EVENT DESCRIPTION SHEET

(To be filled in and uploaded as deliverable in the Portal Grant Management System, at the due date foreseen in the system.

⚠️ *Please provide one sheet per event (one event = one workpackage = one lump sum).)*

PROJECT	
Participant:	1 - Alternatives Europeennes (EuroAlter)
PIC number:	941964479
Project name and acronym:	The Democratic Odyssey - ODYSSEY

EVENT DESCRIPTION	
Event number:	Deliverable D7
Event name:	FIRST ASSEMBLY SESSION
Type:	Onsite assembly
In situ/online:	in-situ
Location:	Athens, Greece
Date(s):	27th September 2024 to 29th September 2024
Website(s) (if any):	https://euroalter.com/events/democratic-odyssey-transnational-assembly/
Participants:	
Female:	140 participants
Male:	103 participants
Non-binary:	5
Greece:	90
Ukraine	15
Albania	14
France	20
Bulgaria	9
Romania	9
Italy	17
Cyprus	7
Germany	8

Sweden	5
Poland	5
Spain	5
Hungary	4
Austria	4
Netherlands	4
Czech Rep	3
Latvia	3
Slovenia	3
Belgium	10
Bosnia-Herzegovina	4
Estonia	1
Lithuania	1
Finland	1
Croatia	1
Slovakia	1
Portugal	1
Malta	1
Ireland	1
Serbia	1

Total number of participants:	248	From total number of countries:	29

Description

Provide a short description of the event and its activities.

The Democratic Odyssey and its crowdsourced campaign is advocating for a "permanent peoples' assembly for Europe" by mobilising a wide-ranging and pluralistic group of actors, including academics, practitioners, journalists, institutional representatives and civil society. Inspired by the tentative efforts of past EU legislatures to institutionalise citizen participation, it seeks to go further.

Where? To make the case, we embarked on a journey with a pilot assembly to engage in multilingual, transnational deliberations, traveling to different

European cities, meeting both in-person and online and planting the seeds for further citizens' engagement in each port. First port of call: Athens.

When? September 27-29th, 2024, a date which also corresponds to the beginning of a new institutional cycle of the EU with a new Parliament and before the hearings of the Commissioners. Our Assembly helped crowdsource the many approaches to democratic resilience in the shadow of crisis with the aim to take our part in agenda setting in Europe for the next five years.

Who? The pilot assembly started with more than 230 members, who will remain members for a year until 1st September 2025, and will continue to grow as it travels to other cities. Members of the assembly were randomly selected by lottery both from 29 countries from **across Europe** including EU candidate countries, and locally, from Athens and the Attica region, both Greek and non-Greek citizens, including migrants and refugees. The criteria for wide representation included age, education, social economic, and attitude to Europe. Alumni citizens from prior assemblies and civil society organisations were also randomly selected.

What? This pilot Assembly's mission is to demonstrate the agenda-making power of citizens' deliberation to tackle the challenges of our time - one of several functions of a permanent assembly. We were interested in how past crisis changed the relationship between the people and the institutions of their city, their country and the EU, but also their relationship with each other across borders..

So we asked a double question of members of the assembly:

> "Reflecting on your experience of recent crises, what needs to change for the EU to overcome future storms? AND: How can we, the people, help better steer the European ship through these storms?"

Friday 27th September, afternoon: From the I to the We

*The **first session on Friday** kicked off in plenary in Athens University's Great Hall where we constituted ourselves as an Assembly of trust and deliberation. Assembly members imagined themselves boarding a ship that they would co-design and pilot, including through the crafting of sails*

reflecting a shared ethos. We put in place the buddy system and enacted the crew's journey to convey the debates and agreements that led to this moment in Athens.

Political buy-in

This Assembly is not mandated by an institutional actor. It is instead a 'pilot' serving as a prototype for what a permanent assembly could do. In this spirit, it reflects a "theory of change" that combines a grassroot campaign and experiment for this assembly AND a political and institutional buy-in. This buy-in is operationalised through the active engagement of local actors, committed to use the assembly to plant democratic seeds.

