manager of the Citizens Foundation in Iceland, for the design and development of the online platform for deliberation– "Your Priorities / Better Reykjavík."

About this document

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This document outlines the outcomes and lessons learned from the PaCE Local Democracy Lab organised in seven European countries. The outcomes and lessons learned are relevant for the development of future Democracy Labs and serve as guidance for other consortia and organisations engaging citizens in their research. This document is feeding into the official academic research of the PaCE project.

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 the participants'´ statements and recommendations
Sophie Kisouw, DEMSOC	Review, Lessons learned local democracy labs
Aleksandra Ziętek, DEMSOC	Review

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

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Disclaimer

The content and information presented in the actual report reflect entirely the view of the PaCE partners contributing to the organization and implementation of PaCE Local Democracy Labs and the authors of the present report. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

The PaCE consortium respects the protection of personal information and data and adheres strictly to the rules set down by data protection legislation, how we handle the data and the rights of participants to the research.

The outcomes of the PaCE Local Democracy Lab carried out in seven European countries represent strictly the conclusions formulated on the opinions and perception of the *one hundred and fifty participants to the lab* and cannot be extrapolated as representing the general opinion of citizens because no standardized inclusion and exclusion criteria have been used for the participants´ selection. The general strategy of participation selection applied to the local democracy labs was to encourage participation across genders and under-represented groups of people, and to enable the free will of members of the community to participate in a public debate.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Context of Local Democracy Labs

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 categorised 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, to build upon the lessons of positive examples, and hence play a part in constructing a firmer democratic and institutional foundation for citizens of Europe.**

The PaCE research addresses the civic engagement approach by enabling the active participation of people from different European countries in the PaCE's qualitative research. Thus, one of the participatory research aims was to carry out seven Local Democracy Labs in different European countries. The selection criteria of European countries for conducting the local democracy labs was in line with one of the research conducted in the WP1, **case studies of populist and nativist parties and social movements in different European countries**. In addition, we were interested in better-tackling people's opinions in different European countries regarding the trust in authorities; thus, Nordic, Eastern, Western, Southern, and Central European countries were selected: **Italy, Iceland, Spain, Scotland, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria**.

The Local Democracy Labs are 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.**

1.2. Purpose of the Local Democracy Labs

The purpose of the Local Democracy Lab was 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 **City of Reykjavik, in collaboration with the Democratic Society**, **Brussels, and Citizens Foundation, Iceland**, were the leaders in organizing and carrying out seven in-person and online **Local Democracy Labs** across Europe.

The **goal** of the 3-hours-long local Democracy Labs held across the European focus member states is to ensure the broadest democratic engagement throughout all stages of the PaCE project. A subsidiary goal (given the emergence of Covid-19) is to learn how to make online Democracy Labs work on packaging the experiences into guidelines to help others run such events.

1.3. Objectives of the Local Democracy Labs

Democracy Labs aim at reaching the following key objectives:
- To keep the research programme continuously connected to the **lived experiences** of participants;
- To think through, with participants, the ways in which they might want to be involved in making and shaping decisions that affect their lives;

Subsidiary aims:
- To produce rich qualitative data around the perceptions of power, trust, and democratic processes;
- To better understand the way in which traditional and social media influence and shape political and social opinions;
- To better understand the way in which community interactions influence and shape political decisions;

1.4. Structure of the Local Democracy Labs

The design of the Local Democracy Labs is based on the idea of the **World Café qualitative method**, adapted for both *in-person and online deliberation*. The World Café format fits the Positive Psychology frame and creates a welcoming and constructive environment, invites a respectful relationship that promotes an equal partnership among participants, and stimulates the peoples´ creativity and freely expressing their opinion around a topic by being guided by questions. The process uses connected conversations to share knowledge, ignite innovation, and tap into the group's intelligence.[1]

The PaCE team proposed an innovative deliberation format in conducting the local democracy labs that was divided in three stages:
1. **Stage 1 – Starting up.** Pre-event ideas generation has been created on the online dialogue platform *Your Priorities*[2] / *Better Reykjavík*. The platform was open ten days prior the event. Your Priorities or Better Reykjavík platform enabled participants to get familiar with the discussion topics, contribute with ideas, and express their opinions about the other participants´ ideas by voting up and down.
2. **Stage 2 – Online deliberation event** was created on-site, in the participants´ country (when possible to organize it in-person) or online on the Zoom communication platform. The event proposed a 3-hour-long on-site or online deliberation where participants were enabled to share their experience and ideas around the proposed topic: *Trust in authorities in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.*
3. **Stage 3 – Follow up**. Post-event ideas were gathered on the Your Priorities platform, where participants had the opportunity to express their opinion about the event and share ideas and insights that had not been yet shared in the online event.

