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Democracy
Equality & Culture
Beyond
the Nation State



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European Alternatives team
Jana Ahlers, Irene Alonso Toucido, Camilo Alvarez Garrido, Billie Dibb, Yasmine Djidel, Nox Clot, Bjarne Kjer, Viktoria Kostova, Ophélie Masson, Marta Cillero Manzano, Niccolò Milanese, Noemi Pittalà, Ségolène Pruvot, Sharlen Sezestre, Ruxandra Stan, Csenge Schneider-Lonhart, Gabriela Siegel, Joy Uzor-Ogwuazor, Ni Made Asri Wahyuni, Myriam Zekagh

Translations and proofreading
Marta Cillero Manzano, Billie Dibb, Bjarne Kjer, Noemi Pittalà, Joy Uzor-Ogwuazor

Art Direction and Graphic Design
Luca Pantorno - [studiolucapan](#)

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Marco Bertaglia has been a group facilitator, mediator, and trainer in Nonviolent Communication for 25 years. He was also an academic and an EU Official, worked at the EU Commission in Brussels, and at the Joint Research Centre, which he left in 2019 to be the national coordinator of Extinction Rebellion, Italy. In 2021, he founded the intentional community *Comunità rigenerative* to seed ecovillages in abandoned places in the Italian Alps. Passionate about facilitation and togetherness, he aims to recreate community and embody Gandhian nonviolence in all of life.

Nicolas Bourdeaud is committed to ecological, democratic and social justice. He has a degree in energy transition engineering (ISAE-Supaero) and political science (Sciences Po Paris). After working on mobilisation for the Primaire Populaire, and writing a research dissertation on Syntropic Agroforestry, he is now focusing on the 2026 municipal elections, for which he is initiating, training and supporting citizen and participatory lists on collective intelligence, municipalism and citizen mobilisation with Fréquence Commune. In Grenoble, he is particularly involved in the Grenoble Alpes Collectif to win the elections and set up a citizens' assembly to discuss the city's budget.

Citizens Takeover Europe (CTOE) is a coalition of civil society actors promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of citizens and residents in European politics through advocating democratic reform and empowering civic practices.

Amy Delis is a master's student at the EU's School of Transnational Governance, following the specialisation tracks of transnational democracy and global security challenges.

Ana Luisa de Moraes Azenha is a Brazilian researcher based in Berlin, specializing in participatory and digital democracy, with a focus on how public participation and technology can impact traditional lawmaking processes. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Humboldt University of Berlin, with a dissertation on "Assessing the Effects of Crowdlaw Initiatives: Experiences from Latin America." She is also a member of the Latin American feminist collective Sor Juanas Berlin.

Martha Fyllou is a Communication & Media graduate (BA) with experience in research, writing and content editing on academic and professional levels. Currently pursuing an MA in Digital Humanities, with a focus on digital discourse, social inequalities, class dynamics, cultural reproduction, and the impact of (cyber)networks across urban, rural, and online spaces. Martha is also interested in intergenerational struggles, racial realities, and tech-neoliberal transformations.

Ulrike Liebert, Part-time Professor at Florence School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute Florence. This essay builds on my monograph „Europa erneuern! Eine realistische Vision für das 21. Jahrhundert“ (transcript 2019) as well as on two ongoing collaborative European projects: the „Democratic Odyssey“ and „Scaling Democratic Innovations“ (ScaleDem). For further information see www.ulrikeliebert.eu.

Giuliano Logos – poet, performer, activist, and singer – was born in Bari and lives in Rome. In May 2021, he competed against an army of international poets, from the UK to Japan, and became the first Italian to win the title of World Poetry Slam Champion at the 15th edition of the Poetry Slam World Cup in Paris. In January 2022, he was selected by the joint editorial teams of Vanity Fair Italy, France, and Spain as one of the 30 “artists, activists, and pioneers” reshaping the future of Europe.

Zukhra Mavlanova is a master's student in Architecture at the Technical University of Munich (TUM). Their academic interests include urban development, governance and the intersection of architecture, city planning and politics. This article is part of their ongoing research into democratic tools in urban planning.

Piotr Michałowski, researcher, cultural expert, a Board member of the European Network of Cultural Centers ENCC in Brussels (since 2015), and a Creative Programme Lead at the MuseoSpace Foundation, Leiden, the Netherlands. He is an independent expert on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, expert evaluator of DG EACEA (European Commission), Goethe Institut Brussels, EIT KIC Culture & Creativity and IFCD Fund of UNESCO. He has obtained MA in culture studies, MSci in project management, MSci in cultural diplomacy, and a European Diploma in cultural management.

Gabriela Mocan, creative producer, curator, academic and author with 10+ years' experience in cultural diplomacy. With a PhD in Philology/ Cultural Studies and collaborations in Europe, UK and USA, she has held strategic, leadership and educational roles. Head of Literature, Architecture and Visual Arts at the Romanian Cultural Institute in London (2013-2019 & 2024 - present), ACMC President and Strategy Consultant (Dec. 2023 – Jan. 2025), Board member of the ACMC and the London Arts-Based Research Centre, and Lecturer at the Babeş-Bolyai University.

Kalypso Nicolaidis is Chair in Global Affairs at the EU's School of Transnational Governance and leads key initiatives on democracy and global governance. Formerly at Oxford, Harvard, and ENA Paris, she has advised EU bodies and focuses on European integration, global affairs, and post-colonialism.

Alexandros Dimitrios Poulakis is a political scientist with distinctions and a Master's in Crisis Management, focusing on corruption in humanitarian interventions. He is pursuing a PhD at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki on participatory budgeting in Greece. He works as a Human Dimension Expert at Callisto and is co-founder of DEMOTRUST, a youth-led think tank promoting transparency, human rights, and citizen engagement in Greece. He has participated in major Council of Europe conferences on participatory democracy.

Maxime Ollivier is an activist for social and climate justice. Climate demonstrations, advocacy, civil disobedience with Extinction Rebellion, electoral campaigning with La Primaire Populaire for the presidential election in 2022: he tried out a number of modes of action before turning to art as a mobilisation tool with the Le Bruit Qui Court collective. He is the author of two books published by Actes Sud: *Basculons dans un monde vi(v)able* (2022) and *Vivre avec éco-lucidité* (2024).

Katy Rubin is a Legislative Theatre practitioner and strategist based in the UK, and director of The People Act hub for creative civic practice. She works in partnership with local and national governments, advocacy organizations, and community groups to co-create equitable and innovative public policy through participatory processes that are joyful, creative, and inclusive. She is currently collaborating with cities around Europe, implementing policy-change projects on housing and homelessness, health and welfare, the climate crisis, and more. Katy is also a Senior Fellow with People Powered: Global Hub for Participatory Democracy, an Associate with Shared Future CIC, and a Senior Atlantic Fellow at London School of Economics, as well as former executive director of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC. Her Legislative Theatre work with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority was awarded the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy’s 2022 award for Best Practice in Citizen Participation.

Emmanuel Schlichter, LL.M. (Kent), is a fully qualified lawyer who studied law at LMU Munich and holds a Master’s degree in International Political Economy from the University of Kent. He applies his legal expertise in diverse and innovative ways to advance systemic, sustainable transformation. As the founder of Rechte der Natur e.V., he works to anchor the Rights of Nature in European law. He is also part of the team at GermanZero, where he focuses on climate policy reform and building pathways toward a just ecological transition.

Danae Theodoridou is a performance maker and researcher. She completed her practice-led PhD in Roehampton University in London (2013). Her work focuses on social imaginaries, the practice of democracy and the way that art contributes to the emergence of socio-political alternatives. She teaches in the MA Performing Public Space (Fontys Academy of the Arts), conducts research in the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, curates practice-led research projects, and presents and publishes her work internationally. She is co-author of *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance* (Valiz, 2017) and the author of *Publicing – Practising Democracy Through Performance* (Nissos, 2022).

Elze Vermaas works at the Belgian social-ecological think tank Oikos and has contributed to a transnational research project on deliberative democracy. Her interests also include themes such as degrowth and ecofeminism. She is co-author of the book *Enough: Thriving Societies Beyond Growth*. She previously worked as a secondary school teacher and served as vice-chair of *Jong Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks*, the youth wing of the Dutch green think tank.

Democracy doesn’t begin at the ballot box. It begins around a table, where voices meet, where stories unfold, where the collective takes shape.

To be a citizen is not only to vote, but to stay. To listen deeply, to imagine otherwise, to care together, again and again.

Citizens’ assemblies invite us to rethink what democracy could be: not an occasional exercise in delegation, but a living practice of deliberation, diversity, and shared responsibility. Chosen by sortition, strangers become collaborators. Opinions become dialogue. Decisions become collective.

With this **Issue 10**, we build on processes of people’s assemblies that have been held across Europe in the last years. This issue is timed to coincide with the concluding assembly of Pilot People’s Assembly for Europe, the final port of the Democratic Odyssey that has been journeying from Athens, through Florence to Vienna. Across these three assemblies, a path has emerged: one that points clearly toward the creation of a **Permanent People’s Assembly for Europe**.

But this must not be the end. We cannot allow the transformative power of this experiment to dissolve into memory. We must campaign for the creation of this permanent assembly. But the ethos of the assembly, the ethos of the movement is decisive. Through the reflections, provocations and visions collected in this issue, we say:

Democracy is a Collective Act of Care.

This is more than a slogan. It is a call.

To you, dear reader, we say: this journal is an invitation. Not to observe from a distance, but to take part. To commit. To be active. Because democracy doesn't survive on its own. It needs our attention, our time, our contradictions, and our care.

Our question, at the heart of this issue, is as urgent as it is hopeful: ***How can Permanent Citizens' Assemblies reinforce democracy?***

To explore this, we've divided the issue into two interconnected parts: **Care** and **Permanence**. Two forces that, together, can reshape how we participate in building a Permanent Citizens' Assembly.

Care is what makes democracy human.

In a citizens' assembly, care is what turns strangers into co-thinkers, and disagreement into dialogue. It is the invisible infrastructure of attention, listening, and respect. This section gathers voices that explore care not as sentiment, but as practice, as method, as ethic, as politics.

We begin with **Ana Luisa de Moraes Azenha**, who, in *An Ethic of Love*, invites us to imagine participation as a feminist act of care – rooted in relationality, responsibility, and the everyday work of co-creation.

Gabriela Mocan and Piotr Michalowski, in *Transnational Assemblies as Ecosystems*, see care in the networks and relationships that allow assemblies to cross

borders, take root, and grow into living systems of democratic practice.

In *Legislative Theatre* by **Katy Rubin**, and in *Citizens' Assemblies as a Corporeal Practice* by **Danae Theodoridou**, we explore care in democratic participation through performative practices – where the body and presence become tools to rebuild trust and shape collective decision-making.

Emmanuel Schlichter, in *If Rivers Could Speak*, challenges us to extend care beyond the human – to rivers, forests, and the living world that surrounds and sustains us.

Martha Fyllou, in *From Institutions to Autonomy*, describes care as something that flourishes outside bureaucratic frameworks – in assemblies grounded in justice, mutual aid, and autonomy. Building on this, **Elze Vermaas**, in *Citizens' Assemblies as Spaces to Transgress*, pushes the concept further – inviting us to imagine assemblies as revolutionary spaces of care, resistance, and transformation.

As a hinge between these two sections, we present the campaign **Democracy is a Collective Act of Care** – an open call to participate, as a personal and political act of care. If care gives democracy its soul, **permanence** gives it its spine.

Too often, citizens are invited to speak only in times of emergency – or when it's already too late. Assemblies are convened, and then dissolved. Ideas emerge, but rarely find traction.

So what would it mean to create structures that endure? A space where citizens are not occasional guests – but permanent protagonists?

We begin with *Tocqueville Redemption*, where **Amy Delis** and **Kalypso Nicolaïdis** ask what a **Permanent People's Assembly for Europe** might look like – and why this is the moment to dream it into being.

The **10 + 1 Guidelines for EU Citizens' Assemblies**, developed by the **Citizens Take Over Europe** coalition, offer concrete steps to make permanence not just desirable, but feasible.

In *Converging Towards Care and Togetherness in Permanence*, **Marco Bertaglia** reminds us that permanence without care can reproduce exclusion – and that well-designed processes are the foundation of meaningful participation.

Nicolas Bourdeaud and **Maxime Ollivier**, in *What to Learn from Three French Citizens' Assemblies*, offer a sobering example of what happens when political will fails to follow citizens' work—and what might be done differently next time.

In *The Case for Permanent Citizens' Assemblies*, **Ulrike Liebert**, from Citizens Takeover Europe, proposes scaling assemblies “in, out, and deep” as a response to the democratic legitimacy crisis in Europe.

From Greece, **Alexandros Dimitrios Poulakis**, in *A Permanent Assembly as a Public Policy Response to the Tempi Tragedy*, offers a concrete example of assembly after crisis – imagining citizen oversight during moments of collective grief and rebuilding.

In *Participatory Democracy in Urban Governance*, **Zukhra Mavlanova** examines how a local assembly in Munich influenced the redevelopment of a major urban site – showing us that permanence can begin at the level of city blocks, not just parliaments.

And finally, in *A Citizens' Assembly for Europe: Why Permanence is Key*, **Kalypso Nicolaïdis**, returns to the European scale – offering a powerful argument for embedding permanent citizens' participation into the very fabric of the EU.

The issue closes with *Il Disertore*, a poem by **Giuliano Logos**, performed during the *Village for Civic Action* at the Democratic Odyssey Assembly in Florence – a final gesture of rupture and return, of refusal and care.

A reminder that democracy, like poetry, only lives when it is carried by breath, by bodies, by those who choose not to look away.

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CARE

An Ethic of Love: Rethinking Participation and Collective Responsibility

Ana Luisa de Moraes Azenha

“In a world shaped by extractivist logics, growing oppression and isolation, such spaces of exchange can function as sites of resistance and imagination of other worlds possible.”

Over a year ago, the growing sense of individualism and social alienation in Berlin, my city of choice, led me to seek community in a feminist Latin American collective. Every month, the collective hosts a debate session to discuss the work of female thinkers. These sessions offer the opportunity for Spanish-speaking people in Berlin to debate the ideas, learn more about them, their work – but especially about how each of us interprets and grounds these ideas based on our own experiences.

Last week, we discussed Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the erotic*. For Lorde, the erotic is situated in several spectrums beyond the sexual. It is a source of joy and love, knowledge and power. “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement (...).”¹ Her reflections prompted us to critically examine the extent to which we are connected to the erotic across various dimensions of our lives. More importantly, they urged us to consider how this understanding could inform pathways toward positive change, both individually and collectively, as migrant women in Germany.

Safe spaces of dialogue, such as the collective’s reading circle, foreground active listening and care, and center embodied knowledge and personal, emotional responses. The conversations that take place in these spaces allow individuals to learn from each other and generate collective knowledge by weaving experience and critical reflection. They can forge emotional and political bonds by deepening trust and empathy, shaping political consciousness and mentoring the basis for personal and collective action.

In a world shaped by extractivist logics, growing oppression and isolation, such spaces of exchange can function as sites of resistance and imagination of other worlds possible.

This insight into the transformative power of dialogue and collective knowledge finds echoes in broader democratic practices. Deliberative forms of citizen engagement

– particularly ongoing, institutionalized formats designed for specific contexts and goals – can potentially influence decision-making but also foster prosocial behavior and empathy² generate epistemic value³ and prompt greater civic engagement⁴.

A powerful example is the first consultation of the Brazil Civil Rights Framework for the Internet. Between 2009 and 2010, the Secretariat of Legislative Affairs of the Brazilian Ministry of Justice conducted an online consultation on a bill that would define the rights and duties of Internet users in Brazil. The consultation was the product of public pressure from Internet activists, researchers and users who opposed a legislative proposal that would criminalize common Internet practices.

The consultation unfolded in two phases. The first phase of the debate focused on the principles that would guide the law, while the second phase addressed the content of its draft. Participants were asked to justify their input with supporting arguments to ensure it would be considered and potentially incorporated. Members of the Secretariat undertook outreach efforts to engage as many relevant stakeholders on the topic as possible. Additionally, they published comments received through other channels on the consultation page. A year later, a bill based on this initiative was introduced in Congress and, after a lengthy political process, it was approved in 2014.

1. Audre Lorde, *The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*, Routledge, 2017, p. 13.
2. Kimmo Grönlund, Kaisa Herne and Maija Setälä, *Empathy in a Citizen Deliberation Experiment*, Scandinavian Political Studies, 2017, pp. 457-480.
3. David Estlund and Hélène Landemore, *The epistemic value of democratic deliberation*, The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy, 2018.
4. Shelley Boulianne, Kaiping Chen, K. and David Kahane, *Mobilizing mini-publics: The causal impact of deliberation on civic engagement using panel data*, *Politics*, 40(4), 2020, pp. 460-476.

Transnational Assemblies as Ecosystems Supporting Global Democracy

Gabriela Mocan
and Piotr Michalowski

Beyond its legislative impact, the consultation yielded other meaningful outcomes. From an epistemic point of view, the debate led to peer learning, with participants gaining more knowledge on the topic, the lawmaking process, and on other points of view. One very engaged participant, inspired by the debate, even decided to pursue a law degree afterward⁵. It also led to the epistemic uptake of some participant input, with five of the thirty-four articles present in the first bill proposal in the consultation having their wording changed or suppressed⁶. Furthermore, the consultation page was used as a source of information for members of Congress while discussing the (fairly unknown) topic. Finally, it also mapped out the constellation of stakeholders and their varying views on Internet governance. This mapping helped unite groups in support of the bill’s approval over the course of nearly three years. This alliance, who claimed authorship of the project, acted not only as an important enabler in its approval in 2014, but ultimately led to the creation of the Rights in Network Coalition in 2016⁷, a network of organizations in defense of digital rights in Brazil.

“His story is a reminder that solidarity is not merely an ideal, but a necessity for survival, and that cultivating collective care is an urgent political task.”

Such initiatives demonstrate that participation, when meaningful and well-designed, can do far more than influence specific policies: it can transform the very way people relate to democracy, to themselves and to each other.

The urgency of building collective responsibility is starkly illustrated by the story of Luiz Carlos Ruas, a street vendor in São Paulo. On Christmas Eve 2016, Ruas was killed after intervening to protect two trans women from an attack inside a subway station, while dozens of bystanders watched without acting. Psychoanalyst Christian Dunker later described Ruas’s intervention as a “transgression of our cowardly way of existing,” noting that those who break the silent pact of indifference often pay a high price⁸. His story is a reminder that solidarity is not merely an ideal, but a necessity for survival, and that cultivating collective care is an urgent political task.

