Democratic Odyssey

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Lessons from the Democratic Odyssey

(D10.2 Evaluation Report of the Democratic Odyssey's Assembly)

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Abstract

The Democratic Odyssey (DO) is a project prototyping a Peoples' Assembly for Europe: a novel, scalable model of permanently renewed European parliamentary processes, through systematised citizen engagement between elections. The 2024-5 pilot has explored how a transnational citizens' assembly - rooted in local contexts yet connected across borders - can complement representative institutions such as the European Parliament and strengthen democratic resilience under accelerating pressures from geopolitical, socio-ecological, and technological poly-crises.

The Evaluation of the 2024/5 DO's three-city and online pilot is structured in three phases of the transnational assembly process: I. the preparation, II. running and III. embedding it. The evaluation of the in total sixteen tasks involved in the process starts with a short description, summarises the issues of discussion, and draws lessons learnt from implementing it. It is to be read together with the Guidelines (Deliverable 10.2) which provide at a glance a summary of the design principles and recommendations for future replications and adaptations of the DO pilot, aimed at facilitating the iteration of future randomly selected Citizens Assemblies travelling to ever more cities across local and national boundaries.

Nota: This report should be read in conjunction with the Athens, Florence and Vienna report. Find out more about Democratic Odyssey here.

D.10.2 Evaluation of the 2024-5 Democratic Odyssey - Pilot

Introduction

The Democratic Odyssey (DO) emerged in 2023–24 with the ambition to prototype a new form of *transnational, translocal, and permanently renewed citizens' engagement* with the European Union. The 2024–25 **three-city and online pilot People's Assembly for Europe** - travelling from Athens to Florence and concluding in Vienna - was designed as a concrete response to lessons drawn from previous European Citizens' Panels, especially those of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). A major insight from the CoFoE process was that transnational deliberation risks losing its transformative potential if it remains disconnected from local democratic ecologies and if it is implemented as a one-off, non-iterative event. For this reason, the DO Pilot began from two founding principles to operationalise the ideal of transnationalism: **translocalism** and **itinerancy**. The assembly deliberately rooted itself in local civic ecosystems while remaining structurally mobile - physically travelling across European cultural and political spaces - to foreground the diverse lived realities that shape European democratic life.

From the outset, the project was organised through a strong commitment to **co-design**. Rather than treating design as a closed, expert-led phase, the DO team created an open **co-creation space** that has operated continuously throughout the process. Central to this ecology has been the biweekly *Brown Bag Lunch* meetings, which brought together scholars, practitioners, researchers, citizens who had already partaken in assemblies and civil society. All share insights, test assumptions, and adapt the design iteratively. This ongoing conversational infrastructure became a methodological anchor: it enabled collective learning, surfacing tensions, and ensuring that the pilot evolved in response to real-time feedback rather than pre-determined templates.

A further methodological innovation has been the development of the **Modular Framework**, conceived as both a design tool and an evaluative lens. The Modular Framework consists of interlinked modules that map the full life cycle of the pilot - from agenda-setting and participant selection, to facilitation formats, participatory arts, digital hybridisation, and post-assembly pathways. Each module in the present Evaluation Report is therefore presented through a triple structure: a **concise descriptive part** explaining the module's purpose and implementation, followed by a **Forum Discussion section** synthesising reflections, methodological debates, and process-learning generated by the DO network, and concluded by **lessons drawn from the Pilot**. The "forum discussion" element is distinct from the thematic content debates among citizens on the deliberative platform; instead, it documents the meta-deliberation among organisers and its open-to-all community about design choices, challenges, and adaptive strategies. The "lessons from pilot" part includes evaluations by both, organisers and participants.

To ground these evaluations in empirical evidence, the report draws on a preliminary mixed-method data collection strategy implemented throughout the pilot's lifecycle and comprising semistructured interviews and questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews have been designed to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences from the relevant stakeholders of the Democratic Odyssey's pilot:

- 1 *Facilitator* - offering comparisons with the highly structured European Citizens' Panels (ECPs);
- 3 *Constituent Network Members and official Observers* - providing experiences from the co-design choices and rolling review;
- 3 *Assembly Members* - representing the citizens' experiences, particularly focusing on the crucial "newcomer's" perspective and the inclusion of transnational residents.

While limited in quantitative terms, the respondent's evaluations provide a valuable ground for a deeper qualitative evaluation of the DO pilot and for the lessons and guidelines for future adaptations and replications. As regards sample sizes and respondent rates, iterative voluntary questionnaires were administered, with varying respondent rates before Athens (36% in September 2024); after Athens (8% in November, 2024); and at the end of the project (11% in November, 2025). The decrease in respondents is linked to a standard decrease of individuals involved from beginning to end of the cycle. While the first two surveys were administered exclusively via email, the final survey adopted a multi-channel distribution strategy, leveraging both email and WhatsApp groups to maximise reach to all Members. In particular, the sample of the final questionnaire presents a clear boundary, as the majority of respondents seem to be the most engaged in the process, with a majority of

them continuing as members of the Citizens' Council to follow-up with activities and provide bottom-up monitoring of the process. To ensure analytical clarity, the final questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale, the results of which have been aggregated into three macro-categories: Positive (values 4 and 5), Neutral (value 3), and Negative (values 1 and 2). Consequently, the statistics presented in this report regarding the final survey are to be interpreted based on this aggregation. This sample's demographic characteristics show an underrepresentation of citizens aged 16-24 and an overrepresentation of highly-educated ones. Consequently, while these insights reflect the perspectives of 'super-participants' rather than a statistical representation, they offer valuable insights on how prolonged engagement in a translocal assembly shapes civic agency and democratic identity over time. For this evaluations report, they have led to putting special emphasis on questionnaires of voices from dissenting and silent focus groups with individuals who either disagreed, withdrew, or remained quiet during the process, thereby identifying critical barriers to sustained participation and engagement. Furthermore, to effectively capture the civic agency of those with lower educational attainment or younger participants, we have adopted art/creativity-enhanced evaluation methods, such as visual tools, drawing, or collage, to complement verbal-cognitive methods of inquiry. Such methods of inquiry may draw inspiration from participatory action research models.

The 2024/25 **DO Pilot Assembly** has been supported by a constellation of funders, including the European Commission's CERV fund, a crowdunding campaign and philanthropic contributions by the Berggruen Institute, Salvia Foundation, Erste Stiftung and in-kind support by local administrations, academic institutions, civil society networks in Athens, Florence, and Vienna. It provides a living proof of the energies that can be unlocked through co-creation and structural co-organisation. This does not imply less or more control over the many variables of a deliberative process, but rather more or less intensity in how the assembly harnesses the 'hive mind'. Its itinerant design - corresponding to Modules on *Translocal Embedding*, *Travelling Assembly Logistics*, and *Hybrid Deliberative Formats* - relied on the active contribution of numerous actors: facilitation teams, local civic organisations, cultural institutions, academic researchers, digital participation experts, and the broader DO Constituent Network. At the moment of writing, several follow-up pathways are underway or under negotiation: consolidation of the Modular Framework as a transferable blueprint; planning of future itinerant assemblies; integration with EU-to-local-and-back parliamentary processes; and proposals for scaling the model into a **permanent Peoples' Assembly for Europe** backed by an evolving theory of change. Some of these pathways for institutionalisation and embeddedness are explored in what is referred in the report more simply as the 'e-book'. This is an iterative set of high-level debates between academics, practitioners and politicians, who have converged to discuss "Should a Citizens' Assembly Complement the European Parliament?". The e-book is edited by Rainer Bauböck and Kalypso Nicolaidis, published online in 2025 and represents, together with this report and the subsequent published guidelines, some of the most up-to-date debates about transnational democratic innovations to date.