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[1] Löhr K., Weinhardt M. amd Sieber S, 2020; Guide to the World Café method

[2] The virtual format of democracy lab will use **Your Priorities Platform** as an online idea generation, deliberation & decision-making platform that connects governments & nonprofits with citizens. The platform creates the opportunity for citizens to contribute with ideas, explore/view other people's ideas, and take part in a compelling debate about each idea exposed as a question of democracy lab. For each idea, citizens have the opportunity to add points for or points against. Once a debate point is added, other citizens can vote the point up or down, but they can't comment directly on it – they will have to write a standalone counterpoint that has no direct connection to the initial point. This makes trolling almost impossible, defangs and downplays any personal arguments between participants, and is the key to high-quality online engagement. Citizens can submit content as text, video, and audio and upload images with their ideas.

Three discussion sessions were proposed to participants in virtual breakout rooms, led by expert facilitators, using three questions for guiding the participants' discussion. The questions were slightly adapted in line with the particularities of each country.

1. **Explorative question** - about the media and the pandemic (round 1)

   How are the authorities addressing the citizens´ concerns and needs arising from pandemic Covid-19? Share your experience and insights. or

   How does the media influence your understanding of the Covid-19 situation?

2. **Deepening question** - starting to get into the topic of how government is dealing with the pandemic (round 2)

   How do you feel about the Covid-19 restrictions the authorities have imposed (local, reginal, national)?

3. **Reflective or activating question** - linking people's thoughts on the pandemic into some ideas, suggestions and recommendations (round 3)

   In a future pandemic situation, what would be your recommendations to the authorities? If you were in charge, what would you do?

2. Key Findings of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs

2.1. Recruitment strategy and participants´ profile

Democratic Society, in partnership with local civic organizations, created the recruitment strategy of participants. The adopted 'network-based' recruitment strategy was supported by a communications plan developed by each local civic organization in line with the particularities of their beneficiaries and the profile of the people in each country. The communication plan included a network map with organizations and stakeholders across the country. The general audience has been reached directly by email or phone, including broader organizations that might promote the message to their public members. The message communicated was friendly and informal. By retweeting or sharing posts, organizations or known people acted as "trusted community ambassadors" for recruiting possible participants.

Social media was another critical channel used to get the word out and recruit participants, especially through Twitter and Facebook. For each event there a Facebook event was created to spread information amongst Facebook users, and the event was shared with different Facebook communities in each country.

The invitation to participate in the on-site or online events has been launched to all interested citizens and residents over 16 years of age.

The total number of participants registered to the seven democracy labs was 282 and around 53%, **150 participants** attended the on-site or online Zoom discussions (Figure 1). In terms of gender representation, more women (55%) were present at the meetings compared with 44% of men and only 1.5% other gender (Figure 2). The level of participants´ of education was by far tertiary or higher education 80% (see figure 3).

The participants´ inclusion criteria were:
- Age balance – young, middle age and elderly people;
- Gender balance;
- Ethnic and religious groups;
- People with immigrant background;
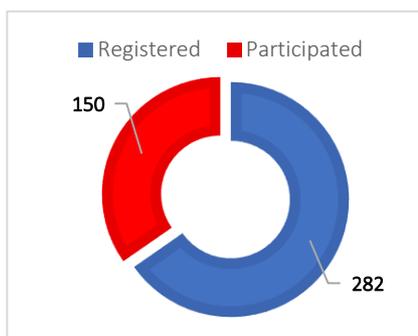- People with disabilities.

Figure 1. Representation of participants attended the online event on Zoom communication platform
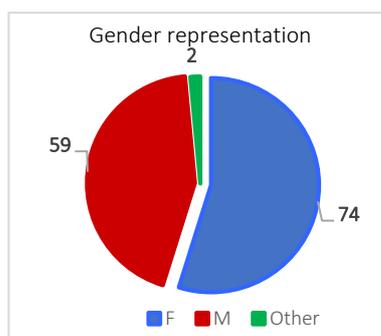

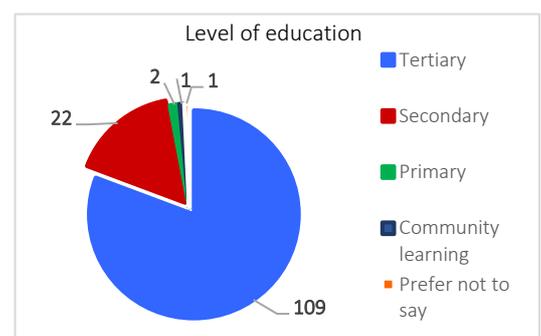**Figure 2.** Representation of participants´ gender

Figure 3. Representation of participants´ educational level

2.2. Common topics for all seven local democracy labs

The PaCE Local Democracy Labs derived several relevant statements and insights from one hundred and fifty participants as a response to the discussion topic: trust in public administration on the time of Covid-19 pandemic. The present report presents a summary of the main key findings gathered in all seven local democracy labs. The extended report on the PaCE Local Democracy Labs organised in each country can be found on the PaCE website.