In addition to other decision makers, three Greek politicians, representing three levels of government, local, regional and national, listened to the Assembly's launch and expressed their commitment" to follow our proceedings and to take its messages into account. Dimitri Keridis, MP from the government party, former minister of migration, representing Greece in European fora including NATO; Christina Kefalogianni, deputy governor of the Attica region (5 million people); and Nikos Chrysogelos, vice-mayor of Athens for climate, governance and social economy.

The participatory tapestry - sail creation Nothing for us without us

Assembly members were invited to share their experiences of crises first with their neighbours. Then they built small groups of up to 15 members to discuss how to reframe individual principles or mottos collectively for jointly giving power and direction to the Democratic Odyssey ship. The results of these small group deliberations were first written or designed on pieces of paper. Later that same afternoon, provided that the groups had managed to reach consensus, a spokesperson from the group shared with the plenary their propositions. In the final session on Sunday, these collective mottos were inscribed with permanent markers onto several large sails of fabric. To quote a few examples:

- Greek citizen: "We are all on one boat - since all is about us the people and our direction - it's us the people who make the world! For this travel we need a compass showing us four fundamental directions: North, the direction of friendship - East, Hope since nothing is possible without hope - West, the world - South, the sea of the ongoing Odyssey…. We also put a tree next to the boat, with birds as the symbols of our love for nature!"

- Polish citizen: "Our Democratic Odyssey confronts us with others who try to keep us divided - who attempt to make our lives harder - who don't tell us many things - who overcomplicate things. Our puzzle is to mutually motivate us - to feed us and our families - to take care that everyone is heard, no matter how shy they are! Our mission and message is: Don't give up - let's empower us - help each other - express our emotions, since if we don't violence will come out - let's stay serious and keep moving forward - Communication keeps us united" - brings us together for joint action - to welcome hope, liberty, peace - if we keep going, slowly we'll come together!"

- French speaking migrant: "Our message is about Athens in 2029 - our hope that Diversity is the Future - our dream of a Democracy for All - the need to Decolonize Democracy without which Democracy will not be complete for us, the non-EU citizens!

In the evening of the 27th, the municipality of Athens hosted a welcoming for the Democratic Odyssey participants, with a visit of an art exhibition about Greece's liberation from dictatorship, music and food.

Saturday 28th September: Democracy in the Eye of the Storm

On Saturday, the members of the Assembly were divided into 14 smaller groups to revisit lessons learned from past crises in terms of democratic transformation. Members explored many different crises from finance to floods and fires, foreign refugees at our borders to wars creeping in on us. Stories of empowerment and powerlessness were juxtaposed. Some concentrated their expectations on state powers, others on citizens and neighbourhoods. We recognised that during crisis some opportunities open and others close, and asked members to reflect on what about democratic practices should be kept, what should change and what should be invented anew in future crises.

What needs to be kept? (What went well?)

The largest chunk of comments revolved around **personal reflections, empathy, and mutual empowerment**. Members said that they tried to "make the most of every situation" and that crises allowed them to recognise that "people share the same values and have similar emotions in situations, despite differing opinions on how to improve". Small circles of solidarity

emerged in patchworks and people often showed solidarity with underprivileged groups. "We learnt to better appreciate what we have and to value the efforts of others (e.g., frontline workers during the pandemic)." The COVID-19 pandemic in particular, because it forced people to slow down led them to consider the responsibility they have for others. The paradox of shared solitude became a lever for collective action. For some, the pandemic was a "turning point" in their lives, sparking realisations of personal priorities (spending time with family, having time for hobbies) and societal **priorities** (material goods decreasing in value as health and relationships become more pronounced).

Group quote: "You reconsider priorities in life."

Citizen-led democracy?

A relief valve and valuable pillar of support during crises was **community solidarity and civil society action**. Members said that civil society and volunteer organisations "supported society and made it function when the state didn't" and that it is "important to give space to people who care". They mentioned NGOs that helped migrants get COVID vaccinations, civil society groups feeding the homeless and helping with administrative burden, grandmothers taking care of refugee children, and echoed again and again the thought that individuals and communities stepped up and assumed responsibility when governments could not or would not help. The best thing, many said, was when these networks survived the crisis.