Finally, the report sets out a **mid and long-term vision** for why issuing guidelines matters. Europe's democratic landscape is in a moment of transformation: geopolitical crises, technological disruptions, and democratic fatigue call for new forms of civic imagination. The DO experience shows that a travelling, translocal, co-designed assembly model can contribute to a renewed democratic ecosystem in Europe - one that is resilient, inclusive,

and able to connect citizens' lived experiences with EU-level decision-making. The guidelines distilled in this report therefore serve two purposes: they document the pilot in a transparent and replicable way, and they articulate a broader *demoicratic* rationale for institutionalising more permanent forms of European citizens' participation.

Part I – Preparing the transnational assembly

1 – Imaginaries and Initiation

1.1 Description

The **Imaginaries** and **Initiation** modules form the symbolic and conceptual bedrock of the Democratic Odyssey's design. This preparatory stage concerns the essential process by which the assembly calls itself into being and defines who "the people of Europe" are and how they can collectively act. The Framework emphasizes that the **democratic imaginary precedes institutionalization**: before governance structures, budgets, or agendas, there must be an act of collective imagination capable of legitimising the experiment itself. This principle mirrors Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of the *imaginary institution of society*: societies are constituted through shared meanings that define what is thinkable and possible.

The Modular Framework envisions imaginaries as plural, dynamic, and performative; they are not mere background metaphors but co-produced narratives that orient practice. This approach consciously breaks with technocratic traditions in EU participation, instead locating democracy within the sphere of meaning-making and emotional resonance. The *initiation* of such an assembly is thus stressed as a **civic ritual**, not a purely procedural act. This ritual combines narrative, symbol, and action. It is necessary to bring a *demos* into presence. The design reflects two complementary logics to participation: the **substantive logic**, emphasizing transparency and deliberative integrity, and the **experiential logic**, highlighting the importance of spectacle, art, and affect in constituting shared agency.

1.2 Forum Discussions

The Forum discussions summarised by this module reveal a lively set of tensions. A recurrent question concerned whether a single unifying imaginary ("Europe as a shared home") should anchor the process, or whether competing imaginaries should be deliberately juxtaposed. Some contributors argued that unity was necessary for coherence and mobilization; others insisted that multiplicity was essential to reflect Europe's pluralism. This debate reproduced, at a design level, the central dilemma of deliberative democracy itself: whether legitimacy emerges from consensus or from the open contestation of perspectives, as Chantal Mouffe argues.

Several practitioners invoked the risk of over-symbolization, that metaphors like the "Odyssey" might inspire enthusiasm but risk alienating those skeptical of grand narratives.

Others countered that without symbolic depth, transnational deliberation would lack affective glue. As one Modular Framework comment put it:

"An assembly without a story is a meeting; a story without an assembly is a myth. We need both."

The Framework also records discussions on the relationship between initiation and ownership. Who should be seen as initiating the assembly? The organizers, the Assembly Members, or the larger public (e.g. through a citizen initiative)? The prevailing consensus (influenced by Josiah Ober's idea of civic auto-institution) was that legitimacy requires that citizens themselves, once convened, reinterpret and thereby re-initiate the process. Initiation is thus iterative rather than fixed: each session reconstitutes the collective subject.

Finally, discussions addressed a pragmatic issue: how imaginaries translate into communication strategies. Should the Democratic Odyssey frame itself as a campaign for democracy, an action-research experiment, or a civic festival? The debate foreshadowed later methodological discussions that surfaced throughout the pilot and are enshrined in this report.

Within the Constituent Network, the "imaginaries" debate was both philosophical and practical. The notes reveal concerns about inclusiveness: if the assembly is to "imagine Europe otherwise," how to prevent elitist overtones? Several contributors emphasized the need to involve artists and storytellers early in the design phase to embed symbolic languages accessible beyond policy circles. This led to the constitution of a Civic Arts Task Force, composed by an heterogeneous team of artists, facilitators and innovators from different fields, which developed artistic methods and participatory rituals (such as the "sails", the “baton of participation” and the "Olympics") to make the Odyssey's metaphor tangible, as further explained in Module 10.

There was also debate over what kind of Europe the assembly should prefigure. Should it envision a post-national polity (à-la Habermas' constitutional patriotism) or a network of interlinked local democracies (more akin to Bookchin's confederal municipalism)? The eventual compromise was pluralistic: the assembly would "travel translocally," embodying both European and local identities.

This pluralistic approach aligns with the E-book (2023), which argues that transnational deliberation must operate within "overlapping and nested publics", each capable of *mutual recognition* without erasing diversity. The Odyssey's imaginary thus integrates cosmopolitan ideals with municipal anchoring, a dialectic of *polis* and *cosmos*.

Interviews conducted in November 2025 added a new layer to this debate. A "transnational" participant suggested that future assemblies should include a "**global mirror**" component. He recommended inviting online speakers from non-democratic contexts (e.g., China, Russia) to discuss what democracy means from the outside. He argued this comparative perspective helps European citizens, who often take their rights for granted, to understand the "value of what they have" and energize their own commitment to the process.

1.3 Lessons from the Pilot

The initiation of the Democratic Odyssey assembly unfolded not as a single event but as a multi-sited, multi-temporal process. The Athens Assembly (September 2024) functioned as the "launch port" of the Odyssey, even though the initiation and planning had begun months earlier through the Constituent Network's open meetings (online). This pre-assembly process itself constituted an imaginary community in the making, blurring boundaries between design and participation.

Survey data confirms that the Odyssey's initiation process successfully cultivated a positive democratic imaginary among Assembly Members. Comparing the baseline (pre-Athens survey) with the final survey, 'Hope' as a primary feeling toward Europe more than doubled (from 17% to 37.5%). Crucially, the lived experience of participation generated a profound emotional shift: 81% of respondents reported feeling 'Enthusiasm' and 63% 'Confidence' during the process, effectively marginalizing feelings of 'Distrust' (which dropped from 22% at the start to just 9%). This shift was underpinned by a clear vision of what binds Europeans together: participants identified 'Values' (66%) and 'Democratic Institutions' (59%) as the primary drivers of community, surpassing 'Culture' (41%) or 'History' (37.5%). Furthermore, the process reinforced a dual civic identity: 72% of respondents define themselves as 'A citizen of my country and also a European,' validating the project's translocal model over a post-national one. When imagining Europe's position in the world, they favored a nuanced stance: 53% envisioned the EU playing a 'strategic/mediation role,' while 44% called for a 'leading global actor' role, rejecting isolationism entirely.