The qualitative examination of participants' statements was carried out with the **thematic analysis[3]**. The characteristics and dynamics of the participants' discussion shaped the direction of the analysis. Thus, two distinct levels have been identified over the global theme of trust/distrust in authorities:

– **the first level** reveals the participants' evaluation of the quality of measures imposed by authorities as a response to the Covid-pandemic formulating *appreciations, claims, doubts, questions and recommendations* and,

– **the second level** unveils the participants' opinion on the strategies adopted by the authorities by highlighting the main consequences on different sectors and to what extent these measures have addressed the needs of different groups.

Thus, four categories have been tackled as the first level of analysis:

– **positive insights/trust**

– **critical views/distrust**

– **challenges/uncertainty**, and

– **recommendations**

Two categories of topics have been highlighted by participants for the second level of analysis tackling the impact of authorities measures on different sectors:

– **common topics for all seven countries** (table 1):

– **country specific topics** (table 2):

Table 1. The overview of the common topics for all democracy labs

Common topics for all seven countries	
Strengths of authorities´ measures – Measure of trust and positive appreciation	Variable that might be considered as measures of trust in different authorities – **Composition of the civil defence team:** e.g., trustworthy authorities such as local communities, health care experts and ministers, police, etc. – **Security of countries and people:** e.g., border monitoring, the influx of tourists. – **Contribution of local authorities** in the distribution of information and adaptation of measures in the local community context. – **Adopted strategy for distribution and implementation of measures:** experts, politicians, local community representatives' figures, engagement of public

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[3] **Thematic analysis** is one of the most common forms of analysis within qualitative research. It emphasizes identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning (or "themes") within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is often understood as a method or technique in contrast to most other qualitative analytic approaches - such as grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis - which can be described as methodologies or theoretically informed frameworks for research (they specify guiding theory, appropriate research questions and methods of data collection, as well as procedures for conducting analysis). Thematic analysis is best thought of as an umbrella term for a variety of different approaches, rather than a singular method.

Common topics for all seven countries

opinion, NGO´s contribution, online access to the public library, e-health consultation, and e-prescription programs.

- **Availability of information:** e.g., language, official channels, frequency of public updating.
- **Strictness of measures and impact on personal life:** e.g., relaxed or strict measures.
- **Media contribution** in the distribution of information: e.g., the role of traditional and social media and level of cooperation with the authorities.
- **People´s cooperation:** e.g., peoples´ awareness and willingness to act in accordance with the measures imposed by authorities.
- **Accessibility of people to different services and goods**, e.g., provision, medical services, etc.

Communication and information strategies – Critical views and challenges	Participants claimed different issues regarding the information flow and strategies adopted by authorities in the distribution and sharing of information. Among the most highlighted issues, there are a few to be mentioned: – **Clarity, accessibility, coherence of measures.** A few variables are to be considered in the future communication and information strategies adopted by authorities, so the message shared with public responds to peoples´ interest, knowledge, and level of understanding: language, circumstances, quantity, channels, format, timing, and origin of the information, etc. The considerable amount of information, frequently updating and changing of measures, and inadequate authorities´ explanations about Covid-19 and its impact have led people to confusion, anxiety, and panic and to fail in recognizing the meaning of the measures and the reality of the virus. – **Foreground vs. background information when relevant messages are shared publicly.** For instance, visuals (numbers, graphics) might create confusion and distract people from relevant information. Likewise, simultaneous exposure of people to collective suffering and threatening images activates the emotional component, and essential information will be sent into the background. – **Overload, sometimes contradictory information, mainly highlighting the negative side** provided by traditional and social media, lead people to confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, and fear and shut down the interest in the information. – **A lack of tailored/customized information** for different groups (e.g., minorities) and different sectors. – **Transparency, evidence of information and prompt reaction** of authorities. – **Protection of laws, constitution and peoples´ human rights.** especially when this comes to minority groups. In this context, educational programmes must be created in order to strengthen the people's knowledge of **availability of suitable protecting entities.** For instance, in case of participants from Poland, the ban on public gatherings was introduced by the PM/Health minister decree, which violates the constitutional right to assembly. The constitution is prevalent to the bills and decrees – in that sense, the ban was illegal and violated one of the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution.

