

D5.3: Lessons learned from the Local Democracy Labs

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WP5 – Dissemination and engagement



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Introduction

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.

From September 2019 until August 2021 The **City of Reykjavik, in collaboration with the Democratic Society, Brussels and Citizens Foundation, Iceland** have been organising and carrying out a total of **seven** Democracy Labs across different countries in Europe: Italy, Iceland, Spain, Scotland, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria, with a total of 150 participants.

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.

A **Local Democracy Lab** is a 'deliberative' participation event which gathers people to discuss the condition of democracy in different European countries through the lens of present challenges. The pilot took place in Messina, Italy in September 2019, the following five Democracy Labs were carried out online, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The final Democracy Lab in Bulgaria took place in-person in July 2021, due to lesser Covid-19 restrictions.

The organisation and implementation of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs would not be possible without the financial contribution of the ***PaCE – Populism and Civic Engagement*** project financed by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement no **822337**.

Report structure

The aim of this report is to present the lessons learned in terms of **process** and **organization** of the PaCE Local Democracy Labs in seven European countries. This report does **not** contain any outcomes of the events in terms of the research on trust in government. For reading more on the outcomes of the events we refer to the PaCE website, where each event has a detailed outcome- and analysis report: <https://popandce.eu/>



In this report, we will:

- Describe reflections on process and organization
- Describe the different ‘flavors’ of the different local Democracy Labs
- How we interpret the lessons learned

We will structure the learnings per country and around the topics raised in Deliverable 5.4 ‘Recommendations on new forms of public participation’, which can serve as a handbook for organizing public participation for research:

- Recruitment approach(es) & communication
- Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful
- Facilitation
- Stakeholder management – working with partners
- Online tools & Asynchronous participation
- Wrapping up and next steps
- Inclusion & equality

1. Italy

Methodology and subject

The first Democracy Lab was organised as a pilot event to test the approach for the development of future Democracy Labs. The pilot was held in person in the Italian city of Messina in Sicily on September 29, 2019 and was organized with collaboration of two local partners: Associazione Ionio Messina and Startup Messina. Participants did not know each other but were familiar to the local partners.

We have framed the key discussion themes around the question: ***How does information influence people’s voting decisions?*** We introduced a World Café format, where people discuss or deliberate in small groups, different for each of three rounds, moderated by experienced facilitators. The questions for the three rounds were developed with the facilitation team:

1. Which information do you think is valuable to know before making a voting decision?
2. How do you evaluate which information you can trust?
3. What do you think needs to be done to ensure informed voting?

The World Café style worked very well for an informed discussion and ideas generation, and allowed for the exchange of diverse viewpoints. We have used the learnings to design the online Labs, adapting the World Café format to an online setting, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recruitment approach

The Democracy Lab Messina registered about 60 people who voiced their interest in the Democracy Lab ahead of the event itself. During the day itself, 15 local participants joined the Democracy Lab in Messina. We assume that the reason for such a low turnout is that the event was organised during a weekend with hot weather, which discouraged people from joining.



Invitations were shared widely in the community via traditional and social media channels, as well as through targeted outreach to certain under-represented groups in the community, online and offline. There are certain groups in a community, predominantly white and male, that are more likely to be heard compared to under-represented groups. Targeted invitations to under-represented groups, with special gender-components, reduces the likelihood of only the ‘usual participants’ to attend these events and voice their opinions. Together with the local partners in Messina, the Democratic Society reached out to different members of the community, including under-represented groups.

Lessons learned from the pilot event for designing online Labs

- Application of the World Café format
- Much effort put into reaching diverse audiences
- Considering the time of the event in relation to the local context and local people customs and daily routines, i.e. days off, public holidays
- Collaboration with experienced and locally recognized partners

2. Iceland

Recruitment approach(es) and communication

The first **online** Democracy Lab took place in Iceland on 30 January 2021. A total of 56 participants registered, and during the day itself 26 participants joined the Democracy Lab. During this Lab we have learnt how important it is to work with a well-networked local partner. With this lab, we worked with a freelance facilitator who was particularly connected to different minority organisations, which resulted in a diverse group of participants, – including young citizens, people of immigrant populations, people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, members of the LGBT community, university students, members of women’s organizations, and single parents. Apart from that, we have set up a Facebook event which was shared amongst different community groups across Facebook, but we haven’t experienced much interest from its members.

Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful

According to the original facilitation plan, we have presented the PaCE project at the beginning of the event. We observed that the presentation had focused participants' attention to the problem of populism, which in turn had a significant impact on their discussion throughout the whole meeting, and that was not our intention. We have taken this insight forward with the subsequent events and moved the project presentation towards the closing part so as not to influence participants' views with a particular approach.

One of the vital points raised by participants on this issue in the post-event evaluation form was that the organisers should provide the participants with some basic information on concepts to be brought up in the discussion, like democracy, populism, politicians and elected officials.



Facilitation

The facilitation team was formed of five experienced facilitators, including the lead facilitator. For some, online facilitation was a novelty. Therefore, allocation of time to train the facilitation team was very efficient and relevant, both on the subject and technical aspects, and providing them with a detailed, still adjustable facilitation script, which they appreciated a lot. We hugely benefited from the team's input on the methodology and substantial issues. Also, the team focused on participants' well-being and creating a good atmosphere, which both offered a great value for the event.

Stakeholder management – working with partners

One of the unique circumstances compared to other Labs was that some of the PaCE consortium members are based in Iceland and working for the city of Reykjavik. This offered a huge benefit in organizing and facilitating this event, being able to work together with the lead facilitator. The recruitment and organisational tasks were a bit challenging for the short amount of time we had scheduled. We take the scheduling of actions as a lesson learned for future events; at least three to four weeks for recruitment, plus about two to three weeks for preparing recruitment and communication material.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

As the Icelandic edition of the lab was sort of a test ground for the whole series, we have gotten a chance to verify how the online setting and tools we have applied would work in practice. The Jamboard digital tool for note-taking was very much appreciated by the facilitators as a means of capturing participants' statements and confirmed our belief it is the right tool to use over the whole series.

For all Democracy Labs, we have launched a dedicated 'Your Priorities' platform for online deliberation, to encourage asynchronous participation and ideas generation outside of the event. Although it was set up well advance in time and participants were prompted to use it on several occasions, it was not frequently attended. We assume their attention was not raised towards the existence of the platform and there was a lack of an explanation of the platform during the event. We have implemented an improvement for other Local Democracy Labs by asking the founder of Citizens Foundation and the Your Priorities platform to present the platform and how it's used during future events.

Wrapping up and next steps

For each Democracy Lab, we have organised a 'debrief' session with facilitators, to discuss the process and outcomes of the event. Also, for each Democracy Lab the local teams collected the main outcomes from the discussions and gathered them in the form of a summary report in local language, which was shared with the participants after the event and posted on the PaCE website for broader outreach. A qualitative analysis report of each Lab in English was created by the City of Reykjavik and would feed into the project research, which is to be disseminated amongst EU policy actors during the dedicated webinar and at the project's final conference.



Apart from that, the PaCE team in Iceland have planned an in-person event for policy actors for the autumn of 2021. The event will be a workshop with different policy actors on the main outcomes of the local Democracy lab in Iceland. The group will be divided into smaller groups debating three or four different themes. The overall aim of the event is to formulate some recommendations that later might be transferred into policy strategies.

3. Spain

Recruitment approach and communication

We organized the Local Democracy Lab in Spain on 12th of March 2021, together with a very experienced team; the founder of La Escalera, the co-founder of Oficina de Innovación Cívica S. Coop and a facilitator from their network working with Impact Hub Madrid. The team was based in different locations in Spain, resulting in a crowd of 26 participants from different parts of the country.

As recruitment is a vital part of organizing a successful event, we captured recruitment learnings for each event in the reports. For the Spanish Local Democracy Lab we learned the tone of voice of messages we post on social media could be more friendly and informal than the original invitation. For example, by inviting people for a coffee and discussing the covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions and using less formal wording. This also encouraged other organisations in their network to share or retweet the posts. Apart from this learning, we have also seen the direct calls and messages in Whatsapp groups had the highest reach. Two thirds of participants say they have been informed about the event by somebody they know. From this experience, we have learnt that network-based recruitment approaches and direct contact were most effective. This is an important insight which we shared with facilitators of Local Democracy Labs in other countries.

Framing the remit and facilitation

For the Democracy Lab Spain, we haven't implemented any major changes to the original questions, besides translating them to Spanish so that they sounded natural. The leading subjects and prompting questions seemed to resonate well with the group, according to the overall feedback we received: the participants valued the opportunity to talk about their opinions and feelings on the pandemic management. This event was one of the first places where they could publicly (outside their social bubble) share their feedback about a situation that has impacted society at every level. Such an observation emerged amongst the participants in the subsequent labs too, as we found out later.