The Athens session set the emotional and symbolic tone. Hosted at what is often considered the 'birthplace' of classical democracy, it deliberately staged continuity and rupture: drawing inspiration from the Athenian *ekklesia* while reimagining deliberation for a multilingual, digital, and postnational age. The ritual of the "tapestry of participation" - where citizens collectively painted their sails with messages from across Europe, served as an embodied metaphor for shared voyage. As noted in the *Civic Arts Summary (2024)*, Assembly's Members described this as "the point where we realised we were building something together."

The narrative "**Europe comes to town**" encapsulated the project's translocal logic: Europe is not an abstract institution but a lived encounter among communities. This imaginary was tested in Florence (2025), where participants reported a deeper sense of belonging but also growing awareness of tensions between the experimental nature of the project and the need for concrete policy outcomes. By Vienna (2025), the imaginary reached its narrative climax under the theme "democracy is a collective act of care." The creation of the *Citizen Council* at the closing session illustrated the passage from initiation to institutionalisation: the Odyssey had given birth to a new body, carrying forward the collective narrative into action.

Between Athens and Florence, and again before Vienna, the online session functioned as connective tissue, ensuring all participants in the assembly were involved in planning and passing between each physical moment. Digital co-presence became a medium of belonging. The hybrid format validated the Framework's hypothesis that imaginaries can be

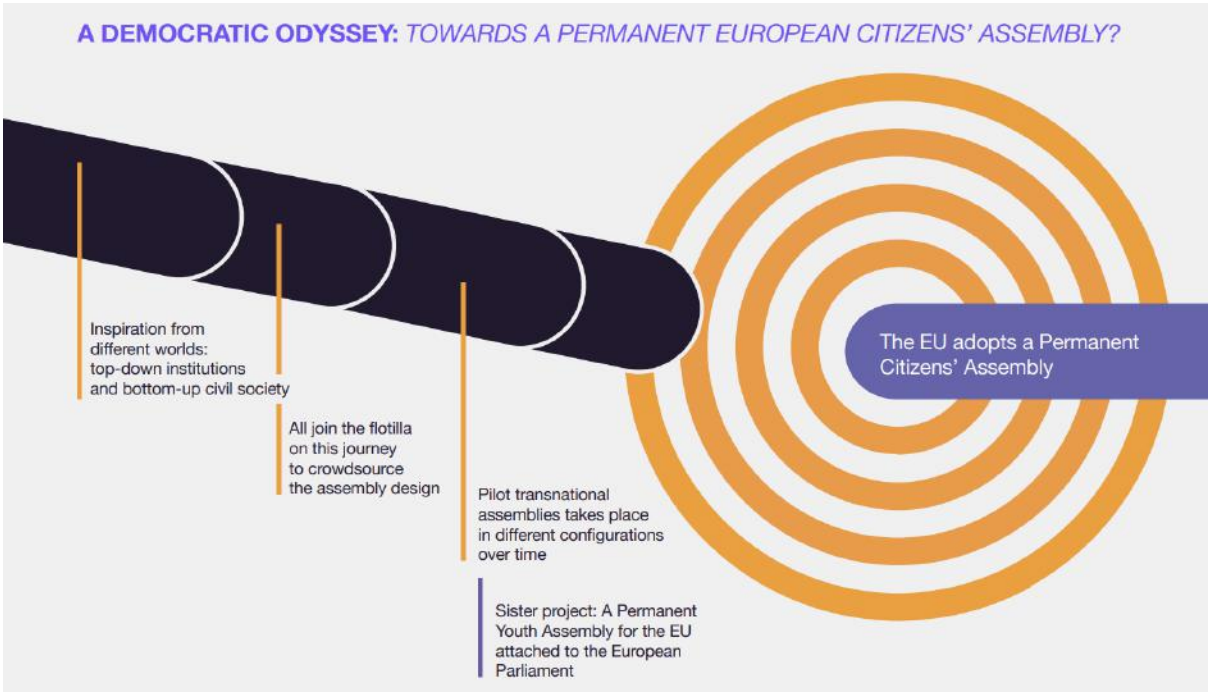
sustained through digital rituals-shared screens, multilingual chat translations - if designed with intentional care.

However, the pilot also revealed the fragility of co-created imaginaries. Interviews highlight the capacity for "**meta-deliberation**": citizens challenging the process itself. In Athens, some participants rejected a song proposed by the Civic Arts Task Force because it felt too "politically charged", forcing a renegotiation of the assembly's symbolic language. This tension was productive: it proved that ownership was real. Furthermore, while metaphors like "Odyssey" or "Sails" mobilised many, others sought more tangible political framing, highlighting the constant need to balance **poetic induction** (creating shared identity) with **rational communication** (ensuring inclusivity and understanding).

2 – Governance and Co-design

2.1 Description

The journey of Democratic Odyssey emerges from the observation of the first transnational and technologically advanced deliberative processes that occurred either before or during its Pilot. Among them are the Conference on the Future of Europe, the European Citizens' Panels and the Global Assembly. While the first two are organised in what we define as 'top-down' ways, that is with institutional mandate and in consultative fashion, the latter was a 'bottom-up' experiment that was not designed specifically to prove there would be direct uptake of final recommendations, but rather to show what such an assembly would look like. The scale at which the Global Assembly was organised, as well as the sequencing of actors involved, generated high-quality deliberations and brought diverse perspectives to the table. Nevertheless, the translation of their outputs into binding policy or actionable change was entirely contingent on external actors' willingness to engage.



Source: Authors' elaboration, 2023.

Unlike national, regional or local citizens' assemblies, which are often convened by governments or public bodies with a defined policy pathway, transnational assemblies operate by definition in a more ambiguous political space. Their recommendations may carry moral or symbolic weight, but their direct political impact is uncertain and depends heavily on voluntary uptake by governments, international institutions, or civil society actors. The Democratic Odyssey's approach was exactly to bridge the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to deliberative designs, accounting for possible barriers and imagining recommendations that would address policymakers but also open-up to a broader range of follow-up (i) by local administrations; (ii) civil society networks; (iii) other public agencies; (iii) education networks; (iv) businesses; (v) citizens at large.

To account for these differentiation and improvement challenges on this middle-way approach, DO sought to establish a different methodology, also in generating a scaffolding that retained sufficient flexibility within its operational infrastructure:

- A broad Consortium - over 30 organisations and multiannual projects have been convincing weekly for more than two years, to discuss the design and operationalise the different streams of work in dedicated Task Forces (TFs): Sortition TF; Onboarding TF; Facilitation TF; Civic Arts TF; Tech-Enhanced Assemblies TF; Logistics TF; Campaign TF; Local embeddedness TF. They are heterogeneous in their composition and like the Consortium, welcome observers to their meetings following the 'rolling evaluation' principle.
  By design, TFs are responsible for presenting strategy plans to the broad Consortium for feedback and final validation. The Consortium, on the other hand, is to be understood as an executive proxy for institutions, in the instance the model would become permanent and institutionalised. It reports back to the Task Forces, ensuring accountability and facilitating cross-silo coordination.
- The Constituent Network - as anticipated in the Introduction, the first key objective was to rely extensively on a meta community that would be open to all and advise every step of the way, effectively co-designing the pilot and supporting the progress evaluations with iterative feedback. We understand this to be translatable to various ranges of design and institutionalisation options, from the more grassroots and bottom-up to the more institutional and consultative. This body also was constituted by citizens from the Conference on the Future of Europe, thus bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience about other co-governed, transnational experiments.
- The Citizen Council - formed at the end of the last Assembly moment and yet announced since the start of the project in the form of encouragement for self-mobilisation and process ownership. The Council is mandated with ensuring follow-up to the Assembly and is empowered to act autonomously on all fronts, yet having worked extensively on ensuring they are connected to their representative 'base', i.e. the broader assembly body.
- The Crew - formed by staff members at EUI, European Alternatives, Mehr Democratie and Mission Publiques, as well as an army of volunteers, the crew convened the consortium and the constituent network, steered the sortition, facilitation and local embeddedness process and help ensure the follow up. They held the project together.