Common topics for all seven countries	
Coordination and cooperation of authorities and other organisations – Critical views and challenges	Different levels of cooperation and coordination among authorities and different organisation are to be considered: – **Inter-departmental or inter-dvisions coordination and collaboration within the regional and local authorities,** e.g., for a better evaluation, monitoring, and follow-up of contexts, the cross-cutting the impact of measures on different sectors. – **Inter-ministries coordination,** e.g., for the evaluation, monitoring, and follow-up of the impact of measures and minimizing the long-term consequences. – **Cross-sectorial and trans-disciplinary cooperation** for envisaging a holistic approach to a crisis from different perspectives. – **Cooperative networking,** e.g., cooperation between authorities, NGO´s and representatives of different minority groups exposed to the risk of marginalization for a better evaluation and follow-up of needs of different groups. – **Coordination between the central government and local authorities,** e.g., tailoring the measures based on the local community´s needs.
Politicization[4] vs expertise and knowledge – Critical views and challenges	– **Consultation of experts, updated, objective and accessible public information and data** for mitigating and addressing the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemics and measures imposed by authorities e.g., expertise in psychology for family, management of crisis and risk situations, resilience and coping mechanisms etc. – **Dialogue among politicians and experts** for strengthening the monitoring and follow-up processes of possible issues in different sectors. Mobilize the bottom-up support by civil society organizations and grassroots networks. – **Consultation with human right experts of minorities, working and trade unions** to better trace long-term effects. – **Consultation with experts of NGOs and other organisations** for tackling better the needs of different communities and groups of people. – **Balance of multiple voices-expertise of those sectors most affected by covid-19 from the health care and social services, economy sectors, and education.** – **Collaborative decision-making approach based on multiple-perspectives view**: public opinion, experts and specialists, NGOs, civic organisations and other stakeholders. – **Expand the groups of advisers close to the politicians** using the principle of division of responsibilities in the process of decision-making.

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[4] Politicization, in the most general terms, means the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political. This core of the concept is common to different conceptions represented in the three kinds of literature. Politicization, therefore, can be generally defined as moving something into the realm of public choice, thus presupposing the possibility to make collectively binding decisions on that matter. In most political systems, a collective choice about an issue is based on a prior process of putting the issue on the agenda, some deliberation about the right decision, and the interaction of different positions regarding the choice. The more salient the issue, the more actors and people participate in the debate, the more positions are polarized, and the more politicized a decision or institution is. While different strands of the literature use different operational definitions, there seems to be a common core meaning of the concept of politicization (Zurn M. Politicization compared: at national European and global level. *Journal of European Public Policy*. 2019, VOL: 26, NO. 7, 977-955).

Common topics for all seven countries	
Closer monitoring of cascading effects and follow up strategies – Critical views and challenges	– **Economic - employment sector** e.g., prioritization and transparency of financial support, especially in the case of self-employment and small companies; evaluation and monitor the impact on tourism, culture and entertainment sectors. – **Democracy and human rights** e.g., better tackle knowledge, culture, education, circumstances of different group of people etc. – **Health sector and wellbeing**, e.g., envisage support programs and follow-up health care services for people with chronic diseases and other illnesses, mental health and psychological issues, physical disabilities, children, and teenagers confronted with different psychological issues due to long-term home isolation, exposure to risk of marginalization etc. – **Education,** e.g. strengthen the digital literacy of teachers and children, provision of devices and software for online classes supported by central government and local authorities. – **Disruptive behaviors,** e.g., monitoring, follow up and support programs to combat or diminish domestic violence, acts of aggression against animals. – **Social isolation and marginalized groups,** e.g., support measures for elderly people at the risk of isolation and loneliness and with chronic diseases, homeless, single people, children etc.
Long-term impact on individual wellbeing - Critical views and challenges	– **Preventive measures and resilience strategies** both at individual and community level. – **Preventative strategies** for preparation and protection of the new generation. – **Protection measures** for disadvantaged groups, evaluation of people at risk of loneliness and isolation e.g., support groups, psychological support programs, healthy lifestyle programs. – **Strengthen the medical and e-Health services** for closer monitoring of chronic diseases and other illnesses. – **Public education and information policy -** e.g., school and work environment education programs, critical thinking training, fake news analysis programs, training for digital literacy.

2.3. Country specific topics

Table 2. The overview of country specific topics[5]

Country specific topics	
Bulgaria: *Media disinformation -* **Critical views and challenges**	– Media painted rather a negative picture of the crisis leading people to fear and panic, creating more space for politicians to the detriment of public opinion debate and expert's perspectives.
Hungary: *Public opinion dialogue* - **Critical views and challenges**	– Public opinion and involvement of different stakeholders such as NGOs have not been consulted as alternative support for local communities and different groups. Therefore, the people were confused and did not "dare to talk with each other about the government's actions – self-censorship.*" Even the mass media sometimes had limited access to official information, "could not ask questions, so they haven't got valid*

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[5] Italy has not been included into the topic analysis since was the first pilot of local democracy labs with different deisgn and topci of discussion.