One improvement the local team implemented into the event scenario was having a short ice-breaker exercise at the beginning of each of three breakout sessions to make new break-out groups more at ease with the - sometimes considered - complex subject. We have used it for the following local labs as a suggestion for facilitation teams, in case they struggled with participants' distress or disengagement.



The facilitation team consisted of only three facilitators, which proved to be too few for a group of 26. It was challenging for the lead facilitator to handle all the tasks, along with facilitating breakout sessions. As a learning from the Spanish lab, we attempted to have more facilitators at the upcoming events, and - if possible - not to delegate table facilitation to the host (the lead facilitator). This experience also surfaced the importance of an integrated facilitation team who can communicate easily, divide tasks among themselves on the fly and trust one another.

Stakeholder management – working with partners

Local partners felt at ease in the collaboration to bring in their opinions, feedback or improvements to match the event to the local context only after a couple of weeks. They stressed that they could have done a better job with the recruitment, if they had been aware of having more space to act on their own from the beginning of the collaboration. We have applied this learning for the subsequent Local Democracy Labs, by clearly setting terms of collaboration at the outset, and specifically highlighting the value of local partners' input and that all the documents we provide serve only for reference, but are not set in stone. This way we created space for local partners to add their own local flavor to each event.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

For note-taking, local partners proposed to use Miro - an extensive whiteboard for note taking and online collaboration. Unlike Jamboard, Miro requires a certain level of preparation to use it confidently, while offering several options for effective collaboration and attractive visuals. Another requisite is proper equipment for the tool to run smoothly. It turned out to be too challenging for participants to use such an advanced tool so facilitators ended up using it themselves, without asking people to contribute directly to the board. For inclusivity purposes, we have decided not to use Miro or other seemingly complicated tools for the future labs. Like with other Democracy Labs, we have launched a dedicated Your Priorities platform to encourage asynchronous participation and ideas generation outside of the event. Although it was set up well advanced in time and participants were prompted to use it on a number of occasions, it was not frequently attended; four ideas were added on the platform and little interaction happened.

Inclusion & equality

In all Local Democracy Labs, we have seen an overrepresentation of participants with a higher education level. This is also the case for the Spanish Lab. Another challenge was to recruit people with a different background, such as people working in sectors which are highly affected by Covid-19; working in the hospitality sector, illegal workers and migrants. The local team did reach out to those people, yet most of them mentioned they couldn't participate due to a lack of time, or because they had to work, or needed to be flexible in case they would find work at the last moment. Besides, there was a difficulty in recruiting people with children, or those who take care of an elderly or disabled person. The local team shared that a gift voucher or compensation for participation might have offered a solution and could have stimulated people's participation. Also, alternatively organizing the event on a weekend or evening might have worked better for some of them, as now it was on a Friday afternoon.



4. Scotland

Recruitment approach(es) and communication

The Democracy Lab in Scotland took place on 30th April 2021 and was performed with the support of the Scottish Democratic Society team. They are an integrated and experienced team consisting of the Scotland director and project officer. During the event, they were supported by two facilitators from the Democratic Society UK team. We used a network-based recruitment approach, similar to other Local Democracy Labs. Still there were some challenges met during the recruitment of participants. It was a pre-election period in the run up to the parliamentary elections which resulted in a lot of organisations, including local government and the Scotland Open Government team, being unable to support us with communication and sharing our message out to our target groups.

Apart from this, the topics of the Local Democracy Lab of governance and the Covid-19 crisis, left people potentially feeling confused in this difficult reality and therefore didn't want to participate in the event. This resulted in a total number of 29 registered participants, and a total of 15 attending participants (51,7%). We have seen a significantly higher number of sign-ups in similar events at different moments in time. We tried to mitigate this by re-shaping the messaging and making the posts as concrete as possible, sharing out the discussion questions that would be asked in the workshop such as around the media and their views on Covid-19 restrictions.

Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful

The local team based in Scotland pointed us to the fact that the questions for the session were not suited for the local situation. Especially concerning the Covid-19 situation, which was at that moment very tense; Scotland has seen a high number of deaths and there was a huge disappointment in how the UK government handled the Covid-19 crisis. Specifically, there was a tension between the different ways the Scottish government was dealing with the Covid-19 crisis - more locally embedded, in comparison to the UK government - very distant and centralistic. This could lead to very emotional conversations or people unwilling to have a fair deliberation.