Addressing today’s complex challenges requires more than individual action or elite-driven policy. They demand a shift toward collective knowledge and shared agency, supported by love-grounded practices. As Joan Tronto argues⁹, care must be integrated into democratic processes as a central concern of political life. Reframing love as a democratic ethic—or democracy itself as an ethic of love—invites us to reconceive political participation not merely as a right or obligation, but as a profoundly relational and moral practice. Participatory, deliberative democracy, seen through this lens, becomes an ongoing act of tending to our shared commons with a collective ethic of care—one that sustains not only our institutions, but also our capacity for hope, solidarity, and transformative change.

5. Ana Luisa de Moraes Azenha, *Assessing the Effects of Crowdlaw Initiatives: Experiences from Latin America*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, forthcoming.

6. Samuel Barros, *A colaboração dos cidadãos na produção de leis: Lições das consultas online do Marco Civil da Internet*, Anais do 10o Encontro da Associação Brasileira de Ciência Política (ABCP), 2016.

7. Ana Luisa de Moraes Azenha, *Assessing the Effects of Crowdlaw Initiatives: Experiences from Latin America*, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, forthcoming.

8. Christian Dunker, *Ato de ambulante que morreu no metrô foi 'transgressão' a nosso modo covarde de existir, diz psicanalista*, Interview by Ingrid Fagundez, BBC Brasil, 2016.

9. Joan Tronto, *Caring democracy: Markets, equality, and justice*, New York University Press, 2013.

The crucial aspects on how the Permanent Citizens’ Assemblies may reinforce democracy are related to grasping the local needs, expectations and challenges, and to providing a continued, sustainable dialogue with stakeholders. The roundtable approach proved to be a useful tool for many similar contexts when the local policies are lacking those aspects and the cultural organizations become highly detached from the localities. Jonathan McClory, author of the May 2021 report called “Socially Distanced Diplomacy: The future of soft power and public diplomacy in a fragile world”¹, wrote: “with a focus on how public diplomacy practitioners can help build the alliances needed to get through the next global crisis, we need to be more inclusive of diverse voices (...) All of this starts with listening”². Our text serves to illustrate potential models and frameworks that help maintain the reciprocal exchanges between policy makers and local leaders. Examples such as the *Bridge Makers* programme of the European Network of Cultural Centres (ENCC)³, or the *Horizontal Network* meetings and speak outs developed by the IN SITU project offer concrete formats to build such participatory bridges. Since 2021, ENCC’s microgranting schemes have supported local creative ecosystems and culture-led development. While these initiatives are related mostly to culture, sustainability and inclusion, the additional level of ‘going beyond’ localities, uplifting those practices to international and European level, is related fully to cultural diplomacy, especially the transregional and subnational dimensions of micro-diplomacy. Finally, the Arts and Cultural Management Conference format has been offering, for over seven years, a sustainable platform for human-centred dialogue on burning issues and challenges, predominantly focusing on new actors in the field and young professionals. These examples are based on the reflective and constantly evaluated models that put forward democratization and participation.

Failures and lessons learned

Our research and fieldwork reveal recurring structural challenges within local governance systems. In many communities, cultural policy remains peripheral - frequently absent from strategic agendas. Moreover, cumbersome decision-making hierarchies often stifle grassroots initiatives, even when they address urgent local needs. A lack of collaboration between cultural stakeholders and local governments is also common, pointing to a mutual need for capacity-building. We advocate for dedicated training programmes - both for cultural professionals and local administrations - that cultivate partnerships and foster mutual understanding.

The path forward lies in devolving greater authority to local structures and creating frameworks for self-governance through alliances of neighbourhoods. Permanent Citizens’ Assemblies, when embedded at the local level, can counteract apathy, reignite civic participation, and promote inclusive cultural development. One simple yet powerful proposal is the institutionalization of annual ‘roundtables for culture’ to track, revisit, and revise local development goals. Such spaces could reinforce the legitimacy of culture in policymaking and encourage broader coalitions for sustainability and inclusion.

ENCC’s recently launched programme *Closing the Gap*⁴, operating since 2021 (presently named *Bridge Makers*⁵), embodies this commitment. It brings together local authorities, cultural centres, and civil society actors to address often fractured relationships, improve communication, and co-create local solutions. While some ENCC members report productive collaborations with municipalities, many face disconnection and lack of institutional support. *Bridge Makers* aims to foster lasting cooperation rooted in trust, transparency, and shared responsibility.

Democratization and cultural (micro) diplomacy

These efforts align with global agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁶, particularly SDG 11: “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”.⁷ Cascading grant schemes like ENCC’s *UPgrants* - formerly *Seeds of Sustainability (SOS) Upscale* - translate this vision into practice.

Launched in 2021, the ENCC *UPgrants* programme funds micro-scale projects in local contexts that foster sustainable, community-driven development. Many initiatives focus on circular economies, environmental stewardship, ethical digitalisation, or inclusive mobility. All are shared via a ‘Treasure Resource Box’⁸, a collective toolkit of replicable models for cultural sustainability.

The cascading grants model demonstrates how micro-funding can seed structural change. The pioneering 2021 edition of *UPgrants* was so impactful that the European Commission integrated cascading funding mechanisms into the 2021–2027 Creative Europe programme, an example of how cultural experimentation can shape European policy. These initiatives illustrate the role of culture not just as a supplement to diplomacy, but as diplomacy in itself - a form of “micro-diplomacy” rooted in community agency, creative production, and participatory governance. Cultural practices become vehicles for civic engagement and democratic innovation.

1. <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/publication/socially-distanced-diplomacy-future-soft-power-and-public-diplomacy-fragile-world> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

2. McClory J. *Socially Distanced Diplomacy: The future of soft power and public diplomacy in a fragile world*. USC Center on Public Diplomacy, The Sanctuary Westminster, London 2021, p. 51.

3. <https://encc.eu/> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

4. <https://encc.eu/articles/closing-the-gap> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

5. <https://encc.eu/activities/programmes/closing-gap> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

6. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

7. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal11> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

8. <https://encc.eu/articles/up-grants> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

Assemblies that make a difference

To strengthen these models, we need frameworks that unify such local practices under broader concepts – what we call ‘creative ecosystems’. These are not just metaphors; they are living systems requiring cross-sectoral cooperation and knowledge exchange between urban and rural actors alike.

One recent project embodying this philosophy is *IN SITU: Place-based innovation of cultural and creative industries in non-urban areas*⁹, led by the Centre of Social Sciences of the University of Coimbra (Portugal). Funded by Horizon Europe, the project explores how CCIs can drive innovation and sustainability in rural and ultra-peripheral regions.

The project’s IN SITU Labs, based in six non-urban regions across Europe (Portugal, Ireland, Iceland, Finland, Latvia, and Croatia), serve as hubs for local co-creation. Each lab engages local creative actors in identifying challenges, co-developing solutions, and articulating the governance needs of local CCIs. Through participatory workshops and horizontal network meetings, the project builds trust, capacity, and shared vision, embodying the ethos of cultural assemblies in action.

Beyond the nation-state – the transnational assemblies

In November 2024, the Arts and Cultural Management Conference¹⁰ (ACMC) in Vienna convened under the theme *Transgression & Collaboration*. This was the 7th edition of the ACMC and one that exemplified how cultural initiatives can transcend borders and foster democratic dialogue across Europe and beyond, aligning with the core values of European Alternatives and the focus of this present issue.

Developed and run by international teams of volunteers grouped around annual editions, the ACMC convenes cultural professionals, artists and researchers to reflect on urgent challenges in the sector. Through the main onsite conference taking place annually in Vienna and the various online activities mapped out throughout the year, it aims at fostering a stimulating, cross-disciplinary dialogue on current matters, as well as building a strong international community around shared passions and goals for cultural and artistic evolution. Its commitment to diversity and innovation, reflected both in the makeup of its team but also in the formats of its events and activities, recommend it as a project of great relevance that resonates with the shared aspirations of our global cultural community.

Guided by the visionary leadership of President and Strategy Consultant Gabriela Mocan, the 2024 edition highlighted the role transnational initiatives can play in shaping European and global democracy. Conversations started online, with several pre-conference events that welcomed, as opposed to the ACMC’s previous Europe-focused editions, speakers from other continents. This was meant to be a new model for the ACMC, one that would facilitate a greater outreach while helping build a stronger community around it. Also, through the ACMC Hub launched on LinkedIn months before the Vienna get together, a stronger community emerged, configuring fresh perspectives.

One of the key objectives of ACMC 2024 was to attract strategic partnerships that would not only deepen the collective reflection on the edition’s theme but also strengthen the project’s long-term sustainability. With this in mind, the participation of two pivotal organisations was secured ENCC and EUNIC¹¹ (European Union National Institutes for Culture). By bringing together perspectives from both the independent and governmental cultural sectors, these partnerships allowed ACMC to explore the conference theme from multiple vantage points, enhancing its relevance and resonance within the broader discourse on transnational cooperation and democratic innovation.

Transgression and Collaboration: catalysts for democratic engagement

ACMC 2024 highlighted how transgression (challenging norms) and collaboration (uniting diverse voices) drive democratic engagement in arts and culture. Transgressive practices question societal norms, creating space for dialogue and new perspectives, while collaboration fosters collective understanding and action. Together, they transform spectators into active participants in democratic processes.

A standout contribution came from cultural expert Piotr Michalowski, Board Member of the European Network of Cultural Centres. His panel, “Arts and Cultural Management in Cultural Heritage: Transgressive Projects and Strategies” showcased how risk-taking, critical disruption, and experimental collaboration can democratize heritage management. The session advocated for inclusive, community-driven models that treat culture as a living, participatory process.

Transnational Assemblies: a new model for democracy

Transnational assemblies represent a rather novel approach to democratic participation. Unlike traditional nation-state-based systems, these assemblies transcend national borders, bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds to engage in dialogue and decision-making. This model reflects a shift towards a more inclusive and participatory form of democracy, where the emphasis is on collective deliberation and shared responsibility. The ACMC 2024 highlighted the potential of such assemblies to empower young professionals, providing them with platforms to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes. By fostering environments that encourage open dialogue and mutual respect, these assemblies can cultivate a sense of shared purpose and collective agency.

In the context of ACMC 2024, bringing EUNIC Austria onboard as a key partner was both timely and significant. Part of EUNIC Global, a network of 140 clusters led, until June 2025, by Romanian Cultural Institute President Liviu Jicman, EUNIC Austria fosters dialogue and mutual understanding through its network of national cultural institutes, thereby reinforcing democratic values at a local and international level. In the context of the conference theme, EUNIC’s work exemplifies how cultural diplomacy and shared cultural initiatives can transcend national borders, spark constructive conversations, and create spaces for democratic expression. The contributions of Andreea Dincă, Director of the Romanian Cultural Institute Vienna and EUNIC Austria President, and Márton Méhes, Director of Collegium Hungaricum Vienna, further emphasized the collaborative spirit at the heart of EUNIC’s mission. Their discussion during the conference highlighted the profound impact of joint projects between their respective institutes, the broader EUNIC network and among all related partnerships.

9. <https://insituculture.eu/> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).
10. <https://acmconference.com/> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).
11. <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/> (accessed on: 24.04.2025).

Lessons from the ACMC 2024: building democratic capacities

The ACMC 2024 provided valuable insights into the functioning of transnational assemblies. One key lesson was the importance of creating spaces that encourage active participation and critical thinking. Workshops and panel discussions focused on developing transgressive skills – abilities that enable individuals to challenge existing norms and think creatively about solutions to societal issues. Another lesson was the need for inclusivity and diversity in these assemblies. By ensuring that a wide range of voices are heard, transnational assemblies can more accurately reflect the complexities of global societies and develop solutions that are equitable and just.

Conclusion

The aforementioned initiatives underscore the importance of transgressive practices and transnational assemblies in fostering active democracy. By challenging established norms and fostering collaboration, these assemblies can empower individuals and communities to engage more deeply in democratic processes. As we move beyond the nation-state, transnational assemblies offer a promising avenue for revitalising democracy in Europe and across the globe.

The work and research activities conducted by the ENCC and ACMC focus on participatory approaches, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and representation for meaningful connections. Given that the flat governance structures enable active participation and a sense of ownership among the community members, the best way forward is to empower local structures, such as community alliances, to adopt and maintain self-governing practices on multiple levels and matters. The participatory governance models, introduced locally, may bring about positive change and may prevent passiveness. A constant consultation process, constant mapping of core needs and potentials, together with a community dialogue, may greatly contribute to social engagement.

Contemporary societies are diverse and multidimensional, and their full complexity should be revealed and described by in-depth participatory practices. The qualities of the Permanent Citizens' Assemblies should be well communicated to civil society, and such formats have to be professionally shaped and led. The well-incorporated elements of the explained approaches are able to bring several long-term effects and sustainable changes. It is then crucial, once being satisfied by the achieved positive change, to consequently work on actually sustaining this change – nothing can be believed as everlasting. But as a reward, according to principles of participatory processes, by creating a horizontal structure of dialogue where power hierarchies have no meaning or function, the informal relationship naturally becomes a win-win process for the community and its development.

Gabriela Mocan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0483-4558>

Piotr Michalowski

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1279-4306>

Legislative Theatre: A Creative Way to Redesign Democratic Spaces and Rebuild Trust

Katy Rubin

In a school gym in New York City in 2014, a group of LG-BTQ youth performed a play they had devised based on their daily realities. In the opening scene, a transgender woman experienced a domestic dispute; neighbours overheard and called the police. Upon arriving, police accused the woman of holding fake identification because the gender on her ID didn't match her name and presentation; searched her apartment; and arrested her after finding hormones, which they mistook for drugs.



Three youth performing a play at the Manchester youth mental health project. Photo by Ingrid Turner

In the audience was a member of the NYC Council who was sponsoring a new Municipal ID bill, originally intended to support undocumented immigrants in accessing public services. At the end of the play, through improvisations and debate, the audience developed an amendment to allow applicants to state their gender without requiring proof of medical procedures and to have the option to leave the gender box blank entirely (alongside other proposals to challenge discriminatory police interactions). The proposed amendment became part of the legislation voted in by the NYC Council, positively impacting the civil rights of New Yorkers.

This story is an example of a Legislative Theatre (LT) process organised by Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, a non-profit I led from 2011-2018. LT is a participatory democracy methodology in which residents directly impacted by inequitable policy use theatrical tools to frame a policy problem and invite peers and neighbours to improvise and test solutions onstage, with the goal of co-creating new rules and laws. In the story above, community members and policymakers entered the process with little trust in one another; the young people regularly experienced harm not only in daily interactions with police and other authorities but also in past attempts to participate in decision-making that affected their lives. However, through the process of LT, young people and policymakers were able to come together to rebuild trust and redesign policy.



Legislative Theatre audience voting on co-created policy proposals. Credit to Theatre of the Oppressed NYC

Rebuilding trust between policymakers and communities

As a practitioner and designer of Legislative Theatre (LT) now working with local governments and community groups around the UK on issues such as housing, immigration, and climate justice, I regularly see breakdowns of trust stemming from vastly unequal power relations in democratic spaces. The majority of ‘consultation,’ when it exists, happens after decisions have been made in closed rooms, and long after problems have been articulated by ‘experts.’

Communities experiencing poverty, institutional racism, and other inequities are then invited into spaces designed and populated by policymakers, often primarily white and/or middle class, thus exacerbating harmful power dynamics. Simply increasing the frequency of this kind of (false) participation will not help to build trust between governments and affected communities.

In fact, UN Secretary-General António Guterres identified trust as a key challenge in the 2023 Common Agenda: ‘Building trust and countering mistrust, between people and institutions, ...is our defining challenge. There has been an overall breakdown in trust in major institutions worldwide due to both their real and perceived failures to deliver, be fair, transparent, and inclusive.’ Similarly, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) notes that the ‘distrust loop, or “trust deficit,” is a barrier to economic growth, digital innovation

and social cohesion’. UCLG’s partner, International Observatory for Participatory Democracy, pinpoints LT as one strategy to address this barrier.

After centuries of harm and inequality, rebuilding trust will be difficult and slow; new forms of active democracy are necessary. LT can be a useful tool for activists working to repair democracy, via three key ingredients: a shared understanding of the problem; a shared experience of collective problem-solving; and shared vulnerability or risk. In LT, the policymaking process is designed by community advocates, not politicians or researchers, and the problem is framed through the lenses of power, equity, and human rights. LT doesn’t start with a white paper or news article: it’s a play, which communicates both the human and institutional contexts and the feeling of the problem, leading to a shared understanding on intellectual and emotional levels. In the story from New York City, the whole audience, including policymakers, gained a new, nuanced understanding of the barriers and risks when a person can’t access identification that accurately represents their identity. Trust begins to take seed when we see that others actively and deeply understand something of our experiences.

**Policymakers and citizens re-shape
inequitable policies together**

In Legislative Theatre (LT), after watching the play, audience members join the community actors onstage to improvise and test new policy ideas. This live testing leads to recognition of the limitations of an idea, while iteration and dialogue often spark more radical interventions, and can generate increased buy-in for policies that are ultimately implemented. Trust grows through shared problem-solving, as policymakers and citizens engage collaboratively and publicly in the messy work of democracy.

At the end of the LT process, actors and audiences propose new policies, and the aim is that policymakers and advocates will also commit to immediate actions. To negotiate on-stage instead of behind the scenes; to try new ideas, fail, and try again, in solidarity with your neighbours; to acknowledge the harm caused by historical oppression; and to do all that in the unorthodox context of theatre – these require vulnerability, for policymakers and citizens alike. People experiencing inequities take risks every day to survive but don't see those risks acknowledged or addressed by governments. Policymakers, meanwhile, often try to push boundaries within rigid bureaucracies, but that risk-taking is hidden from the public eye. Therefore, through shared vulnerability and risk, they can begin to transform power dynamics, and only then will they be able to seek and offer trust.

Undoubtedly, it's a big ask for governments and institutions to take such risks: to use theatre to frame policy problems and develop solutions, and to transform the formal realm of governance into spaces of creativity and participation. Bureaucracies are by their very nature entangled in antiquated rules and procedures that protect the status quo. However, through the joyful nature of Legislative Theatre and other participatory and fun practices, communities can disrupt exclusive policy-making processes and overturn entrenched hierarchies. Only then can we create real change that responds to the needs of affected communities and moves towards a more equitable society.

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme, the International Inequalities Institute, or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Citizens' Assemblies as a Corporeal Practice

Danae Theodoridou



An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly, KANAL-Centre Pompidou, MolenFest 2024, ©Pauline Arnould

Since 2019, my artistic work focuses on *The Practice of Democracy*¹. Under this umbrella title, I create different participatory performances, each one of which focuses on a specific practice of democracy. Until now, I have worked on the practices of public speaking, protesting, assembling, as well as on the practice of conflict. Aim of this work is to explore the way performance can contribute to the empowerment of citizen's participation in politics and the emergence of alternative modes of social coexistence other than the dominant capitalist ones. In order to do that, the project proposes an embodied, sensorial, material approach to democracy, which is usually discussed solely as an intellectual, rational process. What is a democratic community? How do we enter it physically and emotionally? How does the materiality of such a community, the material arrangement of the space and the bodies in it, affect its proceedings? What is the role of feelings and senses in democratic processes? Similar questions are worked in the frame of my projects which are highly participatory inviting citizens from different European countries to experiment with these questions in practice.