Country specific topics	
	information:" "Could not go to the hospitals for getting information from people." Instead, the government used a national consultation as a public dialogue tool, even though the participants considered that the *"consultation was only a pretence of democracy."*
	− People have limited tools for reacting and expressing their opinion about the government's measures: *"Protests against restrictions have been suspended."*
	− The criticisms of the government's decision have not been very much encouraged; some people felt that *"if some criticized, sanctions blocked them."* At the same time, the government has adopted some restrictions in case some people refuse to be vaccinated, considering impacting people's rights. For example: entering cultural events inside, dining at the restaurant, etc.
Iceland: *Protection of economy and employment sector -* **Critical views and challenges**	− *Immigrants and foreign people employment labour market* were one of the most affected sectors. Thus, it has a significant consequence on the *tourism industry, where most members of immigrant groups lost their jobs.* The participants´ discussion highlighted the lack of authorities´ support measures and transparency of information about which authorities people can address questions to, how to apply for financial support, and whether all categories of workers such as self-employed have the rights to governmental financial subsidies.
	− The authority unemployment support programs have been experienced as falling under preferential treatment that sometimes left some people outside the system. The participants have noticed a conflict of interest between the tourism companies and the public.
Poland: *Protection of law and constitution -* **Critical views and challenges**	− The government has let the citizens down. The restrictions, although partly justified, were illegal, and no one was held accountable for them. On the pretext of Covid-19, several regulations were introduced, utterly unrelated to the pandemic battle. Although some of the restrictions were appropriate, the way they were implemented left a lot to be desired. Moreover, civil rights and freedoms, such as the right to assembly, were violated. The pandemic has shown that the mechanisms for protecting the rule of law leave much to be desired and that the political class is more concerned with its interests than with the nation's welfare. The last remaining hope lies in local governments, as they are much closer to the ordinary citizen.
Scotland: *Trust in government and the influence of mass-media -* **Critical views and challenges**	− Handling, selection, processing, understanding, and distinction between reality and the *"media´s story."* was difficult for people to manage because of significant amount of information provided by media *"Separating the noise from what's going on really has been difficult. Understanding the underlying pattern of what's going on takes and effort…"*
	− Prolonged and constant exposure of people to the same category of information on Facebook/news, mainly presenting the negative side of the crisis threatening the people's health and life, created *"a bubble"* and *"drowned"* people.
	− Contradictory and incomplete information of official sources such as authorities and mass media, and the delivery of sophisticated and technical language led people to confusion, especially when facing an unknown event. *"Not given full information how this was going to affect us directly. That has set the tone- real news, fake news, conspiracy theories."*

Country specific topics	
	– Strategies adopted by traditional media during the Covid-19 had a significant impact in the way the information has been processed by people in Scotland: o Exploit the scientific message to feed political narratives; o Create a mass media space for some political figures; o Circulating and exposing people predominantly to a negative message and "painting" a dark picture of the narratives about the Covid pandemic; o Acting as a "public surveillant" of people in different spaces; o Taking advantage of the situation and turning towards the own interest of editorial promotion; o Trapping people in getting "addicted" by the news about the pandemic; o Creating deeper negative attitudes and emotions by overlapping information about the two crises: Brexit and Covid pandemic; o Shifting the focus from the actual situation and keeping on the "background, as less important issue".
Spain: *Strengthen the role of local authority* - **Critical views and challenges**	– Lack of empathy by institutions that showed their weakness due to a deficit of resources and problems of coordination between national, regional, and local levels. – Decisions are based more on the political agenda and partisan interest than on citizens' needs. Participants shared their concerns about the loss of rights and freedoms. – Measures did not sufficiently address the needs and vulnerabilities of different groups, some of the decisions being considered improvised. – Measures have mainly addressed general and urban centrist issues, and less consideration has been directed towards the local and more rural context. Therefore, coordination and cooperation among central government and local authorities have been recommended by participants. – One of the biggest challenges underlined by participants was the provision of a collective solution in a context of polarization and political confrontation.

2.4. Key findings from the PaCE Pilot Local Democacy Lab in Messina

Question 1 – Which information do you think is valuable to know before making a voting decision?

- Need for **clarity on what is being voted on** is necessary. Infographics and/or easy-to-use documents (online/offline) would be helpful to enable the various sections of the population to understand the details;

- Awareness of the **repercussions of the vote**: what negative impact might the vote have, such as in the case of a referendum. And what powers will those elected have after an election;

- Is the **electoral programme trustworthy**? Is there an option to clarify if the elected person has the power to do what s/he promises?