2.2 Forum Discussions

On one hand, various actors and individuals in the Constituent Network saw the absence of a formal mandate as liberating. Without institutional constraints, transnational assemblies have the freedom to explore innovative deliberative methods, raise unconventional proposals, and include voices typically excluded from formal political arenas. They can act as experimental spaces for democracy itself, testing what it means to deliberate across borders, cultures and ways of understanding the world. On the other hand, many drew on the observations from previous case studies to suggest that lack of institutionalisation would not support a vision of testing for potential through a 'proof of concept'.

How to navigate this tension? Balancing aspirational influence and experimental autonomy while critically reflecting on the pathways through which their recommendations might reach political decision-makers? Clear communication with participants about these limitations is essential to uphold legitimacy and sustain trust.

Furthermore, transnational assemblies highlight the need for a political system that is porous and responsive across borders, rather than concentrated in a few political or technocratic hubs in Brussels. By bringing citizens from different countries into dialogue, these assemblies reveal how decision-making structures often fail to capture diversity of experiences, needs and knowledge that exist across Europe. They make visible the disconnect between where power is formally exercised and where the people actually live and experience the consequences of specific policies.

Transnational assemblies act as diagnostic tools. They show the limitations of current political architectures and suggest that truly transnational challenges (climate, migration, digital governance) require forms of democratic engagement that travel with the people, rather than waiting for them to reach institutional centers.

This dynamic applies across all types of transnational assemblies, where governance must transcend traditional hierarchical models and instead function as distributed collective consciousness. This governance is not about top-down control but a shared, evolving sense of responsibility and care among participants, fostering ongoing collaboration that respects diversity and transcends borders. It is a living, adaptive process reflecting the plural, cross-border nature of the assembly and the movement it inspires.

The need is thus for a governance architecture that is *simultaneously efficient, inclusive, and self-reflective*. Governance here is defined not as a bureaucratic function but as a set of evolving relationships of accountability and power-sharing among organisers, citizens, facilitators, funders, and partner institutions.

The Framework stresses that for a transnational assembly, governance must operate across multiple layers and temporalities:

1. A **strategic layer** (the Consortium and the Crew) that ensures strategic coordination, continuity and financial integrity;

2. A **deliberative layer** (the Task Forces and the Citizen Council) that sustains operationalisation while protecting inclusivity, transparency, and procedural fairness; and
3. A **reflective layer** (the Constituent Network and the Citizen Council) enabling meta-level learning and adaptation, as well as accountability mechanisms.

Together, these layers correspond respectively to what Jane Mansbridge calls *deliberative systems*: distributed arrangements where multiple arenas contribute to collective legitimacy.

Co-design is treated both as the missing pieces and the lubricant for this mechanism to function well. It is participatory process through which stakeholders continually shape and reshape the assembly's structures. The Modular Framework conceives co-design as "design by doing," where the governance of the assembly is not fixed ex ante but iteratively constituted through reflection and feedback loops. This aligns with Landemore's (2021) idea of *open democracy*, in which authority circulates dynamically among citizens, experts, and institutions.

The Modular Framework acknowledges the double bind of this democratic experimentation: assemblies that aim for maximal inclusivity must nevertheless rely on professional expertise for coordination. It therefore advocates for what it terms "democratic professionalism" - a balance between horizontal participation and vertical responsibility.

The Constituent Network meeting notes show a recurring tension between *radical co-creation* and *institutional reliability*. Some contributors argued for fully decentralised governance ("let the citizens decide everything from day one"); others emphasised the need for a clear structure of responsibility to ensure ethical, financial, and logistical stability. The Forum exchanges reveal active exchanges about the risk of "process capture" by professionalised actors, even within an ostensibly participatory design. A particularly rich debate concerned the role of *elected representatives* and local institutions in governing and co-designing transnational assemblies?

The Modular Framework's Forum records competing models:

- A **dialogic model**, where elected representatives attend as "listeners" and respond to citizens' recommendations;
- A **partnership model**, where representatives co-design deliberation themes;
- A **separation model**, where elected officials are entirely excluded to protect independence.

In this sense, the journey of the Constituent Network has led them to see the role of institutional representatives in dialogic fashion during the pilot, based on the understanding that it was not mandated directly by institutions. Conversely, there was a convergence towards acknowledging that in the instance of institutionalisation - the final goal of the Democratic Odyssey spirit, there would need to be additional accountability in the way institutions would generate *structured permeability* (the 'partnership model'): elected representatives should not dominate, but their presence as co-creators strengthens the democratic chain of transmission between deliberation and policy.

The Constituent Network's discussions (2023–25) repeatedly revisited governance design. The notes illustrate how difficult it is to coordinate a genuinely polycentric process: the "Task Forces" as operational core, the "Network" as deliberative brain, and the "Consortium" as organisational scaffolding and a proxy for institutions. The Brown Bag Lunch sessions explored models of *distributed custodianship* inspired by Ostrom's principles for governing commons. In this view, the assembly is a shared democratic resource requiring co-stewardship rather than command.

There was also considerable debate about *translocal embeddedness*. The Network agreed that each host city (Athens, Florence, Vienna) should function as a co-equal partner, interpreting the Odyssey's core principles in its own context. This translocal model, which allowed civic groups and municipalities to endorse and contribute through co-design, was seen as a means of rooting transnational deliberation in local public spheres.

2.3 Lessons from the Pilot

Interviews conducted in the final stage of the project reflected extensively on the *organic* nature of the Odyssey. A Member of the Constituent Network with dual experience did contrast the Odyssey with the European Commission's Panels (ECPs), noting that while the ECPs felt "guided quite strongly" with pre-determined agendas, the Odyssey was "organic" and truly "coming from the citizens." The value of the project's governance model lies in its deliberately anti-bureaucratic ethos, which an interviewee framed as a "coalition of good will". He praised the Constituent Network for operating as a "safe harbor" where organizers could engage in "sharing honestly" and discuss failures, contrasting it with other international participatory spaces that function as "catwalks" where organizations tend to "hide difficulties".

This collaborative spirit fostered the project's key success factor: plasticity. The interviewee argued that the Odyssey demonstrated an exceptional ability to adapt to "changing geometries of power and funding limitations" without collapsing, describing this flexibility as a "very positive experimentation" that proves deliberative democracy can survive even in "hostile" or resource-scarce environments.