"misery loves company"

This was not however a celebration of anarchic society. **Successful governance and political responses** were applauded, be it support of EU institutions, information-sharing by governments, digitalisation of bureaucratic procedures, state-provided stations for testing COVID, and giving power to crisis management teams comprised of experts. **Financial adaptations** such as financial support from governments or moratoriums on paying rent or mortgages were also big relief valves. Government action was appreciated when providing a sense of stability and reliability but tellingly, many said that they themselves had to be accountable to one another.

"it was my Responsibility too'

Technological adaptations were also mentioned, mainly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. New digital businesses, remote working and

teleworking, increased digitalisation, and simplified bureaucracy due to more modern, digital solutions are what members wish to see in the future.

Some mentioned the **environmental benefits** of crises, such as decreased pollution during the pandemic, "peace and quiet", and people becoming more responsible, more aware of climate risks, and learning how to help (e.g., recycling). But the crisis upon us today, namely war at our borders, although most often mentioned by members from the east of Europe, was also seen as an environmental disaster.

Finally, some members wished to keep the **effective and helpful media and communications practices** they experienced, including through the use of public personalities advocating vaccinated. But media featured mostly on the dark side.

What needs to change (what went wrong)?

Since crises affect everyone differently, the Democratic Odyssey's way of bringing together local residents with residents from abroad was particularly effective in highlighting ways in which a good thing for some turned out to be bad for others.

Government failures and resulting mistrust has deeply affected our Assembly members like the people at large. They were rankled for not being consulted by those in office and felt that state-of-emergency measures were used to overlook laws and hollow out democracy when it was actually not necessary. *What must change? Crisis as a pretext to grab power.*

Politicians, as they saw it, tend to "play the blame game" during crises, sparking hate and turning people against each other. Such fear mongering gave people a sense of injustice, either because they were on the receiving end of the fear or because they did not like to be manipulated. *What needs to change? Blaming the wrong ones.*

Many spoke up to voice their distrust of their government when it comes to competence, the economy, energy - let alone their bodies and health. There was also a general impression that government officials are self-serving, manipulative, and do not have truly good intentions. *What needs to change? Either government ethics or citizen naivité.*

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GROUP QUOTE: "POLITICIANS GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THEY LISTEN, BUT THIS IS JUST MARKETING"

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Ineffective crisis response and discrimination related to government failures tended to be attributed to a lack of care from governments towards their constituents regarding their mental health and developmental consequences for children. The list of grievances is long: Pandemic frontline workers underappreciated and inadequately supported, migrants being disregarded or purposefully put in danger, pharmaceutical companies exploiting the moment for greed, and governments refusing to rein them in or to cooperate with each other internationally to mitigate shortages, misinformation shared with ill intent, forced vaccination. *What needs to change? Care culture from grassroot should grow throughout society*

The **failure of communication** between societal actors, either directly or through the media, also rankled many. On the one hand, members pointed to how they lacked information about important topics such as vaccines or their rights. On the other hand, they realised that the abundance of misinformation, pouring in from social and traditional media leads to a lack of trust and divisions. *What needs to change? The lack of defences against misinformation*.

Our members also see **economic and infrastructure failures** all around them: abandoned infrastructure, uncontrolled economic benefits for perpetrators of climate change (e.g., fossil fuel companies) or beneficiaries of COVID-19 (e.g., pharmaceutical companies), war, material struggles, and poor-quality education made Assembly members feel insecure, anxious, and unsafe. They said they saw people becoming more introverted and selfish. *What must change? We must ask what could correct infrastructure failure*

"WE LOST OUR HUMANITY"

Assembly members recognised that people living through crisis were not passive beings above criticism and reflected on what led to **societal divisions and mistrust**. Because people did not adequately reflect on their privileges and failed to empathize with those disproportionately affected by crises, they could indulge in noncooperation and sometimes even take advantage of others, ignoring science, healthcare professionals or experts. Many members were struck by how the manipulation for political gain of our volatile and fragile emotions - like anger and fear- increased tensions between groups (vaccinated vs unvaccinated, wealthy vs poor, majorities vs minorities). *What needs to change? The alienation between these groups that was stoked up by politics*

But how? Ultimately, many members were worried about a **loss of political engagement and cooperation**. Older members were especially concerned

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that young people do not care about politics (at local, national, or European level) and that those interested would lose interest and start feeling disconnected and frustrated. *What needs to change? Find more ways to sustain political engagement.*

What could have been done differently (or invented?)