We took the opportunity to have a session with the Scottish team to reframe the questions. We carefully assessed the existing questions and took notice of the specific wording. We concluded the first question needed to be completely reframed, into one that would be more relevant for the local context. The local team came up with the idea to focus on the influence of media, as this was an important topic during the Covid-19 crisis in Scotland. For the second question, we discovered the word 'imposed' would not work well, and might raise attention to the already tense situation between Scottish and UK governments. The third question stayed as it was.

Original questions

1st round:

Do you feel your concerns regarding Covid-19 are being heard and addressed by your government?

2nd round:

How do you feel about Covid-19 restrictions your government has imposed?

3rd round:



In a future wave of this (/a) pandemic, what would be your recommendation to the government? If you were in charge, what would you do?

Reframed questions

1st round

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

2nd round

How do you feel about Covid-19 restrictions and how they were decided? (- by decision makers; Scottish and UK government)

3rd round

Same as above - the question didn't change.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

A remaining challenge within the Local Democracy Labs was to make Your Priorities a relevant platform to use for participants. Therefore, we decided to write a blog post after the event on the Democratic Society website about the Lab and the possibility to continue the conversation:

<https://www.demsoc.org/blog/scotland-democracy-lab-continuing-the-conversations>

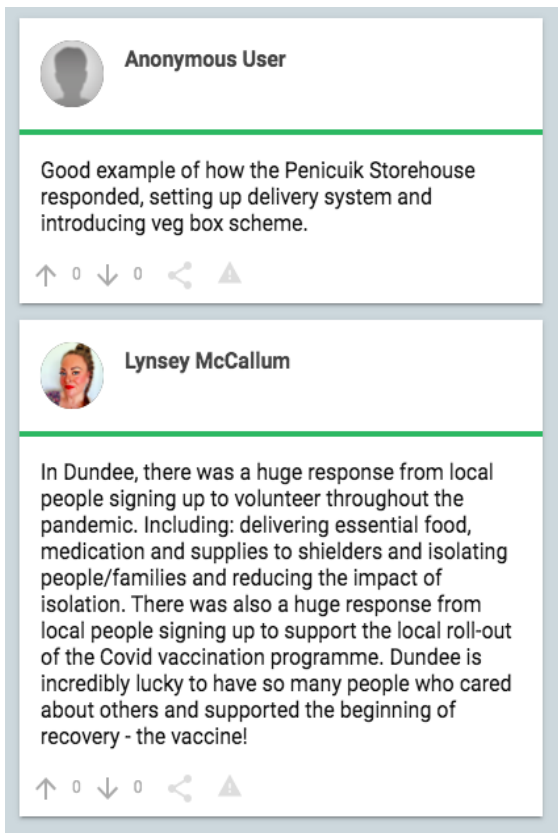


Image: Your Priorities discussion on Local community resilience - Points 'for' (no points 'against').

Unfortunately, the Your Priorities platform was used only slightly more, after we made it publicly available. There were some extra discussion points added to the platform, though little deliberation happened. The reason for this could be it's not clear for people what the purpose of Your Priorities is, a lack of knowledge how to use it and/or a lack of understanding why it's important people should contribute. We take this as an important lesson learned and will focus on improving the relevance, visibility and purpose of the Your Priorities platform.



Inclusion & equality

The time and day of the workshop - a Friday afternoon, could have meant people could take the afternoon off work or to be finished by then with work or school commitments, as in Scotland schools finish at lunchtime on Fridays. It was our intention and we specifically choose for a Friday afternoon to facilitate more people being able to join. On the contrary it could also mean people need a free afternoon or are tired of online calls. However, it has proven to be a challenge to be inclusive towards the different obligations and preferences of people.

Another way to make sure people will be able to commit to an event is to incentivise by a thank you token or gift voucher. The local team commented that vouchers are regularly used in Scotland when organizing such events. We take incentivising as a lesson learned for future projects.

There was a gender representation imbalance; 12 participants were men and only 3 women joined. Also, the participants were a highly-educated group that were invested in or interested in the topics. This meant discussions were flowing and it was fairly easy to facilitate participants. Lots of ideas were shared, however we would have liked a more diverse group of participants. It remains a challenge to host an event that has a diverse audience. Some participants expressed their concerns on diversity in the feedback form:

“This is really great to hear that other folk have similar critiques of the year, but it does feel a bit of an echo chamber, and it feels a huge task to get these opinions to others who are less in agreement with us”; “We need this type of conversations brought to local communities and findings fed to decision makers - how do we do that?”.