However, this same openness posed a significant operational challenge. While the plasticity was lauded as a resilience mechanism, a DO facilitator (also involved in ECP panels) claimed this very flexibility proved difficult to manage at times. Although she argued that the constant evolution and shifting leadership styles between cities (the "continuous co-design" model) created "more effort than necessary and more confusion", she acknowledged that the main success of the co-design model lies in bringing together "all key organizations working on this in Europe in one group". A result defined as unique and constituting the project's primary "competitive advantage". In her view, this Consortium created an "amazing group of experts and people" whose value should not be underestimated. As facilitator of two of the assembly moments in different cities, she experienced how the bottom-up approach allowed citizens to feel "valued" and "heard", leading to human interactions of great emotional impact, especially between groups that "would never be connected otherwise", such as migrants and people with opposing views on the rules of transnational mobility.

The Athens session tested whether such distributed governance could deliver coherence. Despite logistical challenges, it succeeded in demonstrating polycentric coordination. Local partners helped co-shape the event. The co-design dynamic was visible in real time: participants proposed procedural modifications - such as extending plenary discussion time and integrating artistic rituals into deliberation sessions. These suggestions were accepted and implemented during subsequent assemblies. In subsequent online assembly moments, they also requested specific types of expertise being provided. In order to provide clarity, these requests were addressed itinerantly and always with openness to feedback and joint review, be it by the citizen body or the Constituent Network (which were kept separate for methodological soundness).

The shared ownership of such an initiative proved crucial during the 2024/25 Pilot Assembly. Stakeholders acknowledged that while co-design strengthened legitimacy, it also increased complexity. Participants valued openness but also desired clarity on who held final authority. The Consortium also noted that the Constituent Network arguably had developed ‘co-design’ fatigue, suggesting the need for structured intervals between design cycles. The Consortium also set-up rotating leadership, both within the very Task Forces but also through them, in order to reach the different local teams and empower them to be in charge. Activating specific Consortium partners at different times and localities, enabled the shared methodology to be adapted according to the local context and the opportunities that would arise. Such is the case of the accompanying Festival of Democracy - the open-door part of the assembly where the assembly members would meet with the local public. In Athens, Florence and Vienna, the Consortium took the lead in mobilising local funders and partners to organise cultural moments and public debates independently. This is the case of the Klafthmonos Square in Athens, Caffè Letterario Le Murate in Florence, the evening ‘Democratic Olympics’ at the ORF-Funkhaus in Vienna.

In all three cities, the travelling assembly also managed to merge with and strengthen pre-existing initiatives noteworthy of the story of democratic, local struggle. In Athens, assembly members saw the art exhibition “1974 & 1944: Athens Celebrates Freedom” at the OPANDA Arts Center in Eleftherias Park. In Florence, a series of participatory activities included open debates with Black Lives Matter, Ponte Europa and Casa Delle Donne, a gallery exhibit on Black History Month and the screening of the documentary “Food For Profit”, with a follow-up discussion co-designed with the author. In Vienna, consecutive moments were organised in collaboration with Vienna Office for Participation, the European Capital of Democracy initiative and the widely known Wiener Festwochen festival. In all three cases, the activities were co-organised with local administrations and civil society organisations.

Notably, the governance of the Odyssey evolved over time to include more partners who were enthusiastic to sign up to this innovative process. As stated perhaps a bit strongly by a Constituent Network Member and Consortium Member: “The Democratic Odyssey’s is a less stiff process than the other, because it has to be negotiated with a *coalition of goodwill*, not a coalition of bureaucrats.”

Finally, notes from early 2024 shed a light on the resource dilemma: maintaining inclusivity requires significant coordination labour. The 2024/25 assembly significantly relied on NGOs’ support and volunteering. Participants asked whether “radical inclusion” was sustainable

without paid civic infrastructure. This points to a systemic issue that should not go unmarked here: the precarious labour underpinning many democratic experiments. The Odyssey's experience validates the Modular Framework's assumption that governance should itself be deliberative, but it also highlights that division of labour, clear mandates and appropriate resources are necessary. Deliberative processes are sustainable only when anchored in stable decision-making and supporting bodies that citizens can trust to care for the process.

3 – Topic Selection and Thematic Architecture

3.1 Description

This module identifies two different and complementary processes in the selection of a topic for an assembly. Arguably, the moment when a final topic is identified cannot be dismissive of the deliberative journey that has led to it. The broader thematic architecture is thus composed of a constellation of proposals, exclusions and trade-offs that will need to be acknowledged and synthesised in the corollary of facilitation activities of the assembly itself. Not doing so risks generating a 'blank-slate' that hinders process transparency and makes it complicated for assembly members to (i) identify where there is path dependency or discursive turns; (ii) understand the deeper resonance of the initial question vis-à-vis the *imaginaries* described in the first module.

The topic selection process becomes the *"democratic hinge"* of any assembly: it is a question of what citizens deliberate on, how the topic is chosen, and by whom. In the Modular Framework's conception, the choice of topic is not a neutral technical exercise but a politically and symbolically charged act. It determines not only the substantive scope of deliberation but also the boundaries of inclusion, imagination, and relevance.

The Framework begins from a basic premise: in transnational deliberation, topic selection must be *co-created* and *iterative*. Unlike national citizens' assemblies, which can rely on a single demos and a shared set of policy concerns, a transnational assembly must mediate between multiple political cultures, agendas, and expectations. Thus, the selection of the topic is both an epistemic and a performative question. In the case of a European assembly, it shapes what counts as a "European problem" and, by extension, who gets to define it.

The *Modular Framework* initially stressed three guiding principles:

1. **Legitimacy through participation** – The process of choosing topics should itself involve diverse actors (citizens, civil society, academics, practicioners and institutions).
2. **Relevance through lived experience** – Topics must resonate with citizens' everyday realities to prevent abstraction.
3. **Scalability through linkage** – The selected theme should connect local experiences with transnational implications.

This aligns with John Dryzek's concept of *discursive representation*, where deliberative legitimacy stems from including diverse discourses, not merely demographic categories. Additionally, it presents a more nuanced proposal to critics of selection by lot, like Nadia Urbinati's counterargument against what she defines as the purely *lottocratic mentality*.

3.2 Forum discussions

The Forum discussions in this module reveal the multiplicity of opinions on *how* topics should be defined. Some contributors advocated for broad, normative themes ("Europe's democratic future," "climate and solidarity"), while others insisted that a narrower focus allows deeper and more actionable deliberation. The disagreement mirrors classic tensions between *deliberative breadth* and *policy depth*.

Forum contributors also addressed *who initiates* topic selection. Should it stem from institutional demand (e.g. an EU mandate), bottom-up citizen proposals, or hybrid dialogue? The Modular Framework's Forum suggests a "triangular" method: citizen inputs, analytical and experiential framing, as well as political feasibility must all converge. However, several participants warned that involving institutions too early risks instrumentalising the process.

Debates also emerged around the *temporality* of topic selection. Some argued for a single, stable topic to maintain focus; others proposed iterative recalibration at each session, enabling responsiveness to new contexts and crises.

The Framework concludes that topic selection should itself be *deliberative*: a meta-level process in which citizens reflect on the kind of issues worthy of transnational attention. This concept draws on Jane Mansbridge's idea of *deliberative systems*, where agenda-setting and deliberation are interlinked components of democratic legitimacy.