- Discussants debated if it is possible to 'challenge the voter's point of view' to make voters **aware of the impact their voting decision has on the local communities**. An example that was discussed by the participants was the short-term benefit of a promised infrastructure development compared to the long-term negative impact of potential higher taxes and economic losses;

- Information should be understandable and highlight **past actions and votes of the candidates and their parties**; and

The group agreed on the need to focus on **education on vote**. While it is important to make electoral programmes, candidate histories and voting effects accessible, the citizen must also be clear about the importance of voting and that voting is an expression of democracy: it must be in the interests of everyone and not in the interests of immediate gain.

Access to information

Until recently, access to information was limited to: newspapers, election programs, schools, party circles and rallies. Especially political parties and rallies allowed citizens to seek information themselves, intervene directly, as well as make oneself heard and discuss opinions. Nowadays, the participants feel that these physical spaces for deliberation and discussion are shrinking and are being replaced by new technologies. For example, participants agreed that citizens can be easily influenced through social media channels or catchy headlines of newspaper articles. The proliferation of fake news or news with uncertain or unreliable sources can have an influence on the choice of vote.

Question 2 – How do you evaluate which information you can trust?

- Relevance to draw on **different sources** of information, e.g. online/offline, different newspapers;
- Looking at **personal connections**, it is based on the opinion or preference of those you trust, e.g. long-time friends, family, etc.;
- The electoral programme is compared with the **candidate's past behaviour and actions**;
- Participants ideally **examine the actions and behaviour** of the candidate during their whole term in office;
- Assessment of whether the promised objectives in an **election programme are realistic**; and
- The discussion revealed a **general distrust of electoral campaigns and sources of information**. There is little belief in the importance of voting or in electoral programmes. The latter are seen as "proclamations and promises" rather than as a true programmatic reference for the candidate/party. There is a sense of mistrust of social networks, which, as a result of recent scandals, are identified as sources that are not always reliable or are even seen as manipulative.

Critical thinking

Participants raised the point that nowadays we are continuously exposed to information at multiple levels (local, national and international), this is however not matched by strengthening of civic education in schools. The new generations, in particular, are therefore unable to find their way around when it comes to voting and have difficulty finding reliable information.

Participants discussed the need for critical thinking, for example, through the consultation of more than one newspaper. This provides citizens with the skills to analyse the information provided to them before an election. Participants said, however, that they digested less and less information through newspapers, admit focussing only on the headlines.

Lack of trust

There is in general a generalised lack of trust to all sources of information. In addition, participants perceived that with the disconnect between civil society and political actors, the concept of voting slowly loses its relevance. The most important thing about the concept of "Malapolitica" (bad politics) is that citizens themselves have distrust in other citizens, democratic institutions and, consequently, towards universal suffrage.

Question 3 – What do you think needs to be done to ensure informed voting?

- Encourage people to draw on **different sources**;
- Spread the conviction that it is necessary to **go beyond the headlines** of news, reading also its content;
- **Empowering people to seek information themselves**, providing information tools that vary according to social background and skills to ensure equal understanding and accessibility of the electorate;
- Highlight the **feasibility** of suggested electoral programmes;
- **Address the impact of voting** in schools: citizens need to be understand how to analyse not only the past but also the economic repercussions of government actions on the local, regional, and national level that are aimed at the immediate well-being (e.g. less taxes) impacting the future (e.g. less services to citizens); and

Participants voiced a **general distrust** of the electoral programmes and, more generally, of the importance of voting. The ease of access to information in the election phases is - according to the group - essential to guarantee a conscious and informed vote.

The participants considered it as fundamental to know its own community. Living in a community should entail knowing its problems, the potential that it offers and to feel part of it.

In terms of the election campaign, participants noted the need for clear electoral campaigns, focusing on feasible and coherent programmes. Candidates should strive to adopt a clear language that can be understood by the general public. Candidates should also restrain from using verbal attacks against political opponents.

To ensure the exchange between politicians and citizens, participants suggested to hold public debates in the community squares and on television. This would provide an opportunity for citizens to learn about the candidate and its political programme. In addition, there was a general feeling within the group that citizen participation opportunities should be encouraged through civil society organizations that work in the community. Participants believe that citizen participation can improve the living conditions in a community and impact the trust levels between institutions and its citizens.

2.5. Overall topics of local democracy labs

After a more in-depth analysis of the findings and participants' statements, four main inter-related topics were particularly highlighted as possible premises of trust/distrust in authorities that might be considered for future research and policy innovation tools that might better address the complexity and rapid and constant changes of the society we live in today:

1. Communication strategies for public information.
2. Political leadership and political agenda.
3. Engagement and resilience mechanisms of individuals and communities.
4. Coordination and cooperation between authorities and different organizations and stakeholders (see **Figure 4.** *Main key topics of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs common for all seven countries*).