5. Hungary

Recruitment approach(es) and communication

Democracy Lab Hungary took place on the 22th of May, 2021. For the Democracy Lab Hungary, we collaborated with two local partner organizations: AKE - Alternative Communities Association (Alternatív Közösségek Egyesülete), from Debrecen and Dialogue Association (Dialóg Egyesület), from Miskolc.

Like for the other Labs, recruitment was done with a network-based approach. The local partners created some specific selection criteria based on the local context and those affected mostly by the pandemic; elderly, healthcare workers, teachers, beauticians/hairdressers, artists- especially professionals working in the music industry, workers in catering and restauration, Roma people, people who lost a family member in the Covid-19 pandemic, people in pension, social workers (especially from the elderly care), people with a disability and their parents and local municipality workers. They encountered some issues when reaching these specific target groups, such as being dependent on other organizations who are in direct contact with these people. The lesson we learned is that direct contact from our own networks works best and relying on other organizations for their contacts requires more time and effort. Some organizations are willing to support, but in general we have seen little effect. To build a partner relationship takes time, something important to include when planning for recruitment.



The main channels for recruitment were Facebook, considered by far the most popular online social platform in Hungary (compared with Twitter or Tumblr). There were posts on the partners' pages, and other organizations shared the post. And there was an event page - which was updated every 2 to 3 days. Yet the most successful channel remained direct contact; calling, writing emails, and messaging on Facebook to the local partners' network and recommendations made by partners.

The main benefit of this approach is that partners know the participants better, and are aware of their possible contribution to the event. Therefore, this personal approach is essential for the participants and beneficial for the program. However, this kind of approach can be much more resource-intensive, and it could be limiting the diversity of the participants. Still, in this case, the local partners got recommendations from many different individuals and organizations. Therefore, a highly diverse group of people was reached.

Unfortunately, the local organization team in Hungary has challenged a recruitment issue because it has not been considered to overlap the democracy lab event over the long weekend in Hungary. Therefore, the number of participants (18 people) has not been as expected. Among the reasons people decided not to participate in the event, one can mention the lack of interest in the proposed topic and some participants did not dare to participate in this kind of discussion. For some of the participants, it was the first time to talk about issues in this kind of context, which can be considered one of the added values of the local democracy lab in Hungary. One impossible to foresee circumstance was that the event was organized on the first weekend after releasing the long-time Covid-19 restrictions, when restaurants and cafes were opened again, which could have resulted in a lower attendance.

Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful

The issue of democracy, populism, and Covid-19 in Hungary is highly politicized. A lot of people fear hearing their voices on critical public issues. Therefore, the name of Democracy Lab has been changed into "Közéleti Labor" - "Public issues Lab".

We have followed the questions structure originally designed for the Democracy Labs series; no major changes were made as to the content. Together with the facilitation team we have agreed that all questions are relevant.

Facilitation

The facilitation team was formed by the staff of AKE and Dialogue Association, who were well connected to some of the participants, which ensured they gained people's trust from the very beginning. The session was hosted by a team of five: four table facilitators and one lead facilitator; the latter have taken the role of the host, running plenary sessions and taking care of different "background" aspects, such as supporting some elderly people who were using Zoom for the first time and making sure people were able to get back into the break out room as their connection sometimes failed. Such a work division was found optimal for the group of 18 participants - 4 or 5 people per each breakout session, which enabled an in-depth discussion in an intimate atmosphere, where every person was taken care of.



Stakeholder management – working with partners

Overall there was a good collaboration and event organisation thanks to the local partners. They were very well integrated in the local community, one of them running a local community center. This resulted in being able to recruit a diverse group of participants including former homeless people, elderly and people from the Roma community.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

The local partners have been teaching some of the elderly participants how to use Zoom. This was very beneficial because it would otherwise exclude these people from participating.

Like with other Democracy Labs, we have launched a dedicated Your Priorities platform to encourage asynchronous participation and ideas generation outside of the event. Although it was set up well advanced in time and participants were prompted to use it on several occasions, unfortunately also for this event, the Your Priorities platform was not used very much; it has six ideas added to the platform. One of the possible reasons for the low participation on the platform might be people in Hungary are not very familiar with using online participation platforms. We have identified a common need for more experience and getting familiar with these kinds of digital participation tools.

Inclusion & equality

The event is considered a success based on the diversity of participants attending the online event. During the event, many groups were represented: Roma, homeless people, teachers, professors, LMBTQI people, social workers, local municipality workers, blue-collar workers, and people in pension with one or more people.