Here, I would like to focus on one of the projects of *The Practice of Democracy*, entitled *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly*, as this aligns directly with the issue's interest on the way citizens' assemblies can reinforce democracy.

Through the dramaturgical and artistic choices of the specific performance, I will propose five main characteristics that citizens' assemblies should have in order to be able to empower democratic processes. Before I do that, though, it is important to clarify what 'democratic' means in this case given that the term is loaded with different understandings. Democracy in my work is not seen as a normative legal notion defined by constitutions, laws, parliaments, political parties and other institutional structures. Instead, I am more interested in what Castoriadis would call 'instituting' democracy, the democracy of those who (should be the ones who) shape institutional democracy, the 'demos', namely the people². Reflecting on the current state of democracy in Europe and the Western world, political scientists such as Danai Koltsida and Chantal Mouffe have argued that today we are experiencing a demo-cracY where the first and constituent part of the word, 'demos', is more and more absent. This absence manifests through the indifference of citizens towards politics and their

1. Information about the projects of The Practice of Democracy can be found here: <https://www.danaetheodoridou.com/performances/>

2. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Polity Press, 1987.

3. Danai Koltsida, "Left Strategies for (Re)Constituting Democracy: Experiences from Greece", 2021, accessed 29 April 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ERUTpbCFPo>.

4. Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, 2018.

5. Rebecca Schneider, "Appearing to Others as Others Appear: Thoughts on Performance, the Polis, and Public Space", in *Performance in the Public Sphere*, Ana Pais (ed), Centro de Estudos de Teatro and Per Form Ativa, 2017, p. 51.

6. Pierre Ostiguy, "Populism, A Socio-Cultural Approach", in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (eds), Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.75-98.



An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly, KANAL- Centre Pompidou, MolenFest 2024, ©Veerle Vercauteren

significant abstention from elections³. It connects largely also to the fact that institutions of parliamentary democracy limit the possibilities for citizens to meet and confront each other, influence political decisions and, hence, exercise their democratic rights⁴. Therefore, at stake at the moment is the way the people are to be (re)constructed and democratic demands are to be articulated.

I would like to argue that the performing arts can play a crucial role in the (re)construction of the people. Performance scholar Rebecca Schneider defines politics as "appearing to others as others appear [to me]", connecting democracy closely with the appearance and performance (social movement and interaction) of bodies in public space⁵. Social scientist Pierre Ostiguy also stresses the close relation of politics to performance and performativity. Apart from *what* is said in politics, he argues, what is also crucial is the *how* this is said as well as issues of physical and emotional closeness expressed through language, accent, sound, body language, gestures and the like⁶. Drawing on such ideas, *The Practice of Democracy* departs from the premise that we need to start from the body, its public movement, speech, senses, feelings in order to reconnect the people in a 'we' able to reinforce democracy. In this sense, the starting point for the project is the fact that democracy constitutes a corporeal practice. It is exactly for this reason that the performing arts, as a discipline that works primarily with the body, can significantly contribute to the aim to reconstruct the people.

In her text "Doing Democracy", Andrea Phillips discusses participatory art's ability to produce instances of the micro-political characterized by an improvisatory nature, flexibility, invention and creative responsivity, qualities that are vital for politics, due to two important characteristics that are worryingly absent in today's institutional forms of democracy: the fact that such work is invented by participants themselves; and the fact that it relates directly to participants local context⁷. In what follows, I analyze the way *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* tried to construct such micro-political space.

The work invites participants to enter rooms of institutional democracy (such as city halls, parliaments etc., namely rooms that are rarely inhabited by citizens) and create their assembly following a script given to them at the beginning of the performance. The script assigns 'roles' (speaker, listener, moderator) to participants, instructing them on what to do or say (or even refuse to do or say if they want to). During the performance, participants are also encouraged to change roles. Part of the script is left open, giving space to the members of the assembly to express their own thoughts on democracy and social coexistence. Through this game structure, the assembly is led step by step into a collective reflection on the practice of assembling and our attitude in it, as well as on the central role of the body in politics. There are five characteristics of this work that I propose as constitutive elements of any citizens' assembly that wishes to reinforce democracy today:

1. Citizens enter their institutions of democracy: in order to question dominant operational modes of doing politics, we should disrupt established social habits, creating new political connections. The artistic frame could definitely be used to create such disturbing practices that are not easily recognizable, pulling the city-inhabitants out of a depoliticized context and their comfort zones. Inviting citizens in rooms that are heavily bureaucratic and formal (even in their architectural forms) asking them to collectively speculate about how else an assembly could look in there, created a paradoxical social practice for our *Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* that was often able to construct more imaginative ways of being together. At the same time, this proposal allowed participants to take a more focused look on

their local context and the way political decisions are taken there, and propose unexpected reforms for this context.

2. Script-based assemblies: *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* is based on a script that gives roles to participants as well as instructions on what to say and do (or refuse to do so, if they want). While setting the concrete frame for their encounter, the script also asks open questions to participants inviting them to share personal stories recognizing the great value of personal experience in democracy, which is often totally neglected in favor of a pseudo-objectivity. Gradually, participants are also encouraged to divert from the script exercising their own agency in space in unpredictable ways. In this sense, the script acts as a half-finished artwork that is completed only when participants interpret it. Balancing between the need to have a clear frame that brings people together, and the sabotage of its own existence that encourages assembly members to act in unexpected ways, the random gathering of *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* has the potential to become a strong political act in the Arendtian sense, constituting, on the one hand, a clear plural initiation and, on the other hand, providing space for its participants to reveal the dynamic of the specific group in unforeseen ways⁸.

7. Andrea Phillips, "Doing Democracy", In *Support Structures*, Céline Condorelli (ed.), Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009, p.89.

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1998. According to Arendt, action is characterized by four constituent aspects: initiation, plurality, boundlessness, and unpredictability.



An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly, This is Athens City Festival 2023 ©Kostas Gikas

3. Role-playing and the creation of new subjectivities: Art historian and critic Jeroen Boomgaard posits that instead of “engaging” an audience that is “being subjected” to it, art should rather provide space for becoming other “subjects” through it. Instead of simply recognising ourselves in an artwork, we should discover the different, the “other”, what was not there before (Boomgaard 2017, 32)⁹. In order to achieve this aim, we should look for works we do not identify with, works that do not meet our expectations. Especially in times where social life and politics are determined by extremely self-centred individualism, such goal is utterly significant. Only when we subvert the dominant images we have for ourselves and others, as well as the existing configurations of power, we can start constructing the conditions of emancipation. By putting words in people’s mouths (which they would hear themselves saying, regardless of whether they would agree with them or not) or imposing actions that could fit more or less well to the bodies of the assembly members or the space they are in, *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* asked participants to reimagine themselves and become different for a while, opening thus space for a new (social) relation with themselves and others.

4. Corporeal democracy: As mentioned above, the main aim of *An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly* was to propose, establish and practice an embodied, sensorial, material approach to democracy. This happened in different ways, from explicitly discussing the relation of sexuality to politics and cultivating bodily awareness in relation to other bodies in space, to asking participants to practice dance as a political act. I already referred to Ostiguy’s ideas about the close connection of the body and its performance to politics. I would like here to also stress the importance of Mouffe’s discussion on the emotional dimension of politics -a dimension that is severely neglected in current capitalist frames- as vital for the creation of a robust democracy. For the creation of democratic citizens, Mouffe argues, we do not need more “realistic” arguments regarding the “rationality” of neoliberal politics, but more common feelings, more reasons to identify physically, emotionally with democratic values and each other.¹⁰

I would like to close this text by arguing that artistic (but not only) frames that experiment with ways for coming together though the above mentioned characteristics, have the potential to construct powerful acts of ‘publicing’ (Theodoridou 2022) and produce an empowering public space. By approaching the ‘public’ as a verb, namely an action -and moreover as a continuous action as the -ing ending denotes- and (re)training ourselves in this action as a bodily practice in the way athletes do, democracy can be reinforced in radical ways. Maybe, at the end of the day, what democracy needs today is the renewal of its warm-up practices; a good knowledge and handling of specific techniques; extreme physical effort; strong motivation, consistency and ethics; resilience. And maybe if we approach democracy as a sport and practice it daily, we can gradually learn how to become good at it.



An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly, This is Athens City Festival 2023 ©Kostas Giokas



An Attempt to Devise a Democratic Assembly, La Strada Graz 2023 ©La Strada Graz/Nikola Milatovic

9. Jeroen Boomgaard, “Public as Practice”, in *Being Public: How Art Creates the Public*, Jeroen Boomgaard and Rogier Brom (eds.), Valiz, 2017, p. 32.

10. Chantal Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*, Verso, 2022.

11. Danae Theodoridou, *Publicing-Practising Democracy Through Performance*, Nissos, 2022.

If Rivers Could Speak: Rights of Nature and the Democratic Future of Europe

Emmanuel Schlichter

Imagine for a moment that Europe’s rivers could speak. They would tell stories of exploitation and resilience, of waters diverted and polluted under the mandates of human progress, yet still flowing persistently toward the sea. They might question why their fate is decided in parliaments and boardrooms where they have no voice. If rivers could speak, they would ask what democracy means when the very foundations of life – water, forests, land – remain voiceless and rightless. These questions echo across our continent today, urging us to reimagine democracy itself in the face of ecological crisis.

In the European imagination, democracy has long been about human voices and human rights. Yet as climate change and mass extinction accelerate, there is a growing recognition that our political systems must broaden their scope. The concept of Rights of Nature has emerged from a simple but radical insight: that rivers, mountains, forests, and ecosystems should hold rights, just as humans do. This idea invites a profound shift in legal and moral perspective – from viewing nature as property to recognizing Nature as a rights-bearing participant in our shared world. What was once a fringe notion is gaining ground as a necessary evolution of justice. It carries the seed of a more expansive democracy, one that includes the more-than-human world within its circle of concern.

**Lessons from Global Pioneers:
Rights of Nature in Practice**

The Rights of Nature movement is not merely theoretical; it is rooted in global precedents and ancient wisdom. Indigenous communities have long treated rivers and lands as living relatives endowed with spirit and agency. Inspired by such perspectives, countries like Ecuador broke new ground by enshrining the rights of Pachamama (Mother Earth) in their constitution in 2008, explicitly recognizing the rights of ecosystems to exist and regenerate.[3] This constitutional innovation—the first of its kind—signaled a bold redefinition of whose voices matter in a democracy.

Since then, other nations have followed suit. Bolivia passed a Law of Mother Earth granting Nature legal rights, and New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River as a legal person, reflecting Māori cosmology. Even courts in countries like India and Colombia have affirmed rights for rivers and forests. Taken together, these cases across diverse cultures assert that Nature is not an object for exploitation but a subject of care and respect under the law.

**Europe’s Awakening: From Mar Menor
to a Continental Movement**

Europe, however, has been slower to embrace this paradigm. For years, Rights of Nature remained an aspiration voiced by activists and scholars rather than a policy reality. But cracks in the old worldview are showing. In 2022, Spain witnessed a watershed moment when the Mar Menor, a beloved saltwater lagoon, became the first ecosystem in Europe to be granted legal personhood.[4] This achievement—born from a citizens’ campaign and solidified by a law passed in the Spanish Parliament—acknowledges the lagoon’s right to exist, flourish, and be restored. It empowers local residents and advocates to speak on the lagoon’s behalf in court, effectively giving the Mar Menor a voice in legal processes.

The significance of this precedent cannot be overstated. It demonstrates that European law can evolve to recognize Nature’s rights, providing a hopeful template for other regions and countries. Notably, the Mar Menor’s new status emerged only after ecological catastrophe struck (a mass die-off of marine life spurred public outcry). This underscores a tragic truth: societies often recognize the Rights of Nature only when the consequences of denying them become impossible to ignore.

A Radical Experiment: The European Citizens' Initiative for the Rights of Nature

This brings us to a radical democratic experiment now unfolding at the transnational level: a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) for the Rights of Nature. The ECI is an EU instrument of direct democracy, enabling citizens across member states to jointly propose legislation if they gather enough support.

Today, environmentalists, jurists, community leaders, and ordinary citizens from many countries have come together to launch an ECI demanding that EU law recognize and implement the Rights of Nature. It is a call to transform Europe's relationship with the natural world through the democratic process itself. By requiring one million signatures from at least seven EU countries, the campaign inherently fosters transnational solidarity — uniting people behind the idea that the European project must defend the living Earth we all share. In practice, the initiative seeks to establish a legal framework that would, for example, allow rivers or forests in Europe to be represented in courts and policy-making by appointed guardians, ensuring their protection and restoration as a matter of justice rather than charity.

“Democracy must grow to include the voiceless—rivers, forests, and all life that sustains us.”

At its heart, this initiative is about voice and community. Political theorist Hannah Arendt famously wrote about the importance of belonging to a political community, arguing that having rights is contingent on being recognized as part of the polity — the “right to have rights.”¹ In our current system, Nature has no such membership; a river is not a legal person and thus cannot have rights or recourse when it is harmed. The Rights of Nature initiative seeks to change that status quo.

Redefining Political Community: Nature as a Subject of Rights

It is, in essence, an invitation to extend our political community to include the voiceless — granting rivers, forests, and other ecosystems a rightful place in our legal and democratic order. By doing so, we acknowledge that our society is not limited to human beings alone, and that democracy can evolve to represent these voiceless constituents of our world upon whom our survival depends.

This vision requires not only legal changes but also a deep cultural shift. Environmental thinker Vandana Shiva speaks of “Earth Democracy,” a worldview in which humans and the rest of Nature are linked in an interdependent community of fate.² In this view, democracy is not just a matter of human governance; it is a way of living that respects the intrinsic value of all life. The call for Rights of Nature in Europe draws from this ethos.

It demands that we rethink fundamental concepts of ownership, stewardship, and the very meaning of rights. If a river has the right to flow and to be healthy, then human activities that pollute it or drain it dry are not merely unfortunate — they become violations of rights, injustices that the law can and should prevent. Recognizing such rights would foster a culture of care, where development plans and economic projects must account for the “voices” of rivers and forests as legitimate stakeholders.

Care as a Democratic Imperative: Emotion, Responsibility, and Survival

Critics may argue that granting Rights to Nature is a step too far — a poetic metaphor turned impractical law. Yet we should remember that rights are a human invention, tools we crafted to protect dignity, prevent harm, and enable coexistence. In the past, expanding the circle of rights was also seen as radical; the idea of universal human rights or rights for formerly disenfranchised groups was once dismissed as idealism. Over time, those expansions became moral common sense.

“Extending Rights to Nature is a continuation of this democratic evolution.”

Extending Rights to Nature is a continuation of this democratic evolution. It challenges us to imagine a legal system in which the destruction of a forest is not only an environmental crime but also a violation against a member of the community — where the law safeguards ecosystems as essential to our collective well-being. Far from pitting human rights against Nature's rights, this approach recognizes their unity: a poisoned river will eventually poison human communities too. A Europe that grants Rights to Nature is one that better protects human futures as well, creating legal duties for governments and corporations to prevent ecological harm at the source.

The democratic future of Europe may well depend on our ability to broaden our sense of “we.” In an age of fragmentation and global threats, the Rights of Nature initiative offers a vision of democracy that is both grounded and expansive. It is grounded in the tangible — soil, water, air, the non-negotiable foundations of life. But it is also expansive in imagination, daring to ask Europeans to see themselves not as masters of Nature but as partners within it.

This shift requires humility and hope, qualities sometimes in short supply in political discourse. Yet across the continent, movements for climate justice, for the defense of specific rivers or mountains, and for Indigenous rights are converging with the call for nature's rights. They are injecting our democracy with new energy, reminding European institutions that citizens crave bold action commensurate with the ecological emergency.

Building a Transnational Earth Democracy

Transnational by design, the Rights of Nature initiative is creating an unprecedented alliance. Activists in Poland reach out to allies in Portugal to share strategies on gathering signatures; legal experts in Germany draft provisions to apply across the EU; youth climate strikers in Sweden lend their passion to the cause of giving Lake Vänern or the Baltic Sea a voice. In connecting these dots, the campaign builds a European public beyond borders, united by a common recognition that ecological solidarity is the next step for our Union. Just as earlier generations of Europeans built a union to ensure peace and human rights after great tragedies, today's citizens are beginning to construct a new pillar of that project: peace with the Earth, and rights for the Earth. It exemplifies the kind of Europe many wish to see — one that leads on ecological wisdom and responsibility.

As this initiative moves forward, it faces challenges — political inertia, corporate opposition, and the sheer novelty of its proposal. But it also rides a current of possibility that flows from the local to the continental level. City councils in places like Toledo, Ohio (which granted rights to Lake Erie) or regional parliaments in Italy (debating rights for the Po River) show that the idea resonates wherever people witness the fragility of their environment. The ECI's campaign itself is a democratic exercise: a million conversations to gather a million signatures, each dialogue a chance to transform someone's understanding of what law and democracy can be. In that sense, even before any law is passed, the process is already democratizing — it invites citizens to deliberate on the fundamental question of who (or what) our democracy is for.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Arendt introduced the notion of a “right to have rights,” emphasizing that rights become meaningful only within a political community — a principle now invoked to extend the community of rights to nature.

2. Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (South End Press, 2005). Shiva's concept of Earth Democracy envisions all beings as part of one circle of cooperation and rights, an idea that informs the ethical foundation of the Rights of Nature movement.

Listening to the Voices of the more-than-human-world

Did you ever stand on the border of a wild river, streaming from the mountains to the sea, sensing its ever sparkling water flowing through all spheres of the planet, circling again and again the sea, the sky, the earth? Did you ever stand under an old tree, feeling its unique presence at that place, listening to the rustling of its leaves? Did you ever become aware, being watched by a wild bird? Maybe you felt touched by a person and felt a response. The more-than-human persons have always been there. We have to give up the feudalism in our relationship towards nature and accept the community of life. Rights of Nature reflect this by a community of rights.

It signals a Europe willing to lead by example, redefining progress as harmony between human societies and the living world. In doing so, it also revitalizes our democracy, reminding us that democracy is not a static system but a living project – one that must grow in scope and empathy to address the crises of its time.

Toward a Democracy that Embraces All Life

In the end, granting Rights to Nature is about imagining a future Europe where democracy protects the voiceless and the vulnerable, whether they walk on two legs, swim with fins, or stand rooted in soil. It is a future where the majestic silence of a river is understood as having meaning and merit in our courts and councils. Such a transformation requires courage and conviction. But as Europeans have learned through history, the courage to expand our circle of justice – to include those once excluded – is what keeps the democratic experiment alive. By standing in solidarity with rivers, mountains, and all our non-human kin, we affirm life itself as the foundation of our political community.