Assembly members offered a plethora of suggestions for what could be invented to face future storms. Messages for policymakers, community leaders and other citizens alike. All in need of more exploration in the next Assembly meeting.

Most prominent was a widespread sense that **politics had not kept up with the ways we change individually and in our society.** "There needs to be change in our **political systems through methods of democratic participation"** many said. "We want more opportunities for citizens to be involved in policy making and politics than just casting a vote every few years." To start with, many thought that to have a say in and vote about smaller problems more frequently would make sense, ranging from a smarter recourse to referenda, to online engagement, to local community activism, and more collective decision-making in places of work. There were even a suggestion for voting on what kind of rights should be prioritized over other rights during crisis. *Voting, deliberating, acting, how do they relate?*

Group quote: "politicians should include citizens in decision-making, A top-down decision making system is old fashioned"

Many assembly members argued one way or another that **government accountability during crisis management** could not be ensured if it had not been prepared **beforehand.** This is especially true for **climate change** of course, a focus expressed not only by young members. We need to imagine what could happen before it happens, as crises like climate or migration or health are linked.

If all levels of governments (local, national, and EU) are to be **more** professional, not guided by narrow sectional interest but by care for the **infrastructures we share**. This requires **accountability** for their actions, especially in times of crises. A few members insisted on more **mandatory** accountability such as a review political mandates more often, even every 2 years. *Mandatory accountability: an option worth exploring?*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that they had accepted to take part in the Odyssey's first assembly, many members were inspired by the logic they were themselves involved in, and found it hard to imagine real accountability without **direct citizen engagement.** They called for more deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies, and **even a permanent citizens assembly for Europe,** the goal of the Democratic Odyssey itself.

To be sure, most groups raised such a prospect but they seem to **understand assemblies in different ways,** from big jury-type bodies to a 4th branch of government. Some called for advisory councils, others to let citizens decide the baseline for policies, others for assemblies with actionable outcomes. *How do we imagine such a permanent Assembly?*

Group Quote: "Democracy shouldn't be just about voting for other people, it should be about us Acting ourselves"

Members discussed extensively what could be considered **desirable conditions for this to happen,** mostly in the form of questions:

- ❖ What does "cultivating a critical mindset" or "access to reliable information" really mean? How can one both suggest that democratic practices are a constant power struggle and that we need to plan way in advance for democratic crises management? If democracy requires more open risk assessment, should this be a responsibility of the EU in health and other domains, or a local responsibility?
- ❖ Members called for improved **civic education** for all age groups **and critical thinking** as a way to **combat disinformation**. This means **teaching media literacy** through education and training on democracy - especially in schools. *But is this a European prerogative? How do we design curricula that addresses multi-level democracy?*
- ❖ We may be discussing "Europe" but many members craved more **community-driven** solutions and said that European management of crises requires l**ocal engagement** and decentralised policymaking. *How do we aggregate such local action into a European approach?*

Build tomorrow today!

- ❖ A widespread call: without more **transparency** from all decision makers, there will never be trust! Members stressed especially communication on budgets and spending. It would help if

policymakers planned future spending with citizens, creating spaces especially for young people to be involved in political institutions. *But how can this be organised beyond small towns?*

"MORE TRANSPARENCY ABOUT HOW MONEY FROM OUR TAXES IS SPENT ".

Many more messages were floated in small group discussions: the need to focus on small businesses; holding the private sector accountable to be a fair actor; improving the justice system to fight corruption; Governments should not be allowed to stop commercial exchange; a universal basic income should be introduced in Europe (or not?); the voting age should be lowered, even for some down to 10 year olds;   focus everywhere on addressing future crises for the health system.