Figure 4. Main key topics of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs common for all seven countries

These four topics brought into light by the participants´ deliberation are not outcomes specifically revealing the issues people faced in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, but consequences/effects of a possible pre-existing, latent symptoms of a crisis of the complex society we deal today. The Covid-19 was the phenomenon that angled and switched on the spotlight towards these issues and made them more prominent and, at the same time, raised people's awareness.

Furthermore, these four key findings might be considered as topics for debate and analysis and cross-disciplinary approach in the context of re-evaluation of the existing resources, services, tools, expertise in order to enhance the democratic mechanisms of representation, participation, and deliberation, to reinforce the authorities´ capacity, legitimacy and accountability and overall strengthening the trust in authorities.

3. Recommendations

A list of recommendations based on the discussions carried by the participants to the PaCE Local Democracy Labs are advocated by the PaCE leaders of local democracy labs. The recommendations are grounded in some issues and sectors highlighted by participants as insufficiently addressed by the authorities´ measures. The proposed recommendations are shared with the European Commission based on the Grant Agreement of the PaCE project.

3.1. Health care sector

– **Knowledge and expertise**
   o **Consider expertise, knowledge of experts in different sectors** as a valuable and mandatory contribution to better tackle and address the needs of different sectors and groups of people.
   o **Adopt public measures** in line with the **Interdisciplinary capacity building-approach**[6] from integrating knowledge and diverse expertise and engaging different communities and organisations such as NGOs and civil society. The implementation of measures must comply with the principle of **relevance, efficiency, efficacity, impact, and sustainability.** Keep the balance of multiple-voices expertise both from the health care and social services sectors.
– **Chronic diseases and other medical issues**
   o Ensuring reliable medical services and prevention of morbidity as a measure of restructuring the health care services provision to enable people suffering from different illnesses and chronic diseases to benefit from proper and adequate medical treatment and assistance.
– **Mental health and psychological support programmes.**
   o Monitor and follow up programs for people/families at the risk of domestic violence.
   o Public psychological consultation programs funded by the government.
   o Support groups for people with different needs.
   o Public debates on psychological and side effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.
   o Envisage preventative measures and public educational programs in local communities that address mental health, psychological and emotional distress to build up and strengthen people's resilience and coping mechanisms in times of crisis or threatening situations. Create official conditions for implementation of public education for school and industry, social and healthy lifestyle programs.
   o Hybrid opening hours of cultural institutions and centres as a prevention measure for people´s mental health.
   o Art therapy programmes.
– **Volunteering programmes**
   o Encourage public volunteering programmes funded by the national and local government.
   o Provide protection measures for disadvantaged groups of people, such as ageing people, who are more exposed to isolation, by encouraging volunteering programs and management of crisis, financed by the central government in cooperation with the local authorities.

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[6] Water Youth Network WYN and the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery

3.2. Education

- **Digital literacy programs** for school staff financed by government.
- **Propaganda, misinformation and fake news educational programs for youth.**
- **Lifelong Learning and critical thinking programs** available to the public to support and raise awareness of the information selection process, avoid false news and information.
- **Hybrid school programme -** Re-shape the online education programs and facilities by proposing a hybrid schooling solution, as a combination of online and in-person classes.
- **Prioritizing support programmes for education** considering **psychological support** for children exposed to difficult conditions and isolation during the pandemic.
- Adopt **after-effect monitoring programmes for children who have dropped out of school** during the pandemic.

3.3. Communication and information strategies

- **Accessible, transparent, coherent and comprehensive information**
  - o Holistic and consistent authorities´ measures and actions that might strengthen trust in authorities and improve people's attitudes to comply with the measures.
  - o Inclusive communication strategy for different members of community, guarantying the equal access and accessibility to information. At the same time, it is necessary to sharpen the *coordination among the authorities´ and minorities´ representatives* so that measures reflect the clear diversity of the needs of different groups.
  - o Coherent plans and strategies for division of measures and actions by particularities of different sectors for a better evaluation, monitoring and impact on people´s lives, considering priorities for disadvantaged and risk groups.
  - o Online platforms for public engagement and deliberation moderated by citizens, enabling the access to official information in a more accessible way.
  - o Public debates for sharing citizens and residents´ opinions, propose resolution strategies for people or communities' conflicts.
  - o A broader perspective when envisaging public measures by analysing the situation at the international level, listening to experts, not succumbing to populism, and balancing the political decision in favour of expertise.
- **Transparent decision-making procedures**
  - o A hybrid decision-making process, as a collaborative effort between the central government and local authorities, whether some responsibilities might be transferred to local authorities for the benefit of streamlining the process and adapting the actions in line with the particularities of local communities.
  - o Open dialogue among different stakeholders, NGOs, experts and professionals.
- **Take advantage of international cooperation and European consultation groups** as a measure of good practice exchange by networking and debating with different stakeholders across Europe within the frame of the European Union programmes.