The previous module on "Governance and Co-Design" pointed to the ambitions and subsequent challenges brought about by the crowdsourcing principles. Inter alia, the question of how to mobilise the meta-community of the Constituent Network effectively in order to select a topic that would bring broad resonance to the assembly, engage with political agonistics outside the deliberative space and simultaneously provide a set of final recommendations with tractable but structural solutions.

In the Democratic Odyssey process, the Constituent Network was considered as the best possible proxy for the collective intelligence normally mobilised by a Citizen Council (in the Ostbelgien Model), a citizen initiative or any form of bottom-up convergence of interests. The proxy factor made the topic:

- **conceptually ambitious** - the Constituent Network opted for high-stakes topics, where there is often regulatory lack of clarity on the level of competence or there is untapped transformative potential for scalable solutions
- **capable of being strongly anticipatory** - the final topic became more and more salient
- **less concerned about problem tractability** than addressing a topic that would be relevant, leaving it to the organisers (in this case the Consortium and its Task Forces) to implement appropriately

The Constituent Network's meeting notes show intense engagement with topic formulation since the very start. Participants repeatedly asked: *"What makes a topic truly European?"* The resulting consensus was that it should be both structurally transnational and emotionally intelligible. In early drafts, proposals ranged from climate transition and migration to the democratic deficit of EU institutions. The meta-community of the Constituent Network

deliberated on the very principles for selecting a good topic in an EU-wide assembly. The process was entirely co-designed and it lead to a series of deliberative moments online, convened over conference calling format and with chaired sub-group discussions to give all a voice.

The below graphical representation is an extract from the topic selection virtual board generated in March 2024. This also contains the co-designed criteria for selecting the topic:

Source: Authors' elaboration, The Topical Mapping's timeline, workflow and scope, March 2024.

3.3 Lessons from the Pilot

At the end of March 2024 and with an eye to the opening deliberative moments in September 2025 (onboarding and Athens assembly moment) the Assembly had a topic:

"**What needs to change for Europe to weather future storms? And how can we, the people, help better steer the ship?"**

This formulation emerged after comparing commonalities across the many themes initially proposed:

Source: Authors' elaboration, The Topical Mapping's deliberative brainstorming, March 2024.

The topic was seen as a "meta-theme" - a lens through which multiple crises could be connected. It was chosen not only for policy relevance but also for its pedagogical value: deliberating on crises invites reflection on the democratic conditions of decision-making under pressure.

Some Brown Bag Lunch participants worried that the word "crisis" risked reducing the debate to fatalistic underpinnings. Others countered that reframing crises as opportunities for democratic resilience could mobilise hope. The final agreement on imaginaries and semantics, "future storms", reflected this dual awareness. As one participant summarised: *"Our crisis is not only financial or ecological - it is democratic."*

Of course, the final result of the horizontal, collective bargaining on the ideal-type topic did not leave all equally appeased. A member of the Constituent Network notes that the topic, as co-created by the CN, was intentionally designed as "very broad" which sometimes led participants to discuss "ideal notions of Europe" rather than facing difficult trade-offs. The interviewee recommends that, to gain political relevance and avoid the risk of becoming a "talk shop", future assemblies should tackle "more contentious issues" (e.g., migration or housing) to prove the method's ability to genuinely bridge societal divides. This echoed the remarks by a Council member's critique that the final Charter resembled a "political party paper" - rich in headlines but lacking the "substance" of implementation. An observer points out that the selection process may have resulted in a "like-minded" group with "low conflict," suggesting that future topic framing needs to actively invite contradictory voices to ensure robust deliberation. To produce sharper outputs, future topics must be narrower and more contentious to force the assembly into necessary conflict, the observer argues.

In contrast, the final survey shows that the selection of topics resonated with a majority of assembly members: 66% of respondents explicitly judged the themes as 'relevant and important' to the real challenges facing the EU, rising to 84% if neutral responses are included. However, qualitative feedback highlights a tension between *relevance* and *manageability*. As one participant noted: 'The topics were very broad, making it hard to go deep into specific solutions in the limited time.' This suggests that while the topic was extremely salient and kept its relevance even at a time when democracy was not the name of the game due to emerging economic and military conflicts. Nevertheless, future iterations would benefit from narrower framing to allow for more concrete problem-solving outputs.

On a separate note, the itinerant model of the Pilot Assembly prompted the ability of each city to reframe "crisis" through its own historical and civic lens, while online meetings allowed participants to connect transversal insights. This was also done through specific facilitation techniques geared towards sharing individual experiences as gateways to reviewing the very framing of the selected topic (see modules 9 and 10).

In Athens, the topic was first introduced as a deliberative provocation: "Addressing Crises Collectively: By focusing on lessons from past crises we can create pathways to 'crisis citizenship' and envision resilient democratic systems."

The facilitation team framed the crisis as multi-dimensional and often intersecting ecological, geopolitical, economic, social issues. Inputs by analysts and artistic interventions were designed to make "crisis" experiential rather than abstract. Participants described the opening discussions as emotionally charged. Many shared stories of unemployment, migration, and environmental loss. The *Civic Arts Summary* notes that the collective storytelling exercises transformed crisis from a policy concept into a shared lived experience. This emotional anchoring proved crucial: it ensured that the deliberation began from empathy rather than ideology, and it opened up to the constant reassessment of the most appropriate topical framing to accompany this journey from the anecdotal/subjective to the systemic/objective.

Florence functioned as a refinement phase. The deliberations tested whether the various sub-themes could yield actionable recommendations. Expert input from the EUI's School of Transnational Governance and external institutions provided policy grounding. Yet the

deliberative framing remained citizen-driven: participants evaluated expertise critically rather than deferentially.

One notable innovation in Florence was the use of facilitated group sessions supported by digital tools (Talk-to-the-City and Polis), where participants collectively ranked sub-topics that needed deeper exploration. The aggregated data revealed a striking balance: participants prioritised both institutional accountability and emotional resilience. This dual focus suggested that "crisis" had become a proxy for discussing democracy's vulnerability. The Florence Assembly also experimented with *dialogue sequencing*: alternating between thematic and values-based deliberation. This structure reflected the Modular Framework's suggestion that topics should link factual analysis ("what is happening") with normative exploration ("what ought to happen").

Between assemblies, online meetings were used to validate outputs and prepare transitions. Participants revisited prior conclusions, added regional examples, and tested whether discussions in one city resonated elsewhere. A *Summary Report on Iterative Feedback*, previously published, notes that these online deliberations prevented fragmentation and reinforced collective ownership of the topic also through analysts' qualitative feedback.

By Vienna, the topic had matured into ten articulated "pathways" addressing democratic resilience. Each pathway followed the tripartite spirit of the Odyssey: Athens (inspiration), Florence (tension), Vienna (implementation). The final *Citizens' Charter to Revitalise Democracy in Europe by Navigating Future Crises Together* reframed "crisis" not as a disruption but as a mirror revealing democracy's fragility and adaptive potential, in each of the priority aries.

The Vienna plenary's closing remarks captured this evolution:

"We began by asking how to manage crises. We ended by asking how democracy itself can endure and care."