Also, there was a diverse geographical representation of participants, coming from different rural areas and villages, different cities, and the Hungarian capital. The two hosting organizations' cities (2 county centers) were overrepresented, with 6 (Debrecen) and 4 (Miskolc) participants. The participants attending the meeting have had a perfect gender balance, 50% females and 50% males. People with higher education were over-represented among both participants who registered and attended the online event.

6. Poland

Recruitment approach(es) and communication

The Polish edition of Democracy Lab on 10th of June 2021, was the fifth in a series of online events, which put us in a position to take on the lessons learned from recent months of running this initiative. As it turned out before, the network-based recruitment approach proved to be most effective. We worked with a local partner, who is a networking organisation for the civil society in the Podlaskie region (north-eastern Poland) - *Ośrodek Wspierania Organizacji Pozarządowych* (OWOP). Their network enabled wide outreach to local organisations of different profiles and connected citizens.

The recruitment process was coordinated by a designated project assistant, in charge of running all communications, contacting networked organisations and participants. Additionally, OWOP's



staff and members made an effort to directly contact befriended partners to encourage participation and promote the event. Direct outreach resulted in 58% of participants coming from the region.

Along with direct outreach strategies, we implemented a social media recruitment campaign. For this purpose, we again used the help of OWOP's network to share a message through their social media channels. Apart from that, we set up a paid Facebook campaign which converted very well. Targeting criteria included, among others, major Polish cities, universities staff and students, minorities, people interested in civic rights and engaged with civic initiatives. As a result of a countrywide ad campaign we hosted 29% of participants from across Poland, for the benefit of discussion quality and multiple viewpoints. Overall, during the 3 weeks long recruitment campaign, 44 people registered to take part of which 24 finally attended (ca. 55% of participation).

In the context of the Polish Democracy Lab, it's worth mentioning that not all social media platforms fit for the purpose and context. Facebook is a very popular platform in Poland, especially attracting young and middle-aged people, and was the only social medium we used for recruitment and promotion. We were aware that Instagram, even though very popular, is not the best-tailored medium for our content, while Twitter is not so popular amongst wide groups of users. The flipside of using Facebook is that the message might have easily gotten lost in users 'feed walls', as almost every organization from different sectors uses this platform in their communication. This requires a well-considered targeting strategy when setting up an ad campaign to ensure that the message gets across.

Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful

We have followed the questions structure originally designed for the Democracy Labs series; no major changes were made as to the content. Together with the facilitation team we have agreed that all the questions are relevant. We only tweaked them a bit when translated, to make them sound more natural in a Polish language. As the term 'government' has a definite meaning of the central government in Polish, we decided to translate it into 'public authorities', a term that covers a wide range of public bodies and institutions, to prompt participants to consider diverse perspectives.

Original questions

1st round:

Do you feel your concerns regarding Covid-19 are being heard and addressed by your government?

2nd round:

How do you feel about Covid-19 restrictions your government has imposed?

3rd round:

In a future wave of this (/a) pandemic, what would be your recommendation to the government? If you were in charge, what would you do?

Reframed questions

1st round:



How are the public authorities addressing citizens' concerns and needs arising from pandemic Covid-19? Share your experiences and insights.

2nd round:

What do you think of the Covid-19 restrictions and how they were decided by decision makers?

3rd round:

In a future wave of this pandemic, what would be your recommendation to the government? If you were in charge, what would you do?

Facilitation

The facilitation team was formed by the staff of OWOP, who were well integrated and connected to some of the participants, which ensured smooth collaboration during the event and gained people's trust from the very beginning. The session was hosted by a team of five: four table facilitators and one lead facilitator; the latter have taken the role of the host, running plenary sessions and taking care of different "background" aspects, such as time keeping, shifts in the agenda, recording. Such a work division was found optimal for the group of 24 participants - 6 people per each breakout session, which enabled an in-depth discussion in an intimate atmosphere, where every person was taken care of.

We learned that having an experienced, integrated and well-connected team is very much a determining factor of a successful event. OWOP, as a locally recognized organisation, has the ease of creating a friendly, informal atmosphere in an online setting, which makes people relaxed and comfortable. It was also visible that people felt confident with reporting any technical issues that were immediately addressed by the lead facilitator.

Stakeholder management – working with partners

Smooth collaboration and event organisation was achieved thanks to several factors:

- preparation started well advanced in time - about 2 months before the event
- experienced and integrated team with well-developed working methods
- providing communication and procedures templates for the use and adaptation of local team

One significant change to other labs was that there was a project assistant designated by OWOP for all communication, administration and recruitment activities. This person was not involved in facilitation, nor the substantial work on the event programme, her role was to ensure that everything was well prepared ahead of time. Such a working model has streamlined preparations for the event as well as cooperation with PaCE project managers.