The voices of Nature are rising around us, whether in the roar of a storm or the hush of a dwindling forest. The democratic future of Europe will be determined by how we answer them. With the Rights of Nature initiative, we begin to answer not with despair, but with a resounding declaration that our rivers and forests are not alone – that in the halls of European democracy, their presence is welcome and their rights will be upheld. It is an act of hope, of responsibility, and ultimately of democracy in its purest sense: the widening of “we the people” to embrace all that lives.

- 5. Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador (2008), Title II, Chapter 7 (Arts. 71-74). Ecuador’s constitution was the first to recognize enforceable Rights of Nature, granting ecosystems like forests and rivers the right to exist, flourish, and be restored.
- 4. Law 19/2022 (Spain), officially “Law 19/2022 of 30 September for the recognition of the legal personality of the Mar Menor lagoon and its basin.” This law – the first of its kind in Europe – grants the Mar Menor rights of protection, conservation, and restoration, and empowers citizens and guardians to defend those rights on the lagoon’s behalf.

From Institutions to Autonomy: Networks & Citizens’ Assemblies in Restoring Social Justice and Reshaping Democracy

Martha Fyllou

Observing that, on a national state level, parliamentary democracy as a means of representation is malfunctioning and consistently failing to meet the conditions of a functional democratic setting, citizens' assemblies are gaining new momentum especially in the Balkans and in Northwestern Europe.

This may be because they attempt to fill long-standing gaps in public discourse, within which the voices of groups in positions of resistance or vulnerability—due to dominant politics—are ignored or excluded altogether.



Protest © Markus-Spiske

Alternative spaces for dialogue and action

Through these assemblies, a series of alternative discussions can take place, or simply an exchange of perspectives regarding how justice might be implemented, how a more sustainable economic and social situation might be achieved, what counter-measures could be taken to resist unjust developments, how solidarity between citizens and communities can be fostered, and how further calls to action can be organized to exert pressure on governments.

A key tool in any case is the dissemination, documentation, and sharing of issues and potential developments related to matters of housing, law, (national-global-individual or mass) crimes, the public sphere, economic inequality, and many other areas that impact society and perpetuate narratives, positions, and phenomena.

Through social media, these assemblies are now announced as public calls, and their outcomes are shared with all those who follow the related communities, allowing influence on events and the distribution of responsibilities or information among participants.

This very reality—sometimes resembling a digital transformed to physical Pnyx democratic assembly (the place where the Athenians used to gather to discuss political issues and make decisions on the future of their town) and other times a tangible deliberation—produces political outcomes and has brought countries facing common problems into a shared logic, drawing them closer together forming an unconventional parliament.

Surpassing geographical boundaries, citizens organize through assemblies to identify legal obstacles or fragments, to find solutions, to coordinate protests simultaneously in cities across Europe or even globally, with the diaspora playing a significant role in this.

Given that the European Union with its Court of Justice on one side, and global superpowers along with the Interna-

tional Criminal Court on the other, face criticism for the insufficient enforcement of democracy—particularly legality—and for their ineffectiveness regarding lack of law enforcement issues such as in the genocide in Gaza, extreme inequalities, corruption, criminal negligence (eg. in Sudan civil war case), incitement (on wars at Congo), and exploitation of third countries, civil society can thus shape its own wave of resistance.

One such endeavor could be intercommunal and transnational collaborations between organizations, which are already being practiced to some extent, along with organized collective responses and mechanisms for monitoring, recording, and investigating incidents related to the application of the constitution (e.g., what is deemed unconstitutional) or the practical implementation of democracy.

These mechanisms could be based in each country, operating under cross-border cooperation and managed autonomously by communities and citizen groups affected by these issues, enabling them to respond with less bureaucracy and more directness.

They could consist of community members and others who are trained with tools or relevant skills, working in partnership with citizens who have personal interest and lived experiences—those who know “from the ground up” what each decision and circumstance entails—and act as alternative advocates by and for the people.

Toward autonomous democratic mechanisms

In this context, transnational assemblies can serve as mediators who decide on and deliberate pending issues and possible responses from the citizen side—through groups and their representatives or individually—and then assign these matters to the respective autonomous community mechanisms. These, in turn, will advocate for changes and practices through dialogue and mutual oversight with European or international institutional bodies capable of applying them legally and institutionally or acting on their own initiative.

Official and scheduled related assemblies, held monthly in a different country each time, could gather institutional and non-institutional (i.e., community-based) actors from all relevant fields (education, citizen protection, economics, labor, etc.). These participants—similar to what currently occurs more sporadically in occupied spaces, universities, or unions—would present their demands, inform others about shared interests and value-based principles, report on developments and the state of affairs in other countries, evaluate outcomes, suggest next actions, and allow citizens **to know directly where to turn to—without it being impersonal or exclusively institutional.**

Of course, nothing can be implemented perfectly and without dysfunction, and the same applies here. However, this still constitutes an alternative to the complete lack of institutional accountability and ensures **that the state is not the sole entity responsible for carrying out democratic procedures** and decisions that affect various—though often similarly situated—social groups.

Assemblies that include student associations, labor unions, citizen and community networks for interventions and action, educational and artistic collectives, groups of independently organized citizens, movements, activists, and politically active individuals often lead to protests and marches that reach parliament. These can influence political decisions indirectly or draw the attention of European and global arenas to the issues raised—whether these concern systematic human rights violations or other timely matters addressed collectively on an international level.

This type of assembly is thus able not only to serve the defense of justice and democracy but also, in collaboration with transnational assemblies, to disseminate citizens' demands—fulfilling a new kind of institutional function. Without waiting for technocratic state mechanisms to intervene belatedly and only partially, they can deliberate, question, and transcend the boundaries of a nation when that very nation fails to fully recognize them. They can coordinate and decide on actions and resistance against irrational laws (like bans

on gatherings and other rights) and -why not- demand a new political running?

To move toward a more just and inclusive democratic condition, participation in discussions is not enough, **decision-making needs to come from the affected people** whose representation can become more visible and their involvement more accessible—via collective organizing, actively in the processes of shaping policy, and the creation of strong networks and coalitions dedicated to defense and accountability.

The ultimate goal could be the complete detachment and independence of the assemblies and their decisions from institutional validation, as well as their recognition as autonomous executive mechanisms for delivering and restoring social justice and reshaping democracy in general.

Citizens' Assemblies as Spaces to Transgress

Elze Vermaas

“Do it well or don’t do it at all,” says expert Eva Rovers on the organisation of citizens’ assemblies — the closing message of her book¹. Trust in democracy is in decline, and citizens’ assemblies hold the potential to help restore that trust. But as a Dutch saying goes: “Trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback.” The need to organise citizens’ assemblies well is important, and, as I hope to show, can be seen as a practice of care, rooted in a caring democracy.

Even though democracy is now often reframed by the radical right solely as ‘the voice of the majority of the people’ – curiously, a voice ideally spoken only by its leaders – when democracy came about in Athens, its idea was to restructure government into bodies where rich as well as poor citizens were compelled to sit together in assemblies, debate, compromise, and rotate roles through sortition². As Erica Benner shows in her book *Adventures in Democracy*, democracy came about as a realistic solution to a concrete problem: how to end the ongoing civil strife caused by deep inequalities in personal and social security between the wealthy and the rest of society. For centuries, this was widely accepted as common democratic sense — yet it seems to have faded from view. Every thinker, including Benner, that I spoke to about democracy echoed the same concern: rising inequality poses a serious threat to democratic life. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that modern citizens’ assemblies, which draw on this earlier conception of democracy, are re-emerging. And while such assemblies may not address inequality directly, the fact that a statistically representative cross-section of the population gathers to deliberate on shared concerns increases the chances that these disparities will be acknowledged — and, potentially, confronted.

But how can we conceptualise citizens’ assemblies, or democracy more broadly, in relation to care? Fisher and Tronto’s definition of care already offers some insight: ‘On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.’³ They view care as an activity. However, in Tronto’s book *Caring Democracy*, she explores the relationship between care and democracy in more depth. What she refers to as caring involves, as a citizen in a democracy, caring both for fellow citizens and for democracy itself. The aim

“We suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible”

of such practices is to ensure that all members of society can live as well as possible by making society as democratic as possible. She reminds us that the concept of democratic care has its roots in feminist discourse, particularly in concerns about power. ‘Caring democracy thus requires a commitment to genuine equality of voice, and of reducing power differentials as much as possible, in order to create the conditions for a meaningful democratic discussion of the nature of responsibility in society⁴.’

Care in that sense becomes, among other things, the activity of creating those conditions, but how to obtain those conditions, and how to maintain and repair them? Because achieving true representation – and especially creating a space where every voice is heard and each person can engage in deliberation on an equal footing – is no small task. Each citizens’ assembly consists of four key elements that must all be taken into account to create the right conditions. The first is agenda-setting and the design phase; the second is the selection process; the third is deliberation; and the fourth is implementation. In this article, I will focus primarily on the second and third elements.

How do you ensure all citizens are reached for a citizens’ assembly? What do they need in order to be able to participate? Tronto briefly discusses deliberation in her book and highlights a crucial point: there are still people who need to clean or who are involved in other care work – can they realistically take part? Care is not – as one spokesperson from a citizens’ assembly once replied to my question about whether they could easily reach all groups in society – simply a matter of sending everyone a letter and considering the job done if certain marginalised groups fail to respond. Some groups find it more difficult to attend – and that’s where care comes into play.

During my research, I’ve encountered many ways to ensure that marginalised groups can attend and also keep on participating in the assembly. For example, providing child care can make it easier for (single) parents to take part. Simultaneous translation can ease language barriers. Often, a daily allowance is provided to participants. Mobility or digital

access can cause a problem for some people. However, barriers are of course not only physical or economic – young people, for example, can easily worry that they do not yet know enough to take part. Having a facilitator who checks in with them after each session, or having an informal moment with all young participants before the assembly, can be a way to prevent them from dropping out. Or how to reach out to groups that have low trust in the institutions? In the permanent climate citizen assembly in Brussels, organisations that already worked with the groups that were hard to reach were asked to communicate about the assembly. Citizens of these groups were invited to self-nominate through these organisations, rather than being contacted via formal letters – although, like all other participants, they could only join the assembly after a second weighted lottery.

However, it is not only about striving to reach all groups of citizens; it is also about recognising that statistical representation still means minorities will remain minorities within the assembly. For instance, there may be only one Indigenous person present, which can lead to tokenism and place undue pressure on that individual to represent the full breadth of experiences faced by their community. One possible solution is to oversample marginalised groups, ensuring more than one representative is present. Another approach is sequential deliberation, in which the participant consults with their community before each session, helping them feel more prepared and supported in the assembly process⁵.

One of the challenges, when all citizens are brought together in the same space, is to avoid replicating existing power structures. This is where I would like to draw on bell hooks’ book *Teaching to Transgress*. She viewed the classroom as a space where dominant power structures should not be reproduced, and she outlines several methods that are also highly relevant for citizens’ assemblies.

hooks emphasises the importance of recognising diverse forms of experience, and the need to cultivate a sense of community among everyone present. In citizens’ assemblies too, it is vital that participants become familiar with one another. An informal moment at the start can help ease people into the process – one of the reasons why these assemblies often take place in person.

“In citizens’ assemblies too, it is vital that participants become familiar with one another”

hooks also found it important that her students could share personal experiences, and relate them to the academic texts that were studied. Similarly, an assembly might deliberately begin by giving space for citizens to share their lived experiences before introducing external expert knowledge. This not only enriches the conversation but also allows participants to get to know each other and feel more familiar.

It also speaks to the recognition of different ways of learning and processing information. A guided walk through a nature reserve can be just as valuable for understanding climate issues as a data presentation, just as hearing the lived experiences of women who have undergone illegal abortions can profoundly inform discussions in a citizen assembly on abortion policy. Stories can be a powerful way of conveying knowledge, alongside graphs and written texts – which are less accessible. In the Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26, for example, the Knowledge and Wisdom Committee included both academic experts and Indigenous representatives, to ensure the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems.

hooks also points out that the body must be allowed to be present in learning – not just the intellect. Within assemblies, it can be helpful to make explicit that emotions are welcome. As hooks writes, difference does not always make things easier. She recounts how, when she first began discussing her ideas about teaching with fellow professors: ‘A lot of people panicked. What they saw happening was not the comforting “melting pot” idea of cultural diversity, the rainbow coalition where we would all be grouped together in our difference, but everyone wearing the same have-a-nice-day smile. This was the stuff of colonizing fantasy, a perversion of the progressive vision of cultural diversity⁶.’ Good facilitation is therefore key to ensure that everyone is able to speak. Facilitators and moderators, from diverse backgrounds, that are trained in anti-oppressive facilitation and understand how disadvantage is intersectional. It can also be important to acknowledge and address systemic discrimination and power imbalances in the assembly⁷.

It is just as important that organisers themselves reflect diversity and inclusion. Without this, critical design flaws

1. Eva Rovers, Nu is het aan ons
2. Although, women and slaves were not allowed to take part.
3. Fisher and Tronto, Toward a feminist theory of caring, p. 40
4. Tronto, Caring Democracy, p. 53

5. Beyond Inclusion: equity in public engagement
6. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress, p. 50-51
7. Beyond Inclusion: equity in public engagement

can emerge. In the Global Citizens' Assembly for COP26, for instance, a farmer from the Global South noted that economic compensation did not truly make up for lost labour income or the potential long-term financial impact. His commitment to participating in the assembly therefore came in addition to his daily work. A study on inclusivity in citizens' assemblies recommended that these processes should be designed from the perspective of the most marginalised groups⁸.

The fact that citizen assemblies commit to genuine equality of voice and reducing power differentials as much as possible in order to create the conditions for a meaningful democratic discussion is, in itself, an act of care.

The fact that citizen assemblies commit to genuine equality of voice and reducing power differentials as much as possible in order to create the conditions for a meaningful democratic discussion is, in itself, an act of care. As I have illustrated through various considerations and examples, this is far from simple. Drawing once more on bell hooks, it is crucial for people coordinating or facilitating to remain open 'to move' – i.e., to be flexible and willing to learn, adapt or repair when needed. It's an advantage of permanent citizens' assemblies that there is the possibility to learn from each cycle. At the same time, such practices would be far more effective in a society that fosters these kinds of democratic spaces more broadly – not only in the form of assemblies, but also through commons and other shared spaces. In doing so, the lived experience of democracy and active participation in collective decision-making can become part of everyday life, allowing even those who have not yet taken part in an assembly to develop an intuitive understanding of what such a process involves.

But let's end with hooks, because I believe her statement could also be applied to spaces like citizen assemblies: 'The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom⁹.'

8. KNOCA. Workshop on inclusion and disadvantage in climate assemblies <https://www.knoca.eu/events/workshop-on-inclusion-and-disadvantage-in-climate-assemblies>

9. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress, p. 207

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**FOR A PERMANENT
PEOPLES' ASSEMBLY
FOR EUROPE**



**What if democracy wasn't
just about power but
about care and permanence?**

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Tocqueville Redemption: Democratic Foresight in a Permanent Peoples' Assembly for Europe

Amy Delis and Kalypso Nicolaidis



Democratic Odyssey Assembly at Palazzo Buonaiuti,
Florence, 2025. Photo by Elisa Massara

“Democratic institutions,” Tocqueville bemoaned, “strongly tend to promote the idea that nothing is stable, nothing lasting, nothing beyond the immediate reach of the individual.” Since the founder of democratic theory famously despaired over citizens’ overwhelming focus on the present or the near future over distant future, it has been a cliché to note how because individuals in democracies are more equal and more autonomous, they are less likely to feel bound to a long-term legacy or to traditions that span generations. As a result, democracies are supposed to be bad at investing for the long term. Tocqueville was especially wary of the effect of frequent elections on policymaking with politicians, “so pre-occupied with the next election that they lose sight of the distant future.” As a result, democracies lacked continuity, as each new political wave might undo the work of its predecessors. In contrast, leaders in **aristocratic systems**, with wealth and status passed through inheritance, often planned for the long run—both for their families and their societies.

Assuming the diagnosis is true, we ask whether and how “another kind of democracy” can remedy this bias.

We label our argument “Tocqueville Redemption”, to remind ourselves of Tocqueville’s own attempt to argue that democracy was not doomed to short-sightedness. As he observed in particular in America, democratic societies could develop virtues of foresight and restraint, especially through institutions like civil associations, education, and religion, which could teach citizens to look beyond the present. If we take seriously his broader conviction that the remedy to democracy’s flaws is *more* not *less* democracy, we must bet on more democracy *between* elections providing more continuous institutional support for popular ownership of our democratic future.

Strategic Foresight

Here is a paradox however. Today, strategic foresight is everywhere, yet mostly absent from the democratic public sphere. It is an important policy tool for anticipating future risks and opportunities in government and administrative circles, through processes aimed at fostering preparedness for future trends and shocks: national and regional strategies on future thinking are drawn up (for example, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain, Flanders, and Sardinia); the European Parliament and Commission regularly publish foresight reports, through the Foresight Competence Centre and the ESPAS network. But none of these processes are accountable for future-proofing their societies.

Foresight, therefore, should be democratised precisely to cultivate a resilient and inclusive culture of long-term thinking among the broader public. Strategic foresight is a deeply creative and deliberative method, where both the process and results benefit greatly from the inclusion of various voices. Even in their technocratic version, foresight methods themselves already have the capacity to include various knowledge and make connections between different stakeholders, and more deliberation can make “foresight practice be more representative, pluralist and consistent in public policy work”.¹ As such, democratising foresight would both increase the democratic legitimacy of future visions and improve the diversity of the results.

One way to do so is to harp back to an ancient democratic practice: citizens’ assemblies formed through sortition or randomly selected citizens serving through rotation. Because these are generally less susceptible to external pressures and short-sighted policy preferences they can greatly contribute to the effectiveness of future scanning.