Ultimately, the Odyssey validated the Modular Framework's intuition that topic definition is also a performative act. The act of deciding what to deliberate on reshapes participants' understanding of Europe's shared future.

4 – Composition

4.1 Description

The composition of a transnational citizens' assembly determines who is in the room and by extension, whose experiences, values, and imaginaries of Europe are included or absent. Composition is both a technical design question and a democratic act of imagination. Ideally it ought to mirror the diversity, plurality, and imaginaries of the political community it seeks to represent. It refers to the number, profile, and distribution of participants - territorially, linguistically, demographically, socially, attitudinally - and to the principles underpinning their selection.

This balancing act is more complex transnationally, where more variables have to be taken into account and where it is harder to reflect the people's political imaginary since the assembly spans boundaries across political cultures, histories and rules of the game. In the case of the Democratic Odyssey, composition offered a visible statement of who is included in **Europe's "picture of itself"** and how different modes of inclusion relate to each other.

"Citizens Assemblies" worldwide vary widely in size and criteria for inclusion. Decisions about composition - size, quotas, representational balance - affect both representativeness (statistical and symbolic) and legitimacy (social and political). Typical stratification factors include nationality or residence, gender, age, education, socioeconomic status, and urban–rural distribution. Increasingly, assembly designers debate whether attitudinal or value-based criteria should complement socio-demographic ones, in order to reflect the diversity of perspectives on issues rather than merely demographic markers. These choices speak to Hélène Landemore's argument that democratic systems perform better when they maximise the **cognitive diversity** of participants, that is, when they bring together people with different experiences, heuristics, and perspectives (see *Democratic Reason*, 2013 and *Open Democracy*, 2020). She and other scholars have argued that inclusive, sortition-based assemblies outperform small, homogeneous elites because they make use of society's distributed knowledge. Transnational assemblies, such as the Democratic Odyssey, amplify these epistemic advantages by bringing together citizens across borders, political cultures, and lived realities. The cognitive benefits of diversity therefore provide a strong theoretical justification for the Odyssey's mixed composition, iterative city-based sessions, and emphasis on lived experience as a form of democratic knowledge.

4.2 Forum Discussions

The first line of debates in our forum had to do with the meaning of "transnational representation" which in Europe already takes multiple forms. We agreed that the European Union embodies different logics of representativity: the Council of the EU represents national governments, the European Parliament represents citizens who can vote, and the European Commission claims to represent the common European interest. Each of these forms of representation is both partial and limited, constrained by who is entitled to vote, by national borders, and by the institutional imagination of what "Europe" is and who belongs within it.

We differed in assessing the desirable place of nation-state representation in this story. Does the state itself acts as a fundamental and multifaceted limit to representation across borders or a legitimate building bloc? Beyond merely defining formal political and administrative boundaries that determine who is counted or who has voting rights, the nation-state shapes how people's identities, loyalties, and political imaginaries are constructed. It imposes borders that not only exclude those lacking citizenship or residency but also delimit the frameworks through which belonging and participation are understood.

Most problematically, these borders create formal limits, excluding migrants, refugees, stateless people, and mobile populations from full political membership. Yet, they also produce informal and symbolic limits by embedding assumptions about national identity, language, and culture that influence who is recognized as a legitimate political actor. The

nation-state's logic often prioritizes certain narratives, histories, and experiences while marginalizing others, reinforcing hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion.

From this perspective, representation is not a fixed structure but a rhizomatic practice, it grows through overlapping and sometimes competing logics of legitimacy. Yet many people fall through the cracks of these systems: migrants without voting rights, precarious or mobile citizens, and those whose realities are not visible in formal processes.

A transnational citizens' assembly has the potential, therefore, to operate with a different concept of representation, by enhancing the democratic landscape of Europe. By bringing together people who are usually absent from formal channels, it extends the horizon of who is seen, heard, and counted. It gives presence to those silenced by the limits of current representative structures and, in doing so, it tests what "European representation" could mean if grounded in lived experience rather than formal citizenship.

This deep diversity of political histories, migration experiences, and social realities enriches deliberation. It encourages participants to question their own assumptions, to see Europe from multiple vantage points, and to recognise that democracy must be imagined from the margins as much as from the centre.

To be sure, every transnational assembly's composition will vary with the context in time and space, as well as the intent and function of the assembly. The design of a transnational assembly inevitably raises debates about what and whom to represent. Should the assembly mirror demographic proportions across the EU (degressive proportionality), or should each country or region have equal representation? Should citizens without EU nationality - but residing in Europe - be included? Should "veteran citizens" from prior assemblies have a role, or should each iteration start anew?

At transnational scale, composition becomes exponentially complex. It calls for *plural compositional logics* combining demographic, territorial, and epistemic representation. And representation beyond the state must be thought through *translocal publics* that cut across borders. It must balance representational equity among states with demographic realism, cultural sensitivity, and practical feasibility. In such contexts, composition cannot rely solely on demographic proportionality. Instead, it must express a *political imaginary*-a picture of who "the European people" might be if given the chance to reimagine themselves collectively.

The DO Constituent Network debated long and hard about alternative visions for composition. Our initial debates introduced three broad compositional paradigms:

- **Statistical representativeness** (mirroring population proportions);
- **Symbolic inclusivity** (ensuring presence of minorities, migrants, or voices from the margins);
- **Narrative resonance** (designing composition to tell a story about Europe's plurality).

These paradigms may coexist in tension. As one Framework contributor observed, "Every assembly is a story about who counts."

From there we debated five dimensions of composition:

1. **Size** (the total number of participants);
2. **Territorial distribution** (national, regional, or transnational balance);
3. **Socio-demographic diversity** (age, gender, education, income, occupation);
4. **Attitudinal diversity** (values, beliefs, and political orientations);
5. **Normative framing** (what the composition is meant to *represent*: a microcosm, a coalition, or a deliberative public).

Starting with size: drawing from comparative experiences, the “composition” question unfolds along multiple axes - mathematical soundness, symbolic resonance, logistical constraints, and normative meaning. Each axis brings its own dilemmas. Forum participants wrestled with *scale and resonance*. Numbers could carry symbolic meaning: a 500-member assembly recalling the Athenian *Boulè,* doubled to redeem the exclusion of women; 705 participants mirroring the European Parliament; or one participant per million Europeans; or the symbolic reach of “beyond 1000”, relying on the law of large numbers or on stratified samples (eg. 1134, 11134?). Yet logistical and budgetary constraints demanded realism. Larger assemblies enhance statistical accuracy but increase cost, carbon footprint, and facilitation complexity. Several contributors concluded that “it is better to have fewer citizens for longer than more citizens for less time.” In this conversation, scale pitted sampling accuracy against budgetary feasibility. The mathematical dimension speaks to representativeness and statistical validity while the symbolic dimension relates to narratives that numbers tell. Numbers, in this sense, are communicative tools as much as design features.

Logistical debates are never far behind: the larger the assembly, the greater the costs of travel, interpretation, facilitation and sometimes visa diplomacy. Moreover, the more travel, the greater carbon footprint of the transnational assembly. Carbon and budget constraints often impose a trade-off between size, local participation and deliberative depth. Experience shows that for a given budget, it is usually better to have fewer participants and more time than the reverse. Similarly, venues capable of hosting large, multilingual groups are rare, limiting scalability. Therefore, any design must balance symbolic ambition and operational feasibility.