Another unique circumstance was that one of the PaCE project leads is Polish, which has certainly eased contact with the local team, thanks to better understanding of the local context and speaking the same language. However, comforting partners with using their native language for internal communication has resulted in more work for the PaCE project lead and limited contact between the local team and colleagues of PaCE.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

It needs to be acknowledged that at the time of running the event (June 2021), both participants and facilitators were already familiar with running online workshops due to pandemic-caused re-



organization of activities, thus this aspect was not so much of a burden. Zoom video-conferencing platform became very popular in Poland during the pandemic. For note-taking we have used Jamboards, a tool that have been practiced by part of the team before; thanks to its simplicity, it was also easy to handle for those facilitators who haven't used it before. Jamboards were edited by the facilitators, while screen-sharing so that participants could see what was being captured. Facilitators observed that having key discussion points summarised and displayed on the virtual whiteboard enabled participants to generate new ideas and build on what others have said.

Like with other Democracy Labs, we have launched a dedicated Your Priorities platform to encourage asynchronous participation and ideas generation outside of the event. Although it was set up well advance in time and participants were prompted to use it on a number of occasions, it was not frequently attended. A couple of participants created their profiles on the platform but no actual discussions took place. One reason for this might be that online participation platforms are not known or used in Poland, so people might not have clarity on how it works and what the purpose was. On the other hand, we have not given people a clear and appealing message on how their contributions there might add to the research and dissemination to decision makers to make it worth investing time and effort.

Inclusion & equality

Regarding the gender breakdown, there was a clear overrepresentation of women (71% of participants), which is common for the Polish context - women are usually more highly represented in civic and social institutions, more often volunteer and take part in initiatives of a social/community focus. To mitigate the risk of discussions dominated by women, we aimed to allocate people to breakout sessions prioritizing the gender balance. We have reached a balanced age representation of participants (ranging from 18 to 75), of which 37,5% attendees were above 55 years old. This diverse group has been reached thanks to the local partner's (OWOP) networks and the activities they run for different age groups. We have also hosted representatives of ethnic minorities, namely Belarusians who are widely present in Poland. As proved with the other Democracy Labs, the Polish group was dominated by people with higher education (80%). Our learning is that with an open recruitment process, higher educated groups are more interested in participating in research-focused events, due their personal and professional interests.

We have not experienced any technical difficulties reported by participants. Any tech-related issues were reported to the organizers and facilitators ahead of the meeting (through an application form or when invited in person) and participants were ensured they'd receive the assistance needed. In case of minor technical difficulties that occurred at the event, the lead facilitator promptly addressed them, which once again proves how essential an experienced delivery team is.



7. Bulgaria

Recruitment approach(es) and communication

For the final Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria on 3rd of July 2021 we collaborated with the recognized Sofia Platform, a non-governmental organization founded in 2013 with the aim to enhance the democratic culture in Bulgaria and to raise awareness about the historical communist past of the country. Their mission is to work on enhancing the democratic political culture against the backdrop of a global democratic retreat with means of citizenship education and civic dialogue. Sofia Platform was in favor of organizing the Democracy Lab in-person instead of online. After careful consideration and risk assessment we decided to hold the Democracy Lab Bulgaria in-person, as the Covid-19 situation in Bulgaria seemed to have eased and in-person events were becoming more visited than online events.

Sofia Platform has an extensive network and they preferred to do recruitment within their existing networks. A varied network of stakeholders created by the local partners' effort through years of experience in conducting events in civic education and civil society (i.e., the wider public, civil society actors, organizations, teachers, educators, local authorities, students, institutions, media, hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, representatives of minorities, locals to the town of Belene, Sofia, etc.) has been reached and resulted in invitations to more than 300 people by email. Among this, they informed former participants of programs they organised (i.e. Civic Europe) and this way recruited 25 participants to join the in-person event. Also, Sofia Platform integrated the Democracy Lab in their Summer School, making it part of a broader scheme on civic dialogue. The Summer School and the Democracy Lab Bulgaria took place in the town of Belene, known to be a former communist camp. A visit to the historic site was part of the Summer School and the participants of the Lab could join too. We see the integration of the Democracy Lab into existing frameworks and programs such as a Summer School as a great asset to the PaCE Labs and would recommend it for organising future events.