There have already been some attempts at participatory foresight, including CIVISTI and CIMULACT. Both multi-year projects involved citizens in multiple rounds of consultations co-creating visions of the future of research in the EU². In local contexts, projects such as BioKompass in

1. Brian Galvin, *The role of foresight in public policy: Lessons from deliberative democracy and perspectival realism*, European Journal of Futures Research, 15(1), 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40509-024-00246-0>
2. In the CIVISTI project, citizens in seven different EU countries were consulted between 2009 and 2011. More information is available on their website: <https://www.civisti.org/the-projekt.html>. Similarly, in the CIMULACT project, citizens from 50 different countries across the EU and beyond were involved in consultations: <http://www.cimulact.eu/index.html>.
3. The Biokompass project is described in detail on the project website: <https://museumfrankfurt.senckenberg.de/en/biokompass/biokompass-project-goals/>. Further insights can be found in: Aaron B. Rosa, Simone Kimpeler, Elna Schirrmeister and Philine Warnke, *Participatory foresight and reflexive innovation: Setting policy goals and developing strategies in a bottom-up, mission-oriented, sustainable way*, European Journal of Futures Research, 9(2), 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40509-021-00171-6>. Additionally, the participatory foresight initiative in Marcoussis, France, are explored in: Christophe Gouache, *Imagining the future with citizens: Participatory foresight and democratic policy design in Marcoussis, France*, Policy Design and Practice, 5(1), 2021, 66-85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2021.1950687>



Democratic Odyssey Assembly at Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 2025. Photo by Elisa Massara]

Germany and Marcoussis 2038 in France have found a creative way to engage citizens in future thinking⁴. Combined with more structured deliberations, the projects set up museum exhibitions and participated in popular local events, bridging the gap between formal foresight processes and community engagement. They also found ways to share their findings in publicly accessible manners, one made an interactive app, and the other a short movie.

Hence, resilient culture of long-term thinking can be fostered, bringing in different parts of society beyond either the world of politicians or that of technocrats. But can this transtemporal form of democracy be scaled up to be transnational and trans-scalar, where local and international topics can be addressed with the same seriousness? Can they reflect the need and possibilities for a new democratic transformation of our social and political societies?⁴

4. For the full typology outlining six interconnected evolutions in democratic governance please see: Kalypso Nicolaidis, *The third democratic transformation: From European to planetary politics*. JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 62(5), 2024, 845-867. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.15589>

**The Democratic Odyssey:
Next Frontier of Democratic Foresight**

We have tried to take up this challenge through the Democratic Odyssey, a campaign towards a permanent Peoples' Assembly for Europe. This campaign is grounded on its own experiment of a crowdsourced pilot assembly, a unique space to try and adapt various new and innovative methods of participation and deliberation. Since the pilot explores how we may be able to weather future crises together more democratically, foresight and future thinking are the perfect fit for engaging with citizens' visions⁵. So far the pilot assembly of the Democratic Odyssey has met two times in person, as well as a few times online. Inspired by the ancient Greeks and Renaissance Florentines, the travelling assembly met in Athens in September 2024 and in Florence in February 2025. Next, May 23-25, the third and last meeting on this travelling assembly will be held in Vienna.

In Athens, participants were transported to the year 2029 where through a simulation, they negotiated solutions to a new global polycrisis, taking on the role of citizens, media, policymakers, and industries.⁶ The basic scenario sketched out ahead of time was augmented in real-time thanks to the assembly members' own 'future headlines'. The insights from the simulation were then brought back to the present to discuss what would need to happen now in 2024 to allow more preparedness and resilience for such possible future crises. The second meeting in Florence explored inter-alia the tradeoff between focussing on Immediate Crisis Response vs. Long-Term Planning ultimately seeing it as a false dichotomy.⁷

Two points can be highlighted at this stage. First, citizens can engage with foresight in a gamified way. Through a simulation of time travel and multiparty negotiation, they can temporarily assume the role of different stakeholders in a crisis and reflect on what actions they would take. Future thinking requires not only the ability to anticipate and prepare for what lies ahead but also empathy to consider the collective world of the future. Second, only a culture of deliberation can fully harness the potential of foresight and anticipatory governance. Collective intelligence can be cultivated through participatory processes. This approach requires active listening, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collective action.

Looking ahead to the third meeting in Vienna, the assembly can find new ways to engage with future thinking in a creative way. Deliberations and foresight activities with a radically diverse group will allow for innovative thinking.

The Democratic Odyssey has leveraged the needed elements for such engagement with future thinking at different moments. In both Athens and Florence, the assembly had

set up social events open not just to the assembly members but also to the broader public. The open event in Vienna will seek to democratise further future thinking to a broader and a diverse public, through a future market, as with Marcoussis, or a translocal future crisis⁸.

Moreover, while structured deliberation is an important part of foresight, it is not the only one. There are numerous innovative and creative ways to engage in future thinking. Citizens can create future artefacts, resulting in concrete representations of their imagined future with which to interact with the broader public including through digital tools. The assembly moment in Florence had experimented with AI in support of the deliberation process. What if a future persona created by citizens' visions were there to support the deliberative process as a reminder for future generations? This would be a fitting incarnation of Tocqueville's redemption.

5. For more information on the topic, see <https://democratic-odyssey.k8s.osp.cat/assemblies/travelling-assembly/f/43/?locale=en>

6. For the full report and more information on the first meeting in Athens, see <https://democratic-odyssey.k8s.osp.cat/assemblies/athens>

7. For all the discussed trade-offs and their recommendations, and more information on the second meeting in Florence, see <https://democratic-odyssey.k8s.osp.cat/assemblies/florence?locale=en>

8. Gouache, *Imagining the future with citizens*, 2021, p. 75-77.

10 + 1 GUIDELINES FOR EU CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

CTOE Coalition

Citizens Take Over Europe is a coalition of over 70 civil society organisations which promote participation and empowerment. It has been meeting every week since March 2020, when at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdowns, people who had been running initiatives to improve democracy in Europe realised it was urgent to come together in an even more coordinated and powerful way to innovate new forms of democracy. From the beginning, the coalition has emphasised that both deliberative, participatory forms of democracy and direct democracy are important additions to the electoral democracy with which we are familiar in Europe, and that these participatory and direct forms of democracy are particularly important to create at European scale: as covid-19 made obvious, the biggest political issues of our times both cross borders and have very local effects.

The European Union started its own experiment with more participatory democracy in 2021 with the Conference on the Future of Europe, and now the European Commission runs regular citizens' panels. Citizens Take Over Europe has been observing and advocating around these processes, and emphasising that not just any kind of citizens assembly or deliberative process is good enough. In particular, they need to be inclusive, have real follow up and be on real political issues of importance. In one of its first acts, the coalition developed 10+1 principles for citizens assemblies, which can be used to design and evaluate these exercises.

Citizens Take Over Europe has worked since 2020 on the idea of a permanent people's assembly for Europe that would follow these principles. It has developed blueprints and designs for such an assembly that can be read [here](#). It has incubated and collaborated in projects such as Assemblies of Solidarity, Transeuropa Assemblies, Democratic Odyssey, Building Bridges and Citidem to bring these ideas to life on the ground. And it has continued to work with elected officials, including in helping set up groups of like-minded European Parliamentarians to work on the Future of Democracy together with civil society.

Over the past years, deliberative citizens’ assemblies selected by lot have increased their popularity and impact around the world. If introduced at European Union level, and aimed at developing recommendations on EU policy issues, such first ever transnational citizens’ assemblies would be groundbreaking in advancing EU democratic reform. The Citizens Take Over Europe coalition recognizes the political urgency and democratic potential of such innovations of EU governance. We therefore call for the introduction of European citizens’ assemblies as a regular and permanent body for popular policy deliberation. In order for EU level citizens’ assemblies to work as an effective tool in further democratising EU decision-making, we have thoroughly examined preexisting exercises of deliberative democracy. The following 10 + 1 guidelines are based on best practices and lessons learned from national and local citizens’ assemblies across Europe. They have been designed in collaboration with leading experts. At present, these guidelines shall instruct the Conference on the Future of Europe on how to create the first experimental space for transnational citizens’ assemblies. But they are designed for future EU citizens’ assemblies as well.

1

Participatory prerequisites

Strong participatory instruments are a prerequisite for a democratic citizens’ assembly. Composed as a microcosm of the EU population with people selected by lot, the assembly workings must be participatory and allow all members to have a say, with proper professional moderation during the deliberative rounds. The assembly must fit the EU participatory pillar and connect to the existing tools of EU participatory democracy, for instance by deliberating on successful European citizens’ initiatives. The scope and structure of the citizens’ assembly should be designed in a participatory manner by the members of the assembly, starting with the first assembly meeting that will draft and adopt its rules of procedure and set its agenda. Additional participatory instruments such as the possibility to submit online proposals to the assembly on relevant topics should be included in order to facilitate the engagement of all citizens. Information about opportunities to get involved and participate in the citizens’ assembly proceedings must be attractive and accessible to ordinary citizens.

2

Inclusive selection

Members of a citizens’ assembly should be selected by lot in order to give all citizens and residents of Europe the same chance to be included. Lot based selection should make the group of participants as representative of Europe’s diversity as possible. The recruitment through a civic lottery should follow a two-step selection process that includes stratification: First, a sufficiently large number of randomly selected citizens in the EU should receive an invitation to participate in the assembly. The invitations should reach citizens and residents in an unbiased way, e.g. through phone calls on random numbers, letter invitations to random households, or on-door recruitments at random addresses. Second, only a subset of individuals from those who respond positively to the initial invitation should be accepted as participants. This selection is designed to meet socio-demographic quotas, ensuring a representative cross-section of society. The relevant criteria for the quotas could include, but are not limited to: age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, socio-economic status, EU member country of origin, urban or rural background, as well as behavioral or attitudinal aspects relevant to the context of the specific assembly’s agenda. Moreover, different attitudes towards the EU, ranging from very positive to very negative, should be reflected in the sample in order to avoid one-sidedness. This two-step selection procedure is designed to actively encourage Individuals to participate in the assembly and thereby to minimise self-selection biases. Adequate remuneration should be offered to compensate for their time, as well as reimbursement of expenses for travelling and accommodation in the case of physical meetings and, if needed, for childcare. It will be necessary to actively follow up with invitees and to take extra care of socially vulnerable individuals by offering additional support, such as by reserving 10% of seats for marginalized individuals and non-voters.

3

Impactful outcomes

Citizens’ assemblies must be designed such that their outcomes will have clear impacts on EU policy-making. Before the start of the citizens’ assembly, the EU institutions should commit themselves to an effective follow-up mechanism with respect to the resolutions adopted by the assembly. This requires the citizens’ assembly to discuss real EU policy issues and develop solutions that are decided by the citizens themselves. If the citizens’ assembly becomes merely a consultative project that plays only a symbolic role without any policy impacts, this will be detrimental to the objective of involving citizens in governing Europe’s future. This would likely lead to further popular disenchantment with the European project. Therefore, it must be clear from the outset that the citizens’ assemblies are designed to meet after their recommendations have been turned over to the EU institutions and to check whether and how EU policy-makers have translated them into EU legislation. Such follow-up procedures will raise public awareness and expectations towards the EU institutions, as a prerequisite for legislative and, if necessary, also legal follow-up.

4

Bottom-up agenda setting

The citizens’ assembly with its mechanisms for participation, inclusiveness and legislative follow-up and, especially, procedures for agenda setting, should be designed to reflect the concerns, suggestions and ideas from the complete spectrum of European society – from EU sceptics to friends of the EU. Across Europe, ordinary citizens should be invited to voice the most pressing and relevant topics concerning the EU and its future. This bottom-up design of the agenda setting process starts with a first phase that should be open to all citizens to voice their most pressing problems. The citizens’ assembly will then proceed to set the agenda by identifying the topics of highest relevance to European society. The EU institutions will not have the right to limit the range of topics. The citizens assembly should ensure that their members have the freedom to come up with innovations. A digital deliberative crowdsourcing infrastructure could be put in place to build consensus on the priorities of the assembly’s work. Albeit composed of only a few hundred citizens, the citizens assembly would stay connected with the broader society and ordinary citizens in all regions and member states. Moreover, over its whole duration it will interact also with the EU institutions. The legitimacy of the EU citizens’ assembly thus largely

5

Deliberative methods

Deliberations should be informed discussions that allow for a wide range of viewpoints to nuance discourse and find common ground on which to draft the citizens’ assemblies’ recommendations. For each topic discussed, information sessions led by thematic experts are of vital importance to ensure that all participants have sufficient information that represent various perspectives. It also requires establishing a space in which participants feel safe to intervene and have the opportunity to speak, a mix of formats that alternates between small group discussions and larger plenaries, and skilled facilitation to ensure that participants feel heard. There is also the vital question of allowing for sufficient time so that participants can learn, deliberations can develop, and that the multiplicity of viewpoints can be expressed and considered. It is recommended to allow time for individual learning and reflection in between meetings. Deliberations must be independent of political timing and must not depend on the goodwill of current mandates to be taken seriously, especially regarding allocation of budget and proper follow up mechanisms.

6

Transnational exercise

To respond to the unique cultural and linguistic nature of the European Union citizenry, it is critical that the citizens' assembly be a visibly transnational exercise that fosters the cultural, geographical, and linguistic diversity of the EU. Opportunities for interaction, deliberation, and collaboration among the diverse members of the assembly need to be maximized. This will require an adequate infrastructure for translation, including live translation of deliberation rounds, translation of plenary discussions, and translation of all documents. Citizens from EU candidate countries should also be invited to attend as observers, as well as citizens from other areas of the world. An EU citizens' assembly, always maintaining its transnational design, should be at the same time strongly interconnected with national and regional institutions and transregional institutions, including citizens' assemblies taking place at those multiple levels. This could take diverse forms, such as that of an agenda-setting phase with inputs from national, regional and local citizens' assemblies. The number of citizens in an EU citizens' assembly needs to be high enough to sufficiently represent these diversities. No less than 300-350 citizens are recommended for this purpose, although more scientific research is needed for further evaluation.

7

Transparency

The structures and procedures of the citizens' assembly, the methods by which the recommendations are developed, as well as the information provided by experts, should be transparent, that is open and available to the public. All content released by the assembly should be archived and made easily accessible. The necessity of transparency results from the need for legitimacy and the ability of the public and of the mass media to know what has been discussed by the assembly, and with which outcomes. As a relatively new form of democratic governance, citizens' assemblies need to stand apart from traditional lobbying activities and should rather be fitting a modern, transparent democratic political culture. This is especially critical in order to create social and public trust in the democratic process, also from an outsiders' view. Although the process, documents, and decisions that emerge from the citizens' assembly must be transparent, its deliberations require a protected space. This is needed to encourage participants to speak from their heart, to openly discuss their thoughts on any point, and to change their minds without external interference. By contrast, full public transparency of assembly deliberations risks constraining deliberations making them respond to public sentiment, rather than to fact-based argumentation.

8

Accountability

EU Institutions must be accountable to the citizens' assembly by providing it with reasons and justifications for the decisions taken or not taken in following up with the recommendations of the citizens' assembly. The institutions should explain in clear written feedback which recommendations they have fully or partially adopted, or rejected, and provide reasons for these decisions. Additionally, holding EU institutions to account requires a public space for citizens' political dialogue on the basis of the feedback. At the end, to ensure accountability, the citizens' assembly must be enabled to give a response to the decisions enacted by the EU institutions. An impartial coordinating body separate from the citizens' assembly should oversee and decide if the response and follow-up by the institutions is deemed sufficient. The coordinating body would, for example, conduct anonymous surveys among the participants of the citizens' assemblies to make sure there is integrity and coherence by contrasting the surveys with the assembly findings. It would also assess the follow-up response by the institutions and report its conclusions back to the citizens' assembly. The citizens' assembly should also be run by this independent coordinating team that oversees the assembly process. The coordinating body should exclude any members that are direct stakeholders of the assembly, or politicians or any citizen who may have a conflict of interest.

9

Visibility

For the citizens' assembly to become publicly visible, local, regional, national, and EU institutions should actively generate outreach across Europe aimed at fostering media attention and engagement at all levels. Journalists, regional, and national institutions across the EU are invited to observe the assemblies and should be provided with welcome packets that include information about the structure and workings of the citizens' assembly. A strong digital dimension is also critical for the visibility of the work of the assembly, for raising public trust in the assembly, and for ensuring that the assembly is accessible to the general public.

10

Continuity

To ensure the greatest democratic improvement for EU governance, deliberative transnational citizens' assemblies should be established as a permanent body with proper resources within the European system. In exchange, the continuity of citizens' assemblies will help complement representative democracy in the EU. By making the assemblies continuous, citizens will be given a permanent space to meet on a regular basis. Thereby, EU institutions will benefit from unlocking the potentials of the independent citizens' panels. Practical experiences have shown that citizens' deliberations can contribute to solving a great many tricky issues that have left party politicians in a political deadlock. Institutionalizing the citizens' assemblies would be proof that EU leaders have the political will and courage to not only bring citizens to the decision-making table, but also keep them there.

+1

Fun!

Lastly, while these ten guidelines outline incremental steps to making the European citizens' assemblies a permanent success, it is important that all citizens be motivated to participate. Therefore the assembly needs attractive incentives for citizens of all age groups and backgrounds that will engage them with following its progress. Such incentives will include moments of enjoyment and sociability, from lunches and dinners, to entertainment and cultural events, such as concerts and performing arts. The deliberations of and events revolving around the citizens' assembly should be memorable and meaningful, therefore both their digital and social dimensions must be wide-reaching, visible, and attractive.

Converging Towards Care and Togetherness in Permanence: Facilitation as Political Practice

Marco Bertaglia



Togetherness is possible

Why facilitation matters

I see citizens' assemblies as the way forward to cope with the many crises we face. The most effective format for dialogue to happen is supported by facilitators, who are confronted with a field where cooperation is culturally hampered.

The vast majority of us have been deprived from birth of what we need biologically to thrive, including full acceptance of what is alive within us. Socialised into right/wrong paradigms, we soon learn that some parts of us are not welcome. Babies know that without the care of other people we would be dead. To survive, we learn to detach from what is alive in us so that we can belong. We learn to function in terms of right/wrong, good/bad. We develop rationality. We learn to expect certain behaviours within systems based on duty, punishment and reward.

A key consequence is that we are less able to listen with curiosity, openness and compassion. We are prone to polarisation, wanting to prove our point rather than seeking solutions that work for all. Most of us activate a trauma response to ideas we perceive as incompatible with our views. We defend our ideas rather than listen to what has nourished the lives of others. Most of us want a competitive advantage over others, and very few of us have learned to work cooperatively.

Some of us have little confidence in ourselves, less ability to speak up, uncertain that our contribution will be received with care. Many do not trust that what they have to say matters. Under patriarchy, this is particularly true for women, and it can be true for most minorities.

Citizens selected by sortition to participate in assemblies come from all walks of life. Indeed, inclusiveness is a goal of dialogic democracy in order to harness the full power of collective intelligence. We are concerned to ensure that the voices of all those who have been systematically excluded from decision-making are heard. I see this as requiring explicit arrangements to compensate for all the barriers to mutual listening that most of us carry with us. I see here a key role for facilitators, who can enable or jeopardise the outcome of direct democratic deliberations.

What can go wrong with facilitation?

The issues I am seeking to describe here are those that I have experienced in real life situations. I will not give the context from which I extrapolate these experiences in order to protect real people, for each of whom I have great compassion, knowing from personal experience how extremely difficult our role as facilitators is.