- Improve access to technology and ensure that local governments are equiped with necessary technology that enables communication with the public. For example, ensuring everyone has access to free Wi-Fi and devices (i.e. this also enables people to communicate with their families, do school work and work from home).

3.4. Economy sector

- **Long-term action plans for sectors affected by pandemic.**
- **Better support strategies and programs** for business sector, employees, individual and small companies.
- **Digitalization of the cultural branch**. Reshape the provision of cultural and entertrainment activities, providng a hybrid solution inclusing both the online and in-person events enabling people to have aceess to culture in case of isolation.
- **Protection programs for immigrants' employment** e.g., creating a platform and experts intervention teams that can respond to different questions, provide information about application for financial support, etc. One recommendation might be that authorities delegate to civil community organisations (i.e. Trade Unions) the task of communicating preventive measures about the Covid-19 to foreign workers in their native languages.

3.5. Protection of law, constitution and human rights

– **Protection of human rights in different sectors,** including the rights of minority groups exposed to risk of marginalization by involving specialists and experts from different sectors such as Ombudsmen, law representatives, Trade Unions, NGOs etc.
– **Re-evaluation and adaptation of the laws** based on the lessons from the covid pandemic, among other issues, reconsiderations of the professional activities and working conditions.

4. Lessons lerned from democracy labs

Lessons learned on organizing Democracy Labs
Some final remarks summarizing the lessons we learned when looking at similarities and differences between the Democracy Labs in different countries, taken from PaCE report 5.3 'Lessons learned from the local democracy labs':

4.1. Methodology & tools

- The pilot in Italy gave us the insight that World Café methodology was suited for this kind of deliberative 'Lab' event. Also, we gained experience in working together with local partner organisations in reaching out to under-represented groups.
- The first **online** event (Iceland) was a test-bed for the upcoming ones - we have learned a lot, particularly on working with partners, communication, and using certain online tools (Zoom, Jamboard and Your Priorities). We have applied those lessons for the design of other online events, also in regards to the subject matter. In general, **previous experiences were also useful for the local facilitation teams**, as we could provide them with past cases and make them aware of difficult situations that might have been encountered.
- Framing (research) questions to be always reviewed by the local team and **adapted to the local context**.
- For using online deliberation/participation platforms like Your Priorities - consider a few aspects before launching them:
    - o If this is popular in your target community - the less people are **familiar** with these sorts of platforms, they're less likely to use it.
    - o How would you **use the outcomes** from the asynchronous participation - is it worth the time and effort regarding the research objectives and expected outcomes?
    - o Ensure proper and **constant communication** about the tool - this should not be a secondary information you share, treat it equally with the live event when reaching out to the public.
    - o Have a designated person to **moderate the content** on the platform and manage it.
- Research or **consortium members joining** the event offer more in-depth outcomes and connect the research to the lived experiences of participants.
- We encourage **integration** of research events **in participatory programs** as it can give more meaning and value for both participants and researchers.
- **Following up** on the event by minimum a report, but preferably an (online) meeting to keep participants involved.

4.2. Recruitment & facilitation team

- Working with a team is essential for the success of the recruitment. The more **integrated** and **experienced** the facilitation team was, the smoother running of the event, as well as collaboration amongst facilitators and task commissioners.
- Wise approach towards the use of social media for recruitment - pick only those platforms that you know are **popular amongst your target groups**. Otherwise, that would be a waste of time and resources.
- Consider having a **project assistant** who would take care of the administrative, communication and recruitment activities - the case of the Democracy Lab in Poland proves that it's beneficial for the whole organisational process.
- Use of vouchers offering **compensation** for participation is beneficial for reaching specific target audiences (i.e. lower educated, less heard or hard to reach target groups). Research-focused events tend to reach more highly educated groups.
- Attendance rate for online events has proven to be usually **50-60%** of those who registered - to keep in mind when recruiting (recruit 40-50% more than you aim to have at the event).
- Facilitation works best if there are about **5 to 8 people** in one breakout group.
- Choosing online tools and platforms smartly, with the focus on **participants' and facilitators' abilities**. If you do not have enough time during the event to train participants properly to use tools they're not familiar with, or you're not confident about the network and hardware bandwidth, go for the easier ones that would ensure as useful outcomes with less effort (for example, using Jamboard instead of Miro). This is to avoid technical problems and the resulting confusion and discouragement.
- Having **tailor-made and personal support** team available for participants is of high benefit, for example on how to use Zoom.
- Local partners are very different due to various factors, i.e. varying professional experience, with different expertise, cultural background, etc. - the same working model should not be blindly applied to all. Be **flexible** and open to **adapting to their needs**. Some might need more support with technical issues, some might find themselves better in working independently, and others would like to have a bigger say on the subject matter, because of having relevant expertise.