Framing the remit – how to ensure it is meaningful

Sofia Platform raised the need for reframing of the Local Democracy Lab because of additional elections. In April, there were national elections in Bulgaria. Yet with the rejection of forming a coalition by the second party of the country, no government could be formed after the first election. Additional elections were scheduled one week after the Democracy Lab, on the 11th of July. At that moment, there was a caretaker government and much political tumult. The Sofia Platform prompted reframing the discussion questions by not using the word government, replacing it with authorities.

Original questions

1st round:

Do you feel your concerns related to the Covid-19 crisis are being heard and addressed by the government? (local, regional and national)

2nd round:

How do you feel about Covid-19 restrictions your government has imposed?



3rd round:

In a future wave of this (/a) pandemic, what would be your recommendation to the government? If you were in charge, what would you do?

Reframed questions

1st round:

In your personal experience, how did the authorities (local, regional, national) handle the situation with Covid-19 (social, economic, health, personal, cultural impact)?

2nd round:

How do you feel about Covid-19 restrictions the authorities have implemented?

3rd round:

In a future pandemic related crisis, what would be your recommendation to the authorities? If you were in charge, what would you do?

Facilitation

Sofia Platform worked with a very experienced and well integrated team of four facilitators and one lead facilitator, which resulted in groups of 5-6 people where discussions were very lively. One learning and feedback by the local team was that the questions posed were partly overlapping. Participants shared almost everything they had to say during the 1st round. For future events the first question could be more generic or broad, in this case not related to the pandemic.

Stakeholder management – working with partners

Sofia Platform was very committed to organizing the Local Democracy Lab in-person. This gave the opportunity of having PaCE consortium member Ruhza Smilova, who is Bulgarian and researcher for the Centre of Liberal Strategies, joining as a local observer and PaCE representative. As this was the second event happening in-person (Italy was the first), we consider it of high value that a consortium member joined the in-person event. The consortium members offer a direct link to the PaCE research, considering the local context and reflecting on discussion points coming up. It was mentioned by the consortium member that she had many interesting conversations and exchanges with participants during and after the event at the tour. This gives us insight how valuable the in-person aspect is, as it offers more in-depth findings and offers the opportunity to establish more personal connections.

Online tools & Asynchronous participation

Like with other Democracy Labs, we have launched a dedicated Your Priorities platform to encourage asynchronous participation and ideas generation outside of the event. Although it was set up well advance in time and participants were prompted to use it on a number of occasions, it was not frequently attended. A possible reason might be people are not used to using online platforms for deliberation in Bulgaria much. They discuss in person or attend (online and offline events) but are engaged with online platforms, despite the fact that the local partner has stressed this a few times. It was mentioned by the local team that Your Priorities platform might be better used if local politicians or policy actors were made aware, without that it is another tool to discuss without a purpose.



Wrapping up and next steps

Participants shared they would care for better information on what's coming after the Democracy Lab. We of course share the learnings and analysis in a report with participants and invite them to the European Democracy Lab. Though many of them expressed they want to remain actively engaged on the topic of democracy and populism locally. One idea of the local team is a follow-up event with policy actors, which is possibly happening in autumn and could happen online. The PaCE leads are talking to Sofia Platform about this possibility.

Inclusion & equality

There was a gender imbalance in the Democracy Lab Bulgaria; 80% of participants were women and only 20% men. Yet, apart from that there was a diverse crowd. The age of participants was from 23 years old until 61 years old, coming from both rural and urban areas. Also in terms of cultural background there was a diverse group, having people from several minority groups joining, such as people from the Turkish minority.

Also in Bulgaria, this was one of the first opportunities for people to take part in such a deliberative public participation event on the Covid-19 crisis. Many people expressed they enjoyed being asked their views on troubling topics such as the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and sharing conflicting views in a respectful and friendly manner.

Conclusion

Some final remarks summarizing the lessons we learned when looking at similarities and differences between the Democracy Labs in different countries:

- 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. 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.
- 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.
- Framing (research) questions to be always reviewed by the local team and **adapted to the local context**.
- 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.
- For using online deliberation/participation platforms like Your Priorities - consider a few aspects before launching them:
 - 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.
 - How would you **use the outcomes** from the asynchronous participation - is it worth the time and effort regarding the research objectives and expected outcomes?
 - 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.
 - Have a designated person to **moderate the content** on the platform and manage it.
- 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** available for participants is of high benefit, for example on how to use Zoom.
- 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.
- 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.