My experience with assemblies began about six years ago, building on my previous experience both as a trainer in nonviolent communication and as a mediator, group facilitator and co-chair of high-level institutional meetings. In this section I draw from assemblies where I was not the facilitator, but rather either a participant or an observer, in civil resistance movements, associations, or institutional or academic "pilots".

In about two-thirds of the cases, I experienced little or no introduction to how the facilitator intended to take care of the process. In most cases, I did not see the facilitator offer any guidance on how people would ask to speak, how they would be given the floor, and how the facilitator would intervene and with what aim. As a result, in many instances I saw a percentage between 15 and 30% of people speaking between 20 and 40% of the time available, with at least one or two people or 10-25% of participants speaking less than 10% of the time or not at all. In well over two-thirds of cases in my experience, people who seemed more comfortable speaking in public did most of the speaking.

We are collectively experimenting, in niches, with a new way of opening up to a dialogical, deliberative democracy. We are finally trying together to include voices that have been excluded for so long. For the first time, citizens can say that they can be heard. In groups where citizens finally have this opportunity, some people may have an immense unfulfilled need to be heard, to be seen. I have seen many cases where people use more than their fair share of time, even when everyone is given an equal opportunity to speak, often to satisfy their need to be heard—sometimes more than once—distracting from the topic at hand or the purpose of the meeting. I saw facilitators listening to the end of such monologues, without interrupting, to signal at the same time interest in the person, concern for their needs, and concern for the whole and the purpose at hand.

I have seen several threads opened by participants without any of them being closed or acknowledged as still open. I saw some participants withdrawing from contexts where others seemed to speak more easily, and only in less than 25% of the cases did I see the facilitator highlighting what was happening and inviting contributions from people who were less engaged.

Facilitation that effectively cares for the whole

I find inspiration in Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication¹, the work of Miki Kashtan² and of Dominic Barter³. I see facilitation as connected to more than just techniques. This section relies on Miki Kashtan’s Convergent Facilitation^{4,5}.

I see the role of a facilitator as infusing the group with the intention to co-create solutions that work for all. I envision a world in which love and care for the whole are creatively brought to the forefront.

There is a huge gap between the vision and the present reality. A facilitator in a citizens’ assembly is therefore called to compensate for all that the structures of domination have firmly established. We are working for change within a field where these structures and effects have not yet been transformed.

Aong the aspects I hope we keep in mind as facilitators, I consider most important an awareness of power dynamics, privilege and the pervasive effects of patriarchal conditioning on all of us. For example, I wish facilitators to be mindful that women have endured millennia of little or no agency, of their voices not being heard. At the same time, facilitation is concerned with the inclusion of male humans beyond right/wrong.

I am very keen to imagine a strong focus on being aware of the present moment, staying connected to one’s own intuition and values, and caring for all participants, for the whole and the collectively agreed purpose.

I want to clarify what I mean when I say I value that “all voices be heard”. I am not suggesting to divide time equally among people. I am not encouraging that all people speak one after the other, without deciding on what is said. In the case of citizens’ assemblies, I deem paramount that deliberations do come to actual proposals, often within severe time constraints.

I wish facilitators to bring clarity about how specific proposals will be heard, and strategies implemented, how much resonance or divergence assessed before other threads are opened. I see it as important that facilitators begin by stating the purpose of the meeting, its expected duration, verifying if all are aligned.

In doing this, as in many other cases, I see at least two things as important:

- questions are as often as possible asked in a way that they require a yes/no answer;
- extreme precision is used to tell what the facilitator is desiring as a response.

I always like to hear at the very beginning how the facilitator is going to elicit responses, how people are going to ask for interventions and other key agreements. In my experience, being in a facilitated group is a completely new experience for most citizens.

I experienced the usefulness of brief mirroring of what people express. A skill of facilitators that I see as fundamental is the skill to interrupt, in such a way as simultaneously caring for the person being interrupted and for the whole.

Eliciting open-ended answers, rather than simple yes/no, may result in a longer articulation of what a person wants to say. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it takes more time.

Convergent facilitation aims at togetherness. Before converging on a specific “what”, the first stage is to gather criteria, the non-controversial essence, by answering the question “What is important to everyone in the group? The aim is to elicit answers that give the why of what people want. The facilitator listens to what each person says and then translates it into the essence, checking with the whole group to see if there is disagreement or if the identified essence is noncontroversial. To do this, facilitators need to be well versed in the art of empathic listening. In my experience, and I say this with great compassion, this may well be the bottleneck of available skills and experience.

The second phase invites togetherness. Now that we all have a list of agreed criteria, i.e. what is important to all in its essence and what is non-controversial, the whole group looks at all of this to come up with proposals. The core question of this second phase is: “Does anyone have a way forward that addresses all the criteria on the list? This is followed by a third phase, where the aim is to arrive as a group at a decision that everyone can accept as their own.

A plea for the future of citizens’ assemblies

Empathic listening, connection to self, awareness of power dynamics, clarity and precision with words, concrete requests are elements I see as fundamental for facilitators. In the face of so much conflict aversion, I also think it is important to be able to stay with conflict and dissent and see them as resources.

I believe that facilitators need to engage with right/wrong training, relearning presence and connection to what is alive in each moment, being able to face a field of consciousness that carries millennia of patriarchal conditioning towards scarcity, separation and powerlessness, and relearning to trust in the possibility of togetherness.

One of the key ways I believe we can do this is by creating spaces for systematic observation and mutual feedback among facilitators to learn from experience and increase effectiveness. In imagining this as a mechanism for learning together, I am connected to the hope that Citizens’ Assemblies can truly help to bring about a new world of interconnect-edness and peace, which I believe is our deepest collective dream.

1.

Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication. A Language of Life*, 5nd Edition, PuddleDancer Press, 2015

2.

www.nglcommunity.org

3.

<https://www.restorativecircles.org/>

4.

Miki Kashtan, *The Highest Common Denominator. Using Convergent Facilitation to Reach Breakthrough Collaborative Decisions*, BookBaby, 2021

5.

See, e.g., Miki Kashtan, *Convergent Facilitation Primer*, Learning Packet, available at <https://thefearlessheart.org/item/convergent-facilitation-primer-packet/>, updated 21/12/2024

What to learn from three French Citizens' Assemblies? Outputs, Responses, and the Challenges of Effective Impact

Nicolas Bourdeaud
and Maxime Ollivier



The 150 citizens of the French
Citizens Convention on Climate

Citizens' Assemblies are a participatory democracy tool that has been used more and more in recent years in France. As activists fighting for democratic renewal, we are interested in the sometimes mixed impact of these tools, which seem to us to hold great promise. This short article considers Citizens Assemblies (CAs) at three different levels in order to have a large overview of this Deliberative Democracy tools and its outputs in France: at the national level with the Citizens' Convention on Climate (CCC) - years 2019-2020, the regional one with the Occitanie Citizens' Convention (OCC) - year 2021, and at city-level with the Poitiers Citizens' Assembly (PCA) - year 2021.

Here are a fews questions we'll try to answer to get an overview of these three CAs' outputs: did they have quality and coherent achievements? What has been the response from both the public authorities and the population? To what extent have the measures proposed been implemented and how? Have the participatory processes and the implementation been monitored and evaluated, and how?

Before going any further into the analysis, here is a brief recap of what can be said on the main clues and indicators that we considered relevant to have an overview.

	Citizens' Convention on Climate	Occitanie Citizen Convention	Poitiers Citizen's Assembly
Question asked to the citizens' assembly	"How can we reduce Greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?"	"Within the framework of the major areas of intervention of the Regional Council, what are your expectations and the concrete measures that you recommend to improve the life of the inhabitants of Occitania, in the current context and to prepare the future?"	Co-construct the municipality's roadmap on digital responsibility.
Outputs	June 21, 2020 149 proposals classified in 5 parts, with, for each proposal, the mode of application foreseen by the citizens (referendum / organic law / parliament)	October 3, 2020 a document bringing together: - "expectations for a transformed region" - 52 priority measures - also included nearly 300 proposals debated during the working days.	July 23, 2021 45 concrete proposals to make digital tools more accessible and sustainable
Responses	- Political: June 29, 2020: Macron refuses 3 propositions (famous "jokers") on 149 measures. ¹ - Media: Heterogeneous coverage over time. CCC is most often presented as a "political object" rather than a democratic experiment. - Population: measures massively supported by French population ² , but its scope and functioning are not understood or well known ³ .	- Political: respect / presence of Carole Delga as the president of the region, for the last session / next step anticipated: Regional Council. - Media: quickly and little covered by both mainstream and independent media for the last session. ^{4 5} - Population: <i>no data</i> .	- Political: respect and support, coherence with the Mayor campaign program. - Media: simple and precise, mainly covered by LaNouvelleRépublique - Population: a broader audience was involved in conferences and debates.
Effective implementation	April-June, 2021: the climate law has largely "edulcorated" citizens' measures. ⁶ Only 15 propositions , less than 10%, were effectively implemented. ⁷	45 priority actions of the convention, along with 155 proposals, were integrated into the GND adopted by the Regional Council on November 19, 2020.	<i>No data</i>

1. Article from France Info: [Francetvinfo, June 2020, Référendum, limitation à 110 km/h, écocide. Ce qu'il faut retenir du discours d'Emmanuel Macron devant la Convention citoyenne pour le climat](#)

2. Article from the website Réseau Action Climat: [Réseau Action Climat, June 2020, Sondage : des gaulois pas si réfractaires à l'action climatique](#)

3. Elabe's poll: [Elabe, June 2020, Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat, qu'en pensent les Français ?](#)

4. Article from WeDemain: [WeDemain, October 2020, L'Occitanie lance la première Convention Citoyenne régionale - WE DEMAÎN](#)

5. Article from Monde: [Le Monde, October 2020, 'Occitanie, première région à mettre en place une convention citoyenne pour décider de son avenir](#)

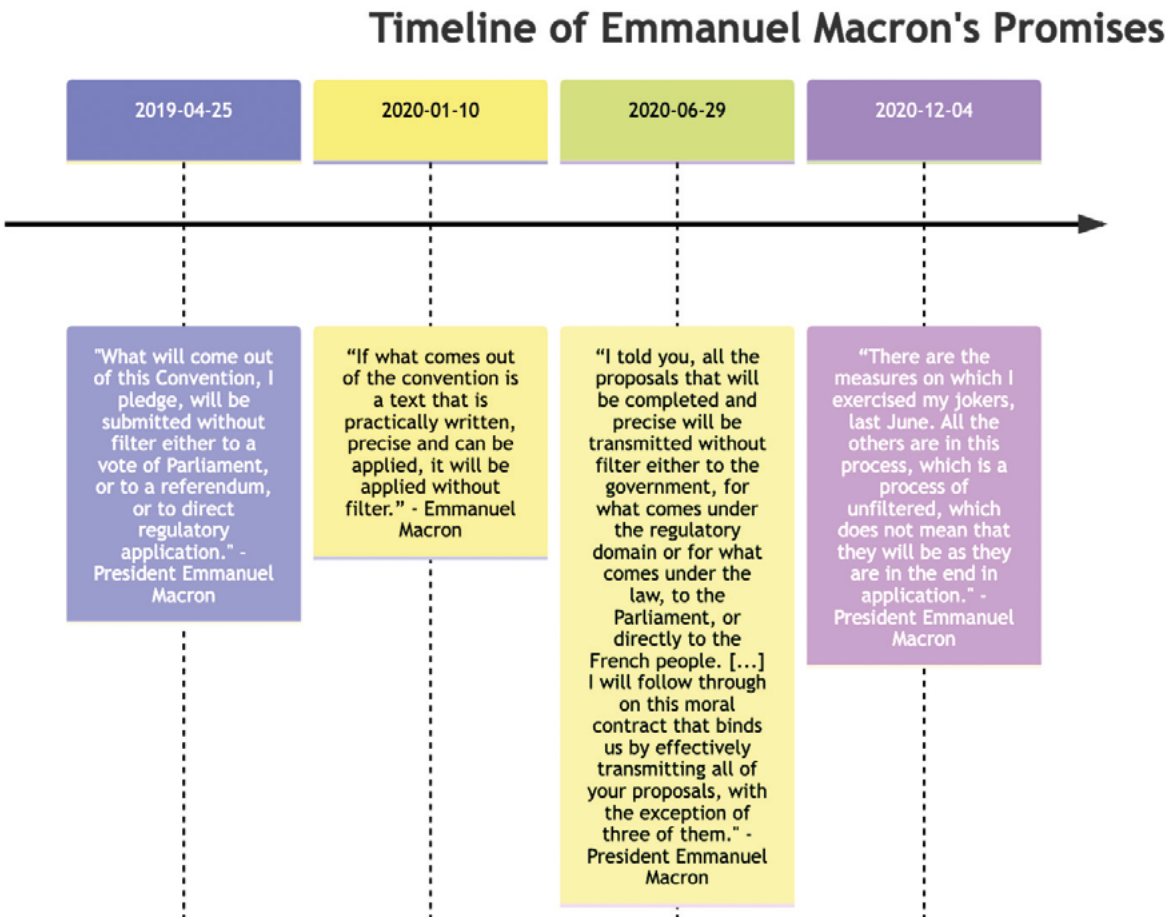
1. Citizens' Convention on Climate (CCC)

The work of the conventioneers is widely recognized as a huge and quality package of efficient measures. The citizens had one main requirement: the 150 measures are a package, and make sense if they are applied together. We come back here on some elements that show the inappropriate and disappointing response of the French government and media to this precious production.

“Unfiltered”
A few years after the first announcement of “unfiltered” by Emmanuel Macron, some have forgotten this commitment from Mr. Macron, the conventioneers will undoubtedly remember it forever. Here is a brief recap of how the public commitment of President Emmanuel Macron has evolved - which well symbolises both the political response and the lack of consideration of the propositions of the CCC:



Macron at the CCC



6. Article from Nature Science: [Natura Science, May 2021, Loi Climat : un "double échec écologique et démocratique"](#)

7. Article from Reporterre: [Reporterre, March 2021, Convention pour le climat : seules 10 % des propositions ont été reprises par le gouvernement](#)

Timeline of Emmanuel Macron's Promises

The “Climate Law”: “Act to combat climate change and strengthen resilience to its effects”

After the Citizens’ Convention On Climate, a law has been presented to the parliament: the “climate law” was supposed to integrate CCC’s mesures. The debate has been restricted by the president of the commission, the deputy Laurence Maillart-Méhaignerie from the presidential majority at the national assembly. While only 46 measures had been inserted in the text of the bill, she refused more than a quarter of the amendments, pretending they were not linked to the subject (using article 45 of the Constitution), even when the amendments took up proposals from the Convention itself. The appreciation to declare an amendment “inadmissible” is left to the total authority of the president of the commission - of the concerned law.

Two years after the Citizens’ Convention on Climate, among the 149 proposals of the CCC^{8,9}:

- 18 have been taken up “without filter”.
- 26 were not taken up at all
- The rest of the measures were only partially taken up.

The opinion published by the High Council for the Climate (HCC) on February 23rd, 2021 is clear: the bill lacks a “strategic vision” and the strategic approach of the National Low Carbon Strategy (NLCS) should be integrated into the bill, supplementing it with new measures, especially on building renovation. According to the HCC, the scope application of several measures is “restricted”, and covers an insufficient share of greenhouse gas emitting activities.

This reduction of the ambition of the CCC through the climate law and the visible disrespect of the citizens and their work by President Emmanuel Macron and the presidential majority at the parliament has led to significant demonstrations: **more than 160 demonstrations have been held throughout France on 9th May 2021**, after the appeal to demonstrate had been signed by over 690 organisations. These demonstrations will remain famous for the image of this big white sheet, with a note on it, 2,5/10, which is the grade given by the citizens of the CCC on the effectiveness of the climate and resilience law to meet the initial objective of reducing GHG emissions by 40%.



Demonstration

Thus, even if the CCC, its members and their production had been able to arouse a great support from the population¹⁰, the media and even more the political treatment have been very rude, and the implementation of the measures proposed can be evaluated around 10-20% today. Regarding the monitoring, neither the citizens, nor the HCC, nor the demonstrations, succeeded in making the government bend, to take advantage of the historic opportunity to respond to climate issues while propelling a democratic innovation that would have created consensus among the population.

8. Article from the website Réseau Action Climat: [Réseau Action Climat. March 2021 Bilan du passage de la loi climat et résilience en commission spéciale](#)

9. Article from France Info FranceInfo. March 2021. [INFOGRAPHIES. Loi Climat : le débat à l'Assemblée est-il "verrouillé" par la majorité ?](#)

10. Elabe's poll: [Elabe. June 2020. Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat. qu'en pensent les Français ?](#)

11. Democratie Ouverte's website: [Labo Démocratie Ouverte. EXPÉRIMENTATION « CITOYENNETÉ ACTIVE EN RÉGION OCCITANIE » : la communauté de l'engagement citoyen mobilisée pour la Convention Citoyenne pour l'Occitanie](#)

12. Article from WeDemain: [WeDemain. October 2020. L'Occitanie lance la première Convention Citoyenne régionale - WE DEMAIN](#)

13. Website “Public Deliberation” : [Public Deliberation. June 2021. The promises and disappointments of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate | Deliberative Democracy Digest](#)

2. Occitania Citizen Convention (OCC)

The final session of the OCC was carried out on October 3rd, 2020. During this session, “the expectations for a transformed region”, a kind of global trend spirit, were enacted and officialised, and more importantly, the 52 priority measures.

Interesting to see that the sessions have been organised in different cities (Toulouse, Montpellier and Carcassonne), thus participating in the communication around the OCC, and eventually to the global support of people of Occitania to the OCC. The CCC had paved the way for this support, and left time to Carole Delga and her team to learn from President Emmanuel Macron’s mistakes. Thus the next official steps were already anticipated since the beginning of the CA. This is one of the reasons why 45 priority actions of the convention, along with 155 proposals, were integrated into the Transformation and Development Plan adopted by the Regional Council on November 19th, 2020. Another reason is that the GND had been worked a lot before, and the work of the citizens had been prepared, almost drafted. We can observe a bit of disappointment among the organising team because, contrary to the CCC, the measures are quite large, and are consequently less powerful, and easier to reuse by the political authorities¹¹. Besides, an article¹² from the very ecologically committed newspaper WeDemain rightly notes the coincidence of the implementation of the OCC with Carole Delga’s political re-election agenda. This seems to be in line with the testimonies of some people who have worked with her at the region: reelection objectives as soon as she became head of the region, and controlled communication to achieve these objectives. The OCC is undoubtedly a part of this strategy.