Negotiating Future Tradeoffs, 2029 and back

*As lessons started to emerge from the morning discussion, the Assembly brought in a playback theatre group on the **Saturday afternoon** to help us connect all these group discussions with one another and re-gather as a "we". This moment inspired a BIG BANG moment that happened next: our **time travel** five years ahead to the beginning of the next EU **legislature**, in the middle of an **explosion of intersecting crisis**: the **crisis of 2029,** a hundred years after a 1929 crisis which shook the world! Scenario simulation, roleplay and playback theatre allowed us to engage in what we can call "democratizing foresight" and project ourselves into this near future in a non-technical way. In the end, we all returned to **2024** and offered **messages from the future** to our current selves: **what we can do now to make it easier to tackle such a storm in 2029?** At the end of the day,* these messages were ranked by the assembly in terms of their readiness to be issues: from requiring a lot more work, to being nearly ready.

On the evening of Saturday 28th September a public festival for the Odyssey took place on a square in Athens, with live music and talks from local associations working on topics ranging from a youth assembly to the rights of migrants. This was an occasion for the members of the assembly to mix with residents of Athens, to draw awareness to the campaign for a permanent people's assembly and to build connections with local associations.

Sunday 29th September: What Next?

Armed with the messages and discussions from Saturday, we entered our concluding moment mindfully by reflecting on where we stood, on the PNYX

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*hill where ancient Athenian (propertied men) gathered in assemblies, we noted our different identities and projected ourselves into the future. We started again with interactive theatre to replay some messages from yesterday and to reflect on our own responsibilities and positions. We tested our messages and intuition from Saturday to imagine the specific "better worlds" in different places and context that our message may bring about - specific islands drawn from members' focus the day before. By the end we were inspired to send our messages in a **bottle**, catch wind in our **tapestry sail,** and exchange **promises and commitments** about the next leg of the journey for residents of Athens, for European politics today and for the Assembly meeting online, in Florence and Vienna.*

Starting with a draft text formulated based on the most advanced messages ranked on the Saturday afternoon, assembly members proposed additions, changes and further issues for development to the overall message of the Assembly. The text was available in English and in Greek, and participants making proposals for changes wrote them on paper, put them over the text held by a pebble, and others could support the suggestions by adding more pebbles.

The final message agreed was

Our people's assembly has met in the first port of its Democratic Odyssey: Athens. We seek to invent a permanent assembly that allows more participatory democracy via regular and transparent deliberation between people, and involving policy makers, scientists, industry and journalists, that leads to concrete commitments and actions at local, regional, national and transnational levels and more cultural integration. We believe this assembly can contribute to better planning for future crises, build trust, interdependence and promote the equality, liberty, education, health and wellbeing of everyone.

Our power is connection !

And further questions and issues to address in the future of the assembly included issues of organisation, of scales of impact of the people's assembly, and its connection with other assemblies:

- *When people have the opportunity to get in personal contact and really listen to each other, it seems that there is a chance of creating ideas and solutions which lead to a better environment for all of us.*
- *We need a concrete timeline of meetings going forward*

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- *How do we make links across national, regional, local scales?*
- *How can this transnational people's assembly support the implementation of their own recommendations but also those of other peoples assemblies at all scales?*
- *How can other people's assemblies find their voice and be heard in this transnational people's assembly?*
- *How will this transnational people's assembly promote, share and integrate co creative innovations in democracy inside and across other people's assemblies at other scales?*

Member of the European Parliament Nicolas Farantouris and former Prime Minister George Papandreou, member of Greek Parliament and rapporteur on Democracy for the Council of Europe, both endorsed the first messages of the people's assembly, and endorsed the work of permanent people's assembly for Europe and its collaboration with other European institutions including the Council of Europe and European Parliament. These are important first endorsements for the Democratic Odyssey going forward.

The Athens assembly was featured in over 24 media outlets both nationally and internationally.

HISTORY OF CHANGES		
VERSION	PUBLICATION DATE	CHANGE
1.0	01.04.2022	Initial version (new MFF).