3. Poitiers Citizen Assembly (PCA)

As with other CAs, one of the successes of the PCA is the active participation of the members of the CA. As with the OCC, the next political steps of the measures proposed by the members were clear even before the beginning of the participatory process. So, we can, of course, note a great support from the political power in place, and also a support of the participants of the conferences organised aside of the PCA. Indeed, in an approach of transparency and accessibility, the City of Poitiers has done two things, trying to enlarge the perimeter of the people involved in the process :

- First, the city has joined forces with two news media
- Second, conferences with experts have been organised, to bring the subject of the PCA to the attention of as many people as possible.

Another point that is very important to point out regarding the PCA: the City of Poitiers has been accompanied by the Commission National du Débat Public (CNDP).

Conclusion

The comparison between the objective of the CCC and its effective implementation and monitoring brings out the question: how can CAs be more powerful? The Occitania and Poitiers conventions give some clues to answer this question: **today, most of the impact of CAs depends on political public commitment to support them and ensure since the beginning that citizens will be the decision-makers, and not simply consulted.**

By comparing with Citizens Assemblies in other countries, Dimitri Courant’s recommendations are also going in the way of a need for a public commitment: “*Cherry-picking and watering down of the CCC’s recommendations show the need for a tighter coupling between deliberative panels, the political institutions, and the broader citizenry. A commitment from the start to a referendum on the whole citizen report, similar to the case of Canadian citizens’ assemblies, could have been a way to avoid those issues. Furthermore, the Irish case shows the importance of a referendum for the mini public’s propositions to be democratically approved and implemented.*”¹³

Looking at the three French Citizens’ Assemblies studied here, one of the solutions is to improve the public commitment to one-off CAs. **Another one could be to institutionalise CAs as a process in which public commitment, implementation and monitoring are framed and then, can truly have an impact in the real world.** But the institutionalisation of such a deliberative process as CAs necessarily has limits: the risk of abuse in the use of complex and expensive processes in order to find legitimacy rather than in the aim of truly improving democracy. The institutionalisation also chimes with the lack of agility in the design and the temporality: “*There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach; it depends on the context, purpose, and process.*” (OECD, 2020). Since every situation will lead to a different approach, in implementing deliberative democracy we need to find a way to combine institutionalisation and innovation in the creation of the Citizens’ Assembly. There are criteria that can reinsure the solidity of a process, but finally isn’t a powerful CA the one that is able to ponderate different criteria regarding the context? Ultimately, the risk is having no one holding the responsibility in the decision anymore and that there is no actor to fight for the right and fair implementation of proposition made by CAs participants: using Citizens’ Assembly as an institutionalised process can lead to political cowardice and a less intense follow-up by political leaders.

The Case for Permanent Citizens' Assemblies: Renewing Europe in an Age of Crisis

Ulrike Liebert

Europe is facing converging crises that reveal the limits of traditional democratic institutions. Many citizens feel alienated from elite-driven, unresponsive systems. The EU, often seen as technocratic and distant, struggles to sustain democratic legitimacy. Yet within this turbulence lies a chance for democratic renewal.

This essay calls for Permanent Citizens' Assemblies (PCAs) to become a driving force for renewing Europe's democracy in an age of crisis. As Europe faces overlapping climate emergencies, health crises, financial shocks, rising extremism, and growing public anxiety—traditional political systems are struggling to keep up. PCAs offer a bold alternative: they bring people back into the heart of decision-making through ongoing, citizen-led deliberation. They don't just patch up the system; they help reinvent it from the ground up. Across cities, regions, and member states, PCAs can turn democratic ideals into everyday practice, providing real-world models of how a stronger, more resilient Europe can emerge. But to succeed, we must scale up these assemblies, embed them deeply in institutions, and anchor them in the public imagination. Building a permanent, citizen-powered democratic ecosystem is not just possible—it is essential for Europe to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

1. Participatory and deliberative citizens' assemblies: A decade of growing evidence

Over the past decade, citizens' assemblies have moved from experimental formats to proven instruments of democratic innovation at every level of governance. Across Europe, hundreds of subnational assemblies—from climate assemblies in French and British cities to local governance forums in Belgium and Poland—have shown that ordinary citizens, given time and support, can produce thoughtful, forward-looking policy proposals. At the national level, landmark cases such as Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on abortion and climate policy demonstrated how structured deliberation can unlock political deadlocks and build public legitimacy for difficult reforms. Meanwhile, transnational experiments like the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) pushed participatory deliberation beyond national borders, offering a glimpse of how

citizens can shape policy across a complex, multi-layered union. These examples are not isolated successes; they form a growing body of practice showing that when citizens are trusted with real responsibility, they deliver collective intelligence and democratic energy that traditional systems often lack.

2. Toward a citizen-powered democratic ecosystem: The case for Permanent Citizens' Assemblies

Building on these successes, we must move beyond temporary experiments toward a permanent, citizen-powered democratic ecosystem. Permanent Citizens' Assemblies (PCAs) offer a structural innovation: they embed citizen deliberation as a continuous, institutionalized part of governance, rather than an occasional consultation. In this vision, PCAs operate across cities, regions, and member states, forming a dense democratic network that complements and invigorates representative institutions. Citizens, selected by sortition and supported by expert facilitation, would deliberate on key issues with real influence over policy agendas. Rather than treating participation as an exception, PCAs normalize it as a core democratic function. In doing so, they help to close legitimacy gaps, re-anchor political decision-making in lived experience, and build a resilient, adaptive Europe from the ground up:

- PCAs can bridge the legitimacy gap: by regularly convening diverse, randomly selected citizens they build trust, sustain participation over time and connect ordinary people to decision-making;
- PCAs can complement parliamentary processes from below and provide horizontal legitimacy: by bringing citizens across borders into shared deliberations about EU-level decisions they can advise or even co-shape legislative policies with elected bodies;
- In a multi-demoi Europe, PCAs foster pluralism, solidarity and the democratisation of EU decision-making by linking expert knowledge with lived experiences.

A vibrant PCA ecosystem would not replace parliaments or governments, but would work alongside them, providing a living pulse of democratic engagement capable of navigating the crises and complexities of the 21st century.

3. Scaling Permanent Citizens' Assemblies: Out, In, and Deep

To realize the full potential of Permanent Citizens' Assemblies, we must think strategically about how to scale them across Europe—along three critical dimensions.

First, **scaling out** means expanding PCAs geographically into local, national, and transnational contexts where participatory and deliberative innovations have yet to take root. This requires political will, supportive institutions, and networks of civil society actors who can advocate for assemblies as integral parts of governance, not just one-off experiments.

Second, **scaling in** demands a relentless focus on quality. PCAs must uphold the highest standards of meaningful deliberation: inclusive and representative selection by sortition, skilled facilitation, balanced expert input, transparency, and—crucially—clear pathways to effective political follow-up. Without such standards, assemblies risk becoming symbolic exercises rather than engines of democratic renewal.

Third, **scaling deep** calls for embedding PCAs into the cultural and emotional fabric of democracy itself. Assemblies must become more than institutions—they must evolve into democratic rituals that build civic pride, foster political imagination, and shift societal norms toward collective problem-solving. This requires storytelling, education, media engagement, and sustained political leadership committed to cultivating a culture where citizen deliberation is seen as both a right and a responsibility.

Scaling PCAs out, in, and deep will not happen automatically. It demands more than reform – a democratic paradigm change. This requires coordinated action from citizens, civil society, political leaders, and public institutions alike. But if we rise to this challenge, we can lay the foundations for a new democratic ecosystem—one that reconnects power to people. PCAs can build Europe's resilience since they teach us to negotiate diversity, to transform deep conflict in good conflict and to adapt to changing conditions.

As Bächtiger and Dryzek (2024) write, “In diabolic times, deliberative democracy must be both systemic and insurgent”. PCAs reflect this dual vision – embedded yet transformative – thereby offering hope for democratic renewal in the 21st century.

Conclusion: A Democratic Odyssey for Europe's Future

Europe stands at a crossroads. Both its founding myths – integration through law and markets – are insufficient for harnessing today's complexities. Many institutions perform democracy without deep participation. We must move beyond “facade democracy” to institutional practices that foster engagement and ownership. The challenges of our time demand more than technical fixes—they call for a democratic renaissance rooted in the wisdom, creativity, and collective will of its people. We need a story of living democracy where citizens co-author Europe's future. Permanent Citizens' Assemblies offer a bold path forward: a living infrastructure for a democracy that is resilient, inclusive, and future-ready.

This vision is already taking shape. The **Democratic Odyssey**—a People's Assembly for Europe travelling from Athens, birthplace of democracy, through Florence, cradle of the Renaissance, to Vienna, city of dialogue—symbolizes the journey we must all undertake. It is a journey to reconnect power with people, to reimagine Europe's democratic foundations, and to renew our shared future from the ground up. If we commit to scaling out, scaling in, and scaling deep, we can transform today's democratic experiments into tomorrow's institutions. The time to act is now—Europe's new democratic horizon is waiting to be claimed.

A Permanent Assembly as a Public Policy Response to the Tempi Tragedy in Greece

Alexandros Dimitrios Poulakis



The Tempi Tragedy

The Tempi train disaster laid bare a long-standing institutional malaise in Greece's public administration. Although framed initially as the result of human error or poor communication, investigations quickly revealed structural deficiencies: outdated infrastructure, incomplete safety systems, inadequate staffing, and a lack of regulatory enforcement (Kathimerini, 2023). Yet these technical failures were only symptoms of a deeper political disease—one marked by fragmentation, opacity, and impunity.

The country faces long-standing problems of clientelism, poor planning and lack of accountability (Featherstone, 2005). Transport and infrastructure have not escaped this rule. Projects are often driven by clientelist interests rather than public need, and accountability mechanisms are routinely bypassed or ignored (Trantidis & Tsagkroni, 2017). Various independent bodies have highlighted delay, over costing, and non-compliance with safety rules.

This institutional dysfunction is not just a question of inefficiency; it reflects a crisis of democratic legitimacy. When citizens see public officials evade responsibility, when safety becomes negotiable, and when loss of life is met with vague promises of reform, trust in democratic institutions erodes (Norris, 2011). The problem is not the absence of laws or procedures, it is the lack of credible, accountable, and participatory governance.

The Tempi tragedy thus symbolizes more than a railway failure. It stands as a moral indictment of a state that has failed to listen, to protect, and to learn. It is in this context that any meaningful reform must begin—not with a new minister or committee, but with a new political commitment to public accountability and democratic inclusion (Smith, 2009; Fung, 2006).

The Proposal of a Permanent Assembly

In the aftermath of the Tempi disaster, Greece needs more than token responsibility or transient managerial reform. What Greece needs is a structural intervention that allows citizens to participate genuinely in decisions that have immediate implications for public safety, resource management, and infrastructure planning. A permanent citizens' assembly on transport and infrastructure is such an intervention – an institution innovation combining democratic legitimacy and deliberative depth.

A citizens' assembly is a deliberative group of randomly selected citizens representative of the demographic of the nation. Members are often selected via civic lottery (sortition), paid for their time and supported by independent facilitators and experts to facilitate informed, respectful and balanced deliberation (Smith, 2009). These gatherings have been applied to solve sophisticated policy problems ranging from Irish constitutional reform (Farrel et al., 2020).

On 28 February 2023, Greek society experienced one of the worst train accidents in its history. A head-on collision between a passenger train and a freight train near Tempi claimed 57 lives, most of them young students. The public debate in the early days was dominated by narratives about technical problems and human errors, but very quickly it turned out to be a deeper systemic crisis, with deep roots in institutional decay, opaque corruption and chronic political negligence. It would therefore be a tragic mistake to view the Tempi as an isolated incident, without realizing that it is directly linked to the chronic underinvestment in railways, mismanagement and of course the lack of accountability of the state for the infrastructure and transport system.

After the first numbing of society, the response was tremendously strong, with thousands of demonstrators in the streets in all parts of the country, demanding justice for the victims, in a general context of questioning the ability of the state to protect its citizens. What followed was a familiar cycle of blame, resignation, and short-term political management – leaving untouched the structural deficiencies that allowed such a tragedy to occur in the first place.

This article aims to highlight the need for our country to move on to more substantial and profound reforms and not just some bureaucratic fixes or ad hoc inquiries. The creation of a permanent citizens' assembly on infrastructure and transport, a deliberative democratic body with a clear mandate to oversee, advise, and scrutinize public policy in these critical domains. The aim is not to replace experts or elected officials, but to inject democratic legitimacy, transparency, and moral accountability into a system that has repeatedly failed its people.

Compared with ad hoc or one-time deliberate processes, a permanent assembly offers institutional continuity and sustained citizen engagement. It institutionalizes a site of civic review, public scrutiny, and democratic accountability of long-term infrastructure planning, maintenance, safety standards and public investment. Permanent assemblies also make it possible for institutional memory to be built, which improves the capacity of the assembly to track policy effects, carry on recommendations and build expertise over time (OECD, 2021)

Greece’s current institutional framework lacks robust participatory channels for civic engagement. While public consultation is foreseen in the Constitution in article 73, it is narrow, non-binding and tends to be procedural. A permanent citizens’ assembly could be established as a pilot under ministerial decree or parliamentary law and then progressively more formally institutionalized through constitutional or legislative reforms.

During times of public calamity and institutional failure, democratic states are not only put to the test as regards their capacity to deliver policy, but as regards their capacity to listen, learn, and restore trust. The tempi disaster was definitely just a technical failure but a profound failure of the moral and democratic contract between state and citizens. Any genuine response must therefore go beyond policy or bureaucratic reform and engage with the key question of legitimacy.

Why Should We?

Political legitimacy rests on grounds greater than legal authority; it depends on popular perceptions of institutions’ fairness, responsiveness, and openness (Tyler, 2006). In Greece, widespread failures on public security along with low citizen participation in policymaking have created a perception that the government is closed, secret, and unaccountable. A citizens’ assembly offers an institutional solution to this perception. By putting serious decisions within the reach of ordinary citizens, it is a step towards collective responsibility and democratic transparency (Fung, 2006)

Besides legitimacy, there is a deeper ethical requirement; to acknowledge harm and create pathways for moral repair (Walker, 2006). After Tempi, the general public and the victims’ families were not only upset, but also morally offended – a sentiment that the state had violated its duty of care. A space of deliberation, where citizens consider, question, and help re-shape the institutions that fail them, is a path towards symbolic and instrumental justice. It does not contradict the tragedy, but it respects the reaction by voicing for those too often forgotten by policy.

Timeless accountability processes like parliamentary scrutiny, audit, and judicial review are required, but they also have a tendency to lag behind events and are uninteresting to the wider public. Permanent citizens’ assemblies have a quality of proactive accountability: a permanent institution can monitor decisions as taken, question first before disaster occurs, and identify issues in the system in real-time (OECD,2020). Its proactive nature is especially needed in high-risk, high-cost sectors like transport and infrastructure.

The incorporation of deliberative practices into formal government is not a final solution but is a movement toward institutional resilience for readjusting capacity, rebounding, and innovating in the midst of a crisis like Tempi. Empirical research suggests that participatory institutions, when they are well-designed, enhance the legitimacy of policies, allow for higher-quality decision-making, and more constructively build civic strength (Smith, 2009; OECD, 2020). In the Greek case, where the government is distrusted and policy horizons are short, a stable deliberative forum might fulfill the dual function of early warning system and public watchdog.

Conclusion

The Tempi train crash exposed not only systemic failures in Greece’s infrastructure and transport management, but a more profound crisis of democracy – a crisis of trust, legitimacy, and moral responsibility. When confronted with such basic institutional breakdown, symbolic responses and technocratic solutions are inadequate. A structural, participatory response placing citizens at the forefront of democratic governance is what is needed.

A permanent citizens’ assembly on transport and infrastructure is not a radical experiment, is a prudent democratic innovation, grounded in a growing international research and practice base. It offers a realistic means to increase transparency, foster accountability, and bridge the distance between policymakers and the public. Above all, it is a forum for moral accounting and democratic reconciliation-an institutional space in which the public can engage with the record of failure and help construct a safer and more just future.

Greece may be a leader-not only in the way that it responds to a tragedy, but in reshaping what an ethical, responsive and inclusive state could be. Having a citizens’ assembly will not take away the past, but it can change the future by rethinking how decisions get made, who gets to make them, and in whose name, they get made. Let’s make our Democracy stronger.

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Participatory Democracy in Urban Governance

A Case Study of the PaketPost-Areal Citizens' Assembly in Munich

Zukhra Mavlanova



Vision for the urban transformation of the PaketPost Area
© Herzog & de Meuron

Urban development as a litmus test¹ of participatory democracy in Germany

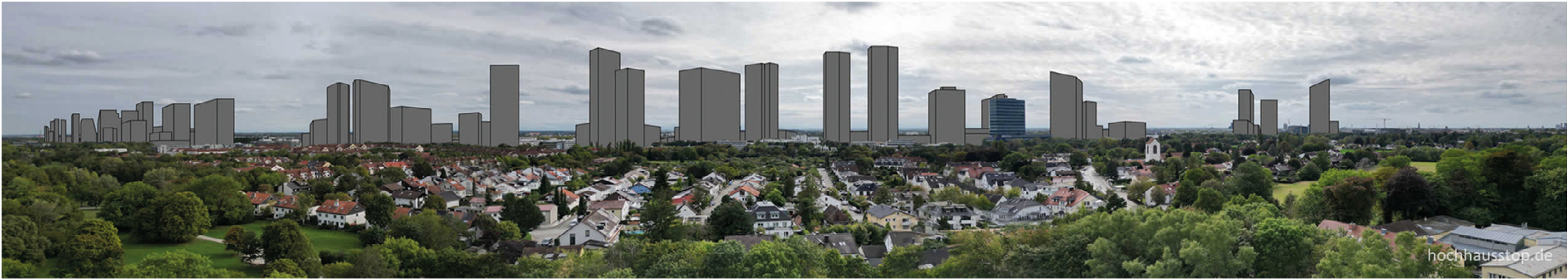
Urban development in the governance context can reflect democratic values, indicating how municipalities embody the principles of inclusivity, equality, and participation. The processes of urban development reflect the extent to which citizens, alongside various bodies and stakeholders, are engaged in the decision-making process, highlighting the state of a democracy. Urban development projects such as new housing projects or urban expansion tend to have higher engagement from the citizens as they directly intervene with the quality of urban space and shape the city they populate.

In Germany, a formal way of citizen participation at the national level is embodied in the law; it protects the right to access information, to public participation in decision-making, and safeguards the right to obtain access to justice on environmental matters, as embedded in §3-4 BauGB – German Federal Building Code.² At the communal level, various formal methods of public participation exemplify direct democracy. These include local elections and a citizens' initiative, known as Bürgerbegehren. If the citizens' initiative is successful, it can lead to a local referendum or a citizen's decision, referred to as a Bürgerentscheid. The informal ways of citizen participation in Germany range from public hearings and written objections on online platforms to the co-planning of strategic urban plans.

The City of Munich is one of the national pioneers and trendsetters through its ambitious urban development projects. The city is committed to and strongly encourages public involvement in decision-making processes, underscored with a dedication to balancing various interests, ensuring a fair and inclusive methodology.

On the local level, the legally binding citizen participation is extended through a strategic orientation framework for urban development, expressed through guiding principles and action areas for the city's future. Participation is offered in a wide range of formats – co-creation in idea and planning workshops, participatory competitions, and online dialogues via citizen assemblies or councils.³

1. A metaphor based on a simple chemical acidity test, a litmus test is a singular question asked to a political nominee to determine their nomination.
2. Cf. Joachim Lohse, *Citizen participation in Germany - some practical experiences*, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Governance Fund, 2021.
3. Cf. Elizabeth Merk, in: *Bürger*innenrat zur Stadtentwicklung*, München MitDenken.
<https://muenchen-mitdenken.de/mitdenken/buergerinnenrat-zur-stadtentwicklung>
(accessed: 29. March 2025).



City skyline visualization used in the HochhausSTOP campaign © HochhausSTOP



View of the planned high-rise buildings before the citizens' assembly © Herzog & de Meuron

PaketPost area: Context and timeline

A recent remarkable example of public interest in Munich is the redevelopment of the PaketPost area in the Neuhausen-Nymphenburg. This project has led to an outburst of public discourse for various reasons, particularly regarding the height of two proposed skyscrapers.

The Büschl Group, a major investor in the Munich real estate market, acquired the area around the former Paketposthalle in the year 2018, including the parcel post hall itself, a protected monument of modern architecture built in 1969, to repurpose the area into an “innovative urban district of the future”⁴. To achieve the vision, the Büschl Group has engaged the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron to undertake urban development studies and create a master plan for the urban district.

Since the first presentation of the design, the main topic of discussion revolved around two proposed 155m high-rise buildings. The main public concerns have included the towers' impact on the sightlines, monument protection, commercialization of public spaces, and, its incompatibility with the 2004 citizens' decision to limit buildings heights to 100 meters. Although the citizens' decision, intended to preserve the historic city view, legally expired after one year, it has continued to be referenced in political discussions and the approval processes ever since.

4. The Büschl Group, *Informationsveranstaltung zur Entwicklung der ehemaligen Paketposthalle und seiner Umgebung*, unpublished protocol, 2019, p.4.
5. Cf. Landeshauptstadt München, Referat für Stadtplanung und Bauordnung, *PaketPost-Areal München, Bürger*innengutachten 2022*, Weber Offset GmbH, München, 2022, p.5-7.
6. Cf. Hans-Liudger Diemel und Sabine Schröder, *Direktdemokratische und deliberative Bürgerbeteiligung in der Mobilitätspolitik*, In: Canzler, W., Haus, J., Knie, A., Ruhrort, L. (eds) *Handbuch Mobilität und Gesellschaft*. Springer VS, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37804-2_21-1, p.7.

The Bavarian Council for the Preservation of Historic Buildings and Monuments has also been critical of the construction, however from the beginning city officials and politicians have been strongly supporting the redevelopment proposal – they have seen it as a chance to strengthen the city's international image as well as a solution to the growing demand for living space, which is crucial for the Munich housing market. Remarkably, the solution for the inter-political debates and disagreement with other public authorities and institutes was sought through instruments of citizen participation.

In January 2021, the city council commissioned the Department of Urban Planning and Building Regulation to conduct a citizen report through a citizen's assembly. This form of citizen participation, a type of deliberative Mini Publics (DMPs), was developed by Peter Daniel in the 1970s and had previously been successfully implemented in Munich in 2013.⁵ Its features include the random selection of citizens to form a heterogeneous group, with the aim of advising policymakers and public authorities by developing recommendations or proposing solutions on an issue. The results are usually summarized in a citizens' report.⁶

Comprised of 112 randomly selected Munich residents, the assembly took place in October 2021 for four days, following two introductory appointments in July 2021, and was carried out by an external organization, which is significant for creating neutrality. The outcome of the participatory process, developed in four so-called planning cells, has yielded several key recommendations. These include the creation of a sustainable neighbourhood with green and open spaces, the organization of the planning process as an open competition, the development of affordable housing, architectural modifications to the high-rise buildings, clarification regarding the use and operation of the parcel post hall, as well as an increase in information sharing with citizens. Notably, the feedback from this participatory process was largely positive regarding the construction of the skyscrapers, with citizens primarily requesting adjustments to their design.

Although citizen assemblies do not legally require public authorities or policymakers to implement the outcomes, a procedure mandates that public information about the results must be provided a year later. This public announcement or informative session can be highly influential in a representative democracy, as it can influence future elections of policymakers.⁷ Following the Munich assemblies, the towers were redesigned insignificantly; the elevator, initially crosshanging between the towers, was removed, and more cultural spaces were added to the top floors of the skyscrapers.

Following this, despite the neutrality of the citizens’ assembly and the clear statement of its goals, framework and conditions⁸, the HochhausSTOP initiative has emerged. Initiated by CSU politician Robert Brannekämper and former city councillor Wolfgang Czisch, the initiative announced in January 2025 that it has gathered enough signatures to begin a citizens’ decision process against the construction of the towers. As a formal instrument of citizen participation and a tool of direct democracy, it typically starts as a bottom-up initiative in response to citizens’ dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the citizens’ assembly. Notably, the initiative aims to limit the height of skyscrapers in the PaketPost area to 60 meters while using imagery that portrays the entire city to highlight the issue. One of the images provided is a photo collage that visualizes skyscrapers across the city at an exaggerated scale, along with a shadow study showing the overlapped shadows of two 155-meter towers throughout the day. This misrepresentation can be seen as misleading and manipulative and has been called “populist” by the city councilor Anna Hanusch⁹. Although the formal procedure of signature collecting has been successful, the citizen decision (against the towers’ construction) will be unlikely to proceed if the urban development plans receive a positive review.

A comparative analysis of the citizens’ participation and chances of permanent citizens’ assembly

In the case of the PaketPost area in Munich both instruments of direct and deliberative democracy have been (citizens’ assembly) or may be (citizens’ decision) implemented. While the extent of success is complex and yet to be distinguished, both citizens’ decisions and assemblies have ambiguous status.

While legally binding and therefore mistakenly seen as more influential by the HochHausSTOP initiative, citizens’ decisions can be polarizing due to a survey format of yes/no questions. It also can prevent individuals from fully expressing their opinions. In contrast, through citizen assemblies, more complex problems could be handled, including informing the participants and allowing more active forms of participation. Furthermore, citizens’ assemblies avoid the issue of a perceived majority that often arises from the “loud voices” of those discordant, as they tend to receive more media attention or support from politicians. For instance, several articles in Süddeutsche Zeitung are from those who feel unrepresented after the assembly, hence, those who oppose the idea. Logically, fewer people engage with the press if they agree with the topic.

Moreover, by randomly selecting a representative group, the assemblies enable citizens with diverse backgrounds to engage with one another. This interaction can lead to changes in opinions, which is less likely to occur in decisions made solely by citizens.

The public generally trusts the citizens’ decisions (survey) more as they involve overall participation. Assemblies, on the other hand, are arguably less vulnerable to manipulation since they include an informing element. For instance, when discussing affordable housing, this issue can be used to justify the construction of a high-rise building that initially can be built merely for profit. Additionally, topics like the cultural reuse of today’s inaccessible hall and the selection of a renowned architect can be seen as a persuasive strategy and could be discussed during this participatory process.

Establishing a permanent citizens’ assembly could address some of the challenges that temporary assemblies face. As an institutional body, it could introduce a binding effect on participation outcomes and standardize the assembly process, which in its turn would improve transparency and communication while keeping the public informed. An institutional body could awaken more public trust than a citizens’ assembly and provide a more specific focus on a topic than the citizens’ decision. Additionally, having a permanent assembly could offer a broader range of topics and a more consistent way of handling them. The probability of instrumentalizing the tools of public participation or their political misuse, as in the case of the HochHausSTOP initiative, which mimics a citizen’s bottom-up initiative, could be minimized.

Conclusively, the assembly at the PaketPost area shows cases the need for more regular assemblies that could be organized by a permanent citizens’ assembly, reflecting the growing mistrust in representative democratic tools. At the

national level, permanent citizens’ assemblies already exist in some European countries, such as Belgium. Implementing one locally, starting with urban development issues, could be an effective pilot project for this model in Germany, which could start in Munich – the place for national lighthouse pilot projects in urban development.

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8. Cf. 2. Joachim Lohse, *Citizen participation in Germany – some practical experiences*, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Governance Fund, 2021, p.4.

9. Eva von Steinburg, “Das ist eine Frechheit”: Neue Initiative schürt in München Furcht vor Hochhäusern, *Abendzeitung München*. <https://www.abendzeitung-muenchen.de/muenchen/das-ist-eine-angstkampagne-initiative-schuert-in-muenchen-furcht-vor-hochhaeusern-art-961110> (last accessed 13. April 2025).

A Citizens' Assembly for Europe: Why Permanence is Key

Kalypso Nicolaidis



Democratic Odyssey Assembly at Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 2025. Photo by Elisa Massara

In 2020, Alberto Alemanno, Niccolò Milanese and myself called for the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe to create a permanent citizens' assembly for Europe (Alemanno et al, 2020). Subsequently we launched the Democratic Odyssey project, committed not only to articulate this vision but also to provide an actual proof of concept for it. In a recent publication with GlobCit, twenty three authors debate this vision, offering a great range of arguments for and against. If you accept the rationale for citizens' assemblies (CAs), however, and even while many would agree that Europe needs more than ad-hoc panels, the idea of a new permanent body for the EU meets with much resistance. Permanent CAs may make sense at the local level, in cities like Paris and Brussels, objectors argue, but adding yet another institution to the already very complex EU edifice simply adds to the complexity (Berg, et al, 2023, Abel et al, 2022). In the book, I provide five reasons why citizen participation needs institutionalization, not on-off or ad hoc processes, which I reproduce here:

Continuity. The term 'permanence' can be misunderstood. It does not mean that the assembly would be permanently sitting or that its members would hold their mandates for a long time. On the contrary, the ongoing nature of the ECA's existence will be combined with intermittence through rotating membership (of a few months), a feature which has nearly always characterised bodies selected by lottery in democratic and republican history. Members would meet intermittently and in different places. Nevertheless, such a standing body would become a genuine fixture of the EU institutional landscape, and its stature would be continuous as institutions are meant to be, with a privileged relation to the EP.

Independence. A permanent CA would escape the vagaries of the political cycle. It would avoid falling prey to arbitrariness and cherry-picking as to when and how citizens are convened to form a temporary assembly (or panels for the Commission). As an independent space within the EU institutional structure, it would be well placed not only to provide policy input as do the current panels but could become a source of sunlight shining onto the whole EU edifice – an open monitoring body whose vigilance could enhance the legitimacy of other EU institutions, including the EP. And its independence would be sustained through its own budget. While power cannot just melt in deliberation through the force of argument, institutional staying power can help mitigate power asymmetries.

Learning. Permanence would also correct for one of the drawbacks of ad-hoc assemblies, namely the lack of knowledge consolidation, by promoting collective learning over time and refining from experience the way the assembly operates by collecting best practices. Its translocal character would allow for what is sometimes referred to as side-scaling and thus mutual learning across political systems. The learning dynamic through different iterations would not only benefit facilitators but the citizens themselves.

Embeddedness. Permanence would allow the ECA to become more embedded over time. Within EU institutions, both the Commission and the EU would draw its Citizens' Panels from the ECA membership. It would also be able to develop relations with national parliaments, a crucial dimension of embeddedness. At the same time, its permanency will facili-

itate the ongoing involvement of civil society as interlocutors, collaborators or counter power. This, in turn, would empower advocates of citizen engagement within EU institutions in a virtuous circle of connected political spheres.

Publicness and social imagination. Finally, by existing as a standing body labelled 'assembly' rather than the more obscure term 'panel,' this body would be public in the proper sense, visibly part of the institutional landscape (with or without Treaty change). Permanence would allow it to acquire a status understood and valued by the citizenry as citizenship in action, while the very label and look and feel of the assembly would hopefully appeal to their democratic imagination. There would be a story to tell about the long march of democratic progress, a new way to enlarge the franchise ushered by the third democratic transformation, however tentatively (Nicolaidis, 2024). In this way, the ECA would be a tool for systemic change, not only a footnote to electoral democracy. By giving effect to popular power in a non-ephemeral way at the EU level, it might even convey the message that the EU is becoming more democratic than its member states. And beyond the EU, it could strengthen the EU's claim as a global norm-setter on new democracy, adding to its growing clout on data protection and the governance of digital platforms, thus strengthening its ability to support citizens fighting autocratic control.

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Il Disertore

Giuliano Logos

Nel silenzio — e dunque nella complicità — di una parte ancora troppo ampia dell’in-formazione italiana e internazionale, il genocidio del popolo palestinese continua a essere perpetrato da Israele. Le voci dissidenti - dall’attivismo all’arte, dagli studen-ti nelle università a cittadini nelle piazze, nelle strade, agli artisti sui palchi di tutto il mondo - vengono sistematicamente e brutalmente represse, da governi sordi e ciechi di fronte a questa tragedia e/o complici di fornire arsenale per compierla. Parlare di Resistenza oggi è parlare di tutto questo.

Prendendo in prestito alcune delle più grandi voci che hanno avuto il corag-gio di schierarsi apertamente contro così tanto orrore:

Piero si rivolta all’ombra dei fossi a cui avete strappato i papaveri¹
Vi serviva il rosso dei petali per farci i mirini dei caccia con cui bombardate ospedali

Ma l’Aurora stamane Vi accarezzerà nel Vostro letto
di piume e ipocrisia benpensante, allatatta
al seno delle pressioni diplomatiche
mentre Voi sproloquate di *equo spazio e tempo*
da scranni d’argento
come se a chi vede il cielo farsi schegge di luce in un firmamento
di fiamme e di urla e di vite falciate e abbattute possa fregare qualcosa
del Vostro
concetto di tempo

E mentre questo accade,
mentre la Vostra anima marcia fermenta
nel tepore delle Vostre redazioni riscaldate
da cui estirpate ogni Vostro collega e ogni penna che si batte
per la libera informazione e la pace
Voi trovate,
nel baratro di disumanità che Vi abita il grembo
il coraggio
d’osservare ogni artista, attivista, ogni cittadino
che si dice contrario al massacro,
- solo questo -
contrario al massacro,
al costante sistematico spargimento di sangue umano
portato avanti da un cinquantennio /
Voi trovate
il coraggio di desiderare di imporgli il silenzio
di profonderVi comunicati di sdegno².

Ma che Vi fulmini il cielo
se volete un’arte ignava al cospetto della guerra

Voi siete il precipitato d’una generazione
da cui Vian e Fossati cantavano le gesta

1. Fabrizio De André, La guerra di Piero, in Tutti morimmo a stento, 1968.
2. During the Sanremo 2024 festival, Italian musician Ghali closed his live national performance with the call “Stop genocide,” referring to Palestine. RAI CEO Roberto Sergio responded by using Italy’s public service to express his personal solidarity with Israel on behalf of the entire RAI - on the specious argument that fair space and time for debate had not been respected - sparking controversy over the lack of information balance in public service.
3. Boris Vian, Le déserteur, single published in 1954. Translated and adapted into Italian by Ivano Fossati, Il disertore, in Macramé, 1996.
4. Bob Dylan, Blowin’ in the Wind, in The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan, 1963.
5. John Lennon, Imagine, in Imagine, 1971.

del Disertore
E allora ci perdoni
se in piena facoltà
Egregio Presidente
*scriviamo la presente che spero leggerà.*³

Avere voce è una responsabilità.
Parlare è una responsabilità.
Essere un artista, un attivista, un cittadino è una responsabilità.
Persino la visibilità effimera
in quest’era di thera e gigabyte
è una responsabilità.
Questa generazione lo sa.
E non importa quante manganellate darete ancora
per interposta persona
al riparo dietro uno schermo.

Amministratore Delegato, chiediamo solo questo,
come John e Bob vorrebbero:
quanti anni deve vivere un popolo
*per avere il diritto di essere libero*⁴
fuori
come è libero
dentro?
*Immagini*⁵
- se le riesce -
che la risposta soffi nel vento.

PS. Se la generica frase “stop al genocidio”
produce mal di pancia a qualcuno
a me pare che
quel qualcuno
qualcosa lo stia ammettendo.

The Deserter

Giuliano Logos

Amid the silence - and thus complicity - of a still too large part of Italian and interna-tional media, the genocide of the Palestinian people continues to be perpetrated by Israel. Dissident voices - ra(n)ging from activism to art, from students in universities to citizens in squares, in streets, to artists on stages all over the world - are system-atically and brutally repressed by their governments. Governments deaf and blind to this tragedy or/and governments complicit in providing the arsenals to carry it out. To speak of Resistance today is to speak of all of this.

Borrowing some of the greatest words of some the greatest voices who in the last decades have had the courage to speak out openly against such horrors:

*Piero is turning in his grave in the shadow of the trenches from which You plucked the poppies*¹
You needed the red of their petals to paint the scopes of the fighter planes with which You bomb hospitals

But the Dawn this morning will still caress You in Your bed
Of feathers and well-meaning hypocrisy, suckling
at the breast of diplomatic pressure
while You prattle on about fair space-and-time
from silver benches
As if those who see their sky become shards of light in a firmament of flames and screams and mown-down lives could give a damn
about Your
concept of time

And while this is happening
while Your rotten soul ferments
in the warmth of Your heated newsrooms
from which You uproot every colleague and every pen that fights
for free information and peace
You find,
in the abyss of inhumanity that inhabits Your womb
the courage
of watching every activist, every artist, every citizen
who speaks out against the massacre,
- just that -
against the massacre;
against the constant systematic shedding of human blood
carried on for a seven decades /
You find
the courage to wish to to command silence
to utter statements of indignation.²

But heaven strike You
if You desire art oblivious in the face of war.

You are what remains of a generation
from which Vian and Fossati sang the deeds of

the Deserter.
Then forgive us
If in full possess of mental faculty
Dear President
*we write this letter which we hope You will read.*³

Having a voice is a responsibility.
Speaking is a responsibility.
Being an artist, an activist, a citizen is a responsibility.
Even ephemeral visibility
in this age of thera and gigabytes
is a responsibility.
This generation knows that.
And it doesn’t matter how many more baton blows You give
by proxy
in the shelter behind a screen.

Dear Mr. CEO, we ask only this,
as John and Bob would have it:
how many years can some people exist
*Before they’re allowed to be free*⁴
outside
as they are
inside?
*Imagine*⁵
- if You can -
the answer blowing in the wind.

PS. If the generic phrase “stop genocide”
causes someone’s stomach to ache
it seems to me that
that someone
is admitting something.

Listen to Il Disertore [here](#)



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