Another set of debates concerns the criteria for stratification. Gender parity remains a baseline, yet questions arise about how to include non-binary citizens fairly given limited data. Age balance is another critical factor, with frequent proposals to overrepresent youth under 25 to ensure intergenerational dialogue. Socio-economic diversity is often approximated through education levels, but alternatives such as occupation, housing status (owner/renter), or income brackets can better reflect lived inequalities. How finely we ought to account for geographic diversity - national, regional, or bioregional - poses its own puzzle. In Europe, should the baseline be EU member states, candidate countries, or regions? Should cities and rural areas be proportionally represented, or equally weighted to counter metropolitan bias?

A fundamental question is to ask what is the referent for demographics? Is the assembly aiming for national representation or subnational regions or cities. Several contributors insisted that representativeness should be anchored in demographic proportionality-ensuring credibility and comparability with national assemblies. Others argued that strict proportionality risks reproducing existing inequalities. A group of practitioners proposed

“corrective representation”: oversampling those typically marginalised in non-urban settings transnational politics-youth, migrants, precarious workers, linguistic minorities.

Another tension arose between *national balance* and *pan-European integration*. Should citizens be selected equally from each country (geographical equality), or proportionally to population size (demographic equality)? Should regions, cities, or cross-border communities be the key units of representation? One option is to combine the two. Or to overlook national boundaries completely as with the global assembly. Relatedly, one tension we encounter with a transnational assembly is that between demography and regions or country equality. You can choose pure equality geographically – be it country or regions or for instance design a share of assembly seats for state demography, and a share (say 50%) for an equal number for each state.

One particularly lively debate concerned the referent unit of representation. The very idea of “Europe” is contested: geographically, culturally, and politically. Assemblies must navigate questions about including non-EU countries, diasporas, and transnational communities that challenge formal EU boundaries. How the assembly defines its European scope directly affects its representativeness and legitimacy. Should the assembly mirror the EU’s 27 member states, the broader European continent, or a cosmopolitan public including residents without EU nationality? While some feared that including non-EU residents might dilute the assembly’s policy relevance, others saw it as essential for reflecting Europe’s social reality.

The over-inclusion of minorities as well as non-nationals would add further complexity. Some suggested weighting groups that are systematically underrepresented in public debate - ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, or lower-income citizens. Regarding incorporating ethnic quotas, some suggest state recognition certificates, like they do for lower castes in India, but some countries refuse to do that (e.g. France). Or we can use self-identification. Yet implementing ethnic quotas across Europe encounters legal and cultural resistance, particularly in countries that prohibit collecting data on ethnicity. The transnational challenge has to do with the very different attitude to different kinds of diversities across countries.

Innovative methods, such as self-identification or proxy variables like parental birthplace, offer partial solutions. Others propose to include “attitudinal criteria,” ensuring the assembly reflects not only where people come from but also what they think, preventing issue-specific bias (e.g., a climate assembly composed only of climate activists).

The assembly can also be composed in a hybrid manner, bringing randomly selected citizens with civil society actors (which can themselves reflect a mix of self selection and random selection from lists of candidacy). Indeed, if the initial sample from which the assembly is formed (stage 1) was big enough, potential members could be asked to check a box regarding their activity in a civil society organisation which would become another criterion (like, say, socio-economic status) in the stratification process).

Politicians and civil servants on the other hand can be seen not as part of the membership of the assembly but at least as “participants” - a kind of outer composition. Beyond asking whether the assembly members debate with them during or sequentially following their own deliberations, we might want to reflect on this differentiated status.

Debates emerged on whether to include “veteran citizens”-alumni from previous assemblies-to preserve institutional memory. Advocates argued that continuity strengthens learning; critics feared the emergence of a deliberative elite or argued for fresh randomness to preserve unpredictability. Hybrid formulas, mixing demographic and country equality, are increasingly favored - for instance, 50% proportional to population, 50% equal per state. The resulting picture is one of pragmatic pluralism: no single formula suffices, but each contributes to a richer democratic mosaic.

Finally, the normative dimension of these debates concerns the purpose behind composition. Should a transnational assembly be a statistical microcosm of Europe or other transnational regions, a transformative space where underrepresented experiences are amplified, or an assembly constructed to address the wider public’s imaginaries of Europe? The constituent network emphasised that composition should be reflexive: citizens themselves should discuss and re-evaluate who is in the room and who is missing. As one note reads, “composition is not fixed-it is a living question the assembly must own.”

In sum, composition is not a mere technical parameter but a site of contestation over what democracy means across borders. Every decision - on who is included, in what proportion, and by what method - embodies a theory of legitimacy, equality, and belonging in a given transnational setting.

4.2. Lessons from the Pilot

The composition of the pilot assembly was conceived as both laboratory and journey - a moving, evolving experiment in transnational democracy. The Assembly’s structure combines two realities and therefore two spheres - the transnational and the translocal - bridging citizens across borders with those rooted in the host city. More specifically, its experimental composition was built through eight pools of participants, each reflecting a different source of democratic experience and inclusion (for more detail see Who’s Who in DO, here).

Sphere 1: Transnational sphere

1. Randomly selected citizens across the EU
2. Citizens who volunteered in previous EU panels but were not selected;
3. Alumni from past assemblies (veterans of deliberative democracy)
4. Members of transnational civil society networks, included in their personal capacity not as representing an organisation.

Sphere 2: Translocal sphere

5. Local Greek residents in Athens and Attica, Italians in Florence and Fiesole, Austrians in Wien
6. Other Europeans living locally:
7. Members of local civil society organisations
8. Non-European residents (“global citizens”)

This composition reflected the Odyssey’s founding ethos: Europe comes to town, commitment to combining randomness with rootedness, and chance with choice. In the case

of DO, each of these pools was selected through transparent two-stage lotteries led by the Sortition Foundation and the QED Foundation, using door-to-door or digital outreach to ensure both randomness and inclusion. Together, they formed an Assembly that collectively embodied Europe's diversity - age, gender, nationality, education, and attitude toward the EU - while actively correcting biases (for instance, by overrepresenting youth or citizens with critical views of the EU).

Beyond its technical features, the Odyssey's approach to composition expressed a philosophical stance: that democracy is a living practice, nourished by iteration, exchange, and openness. The Odyssey treats composition not as a fixed blueprint but as a democratic pedagogy, where members themselves reflected on and helped redefine future selection criteria. The Assembly became a co-author of its own evolution, continually asking who is missing, who should be included next, and how Europe's mosaic of belonging can expand through learning by doing.

The combination of both "transnational" and "translocal" spheres symbolises the Odyssey's belief that democracy must live simultaneously at the level of the polis and the continent, as reflected in its motto: 'Europe comes to town'. The transnational pools ensured a Europe-wide perspective, a bridging of experiences from different societies, regions, and value communities. The translocal pools, in turn, ground this transnational dialogue in real places - anchoring deliberation in the daily realities of residents, workers, and migrants in the host city, thus enhancing the glue they holds them together. Each meeting thus became a laboratory for testing how global questions about crisis (see TOPIC) meet local contexts, and how deliberation across national differences can remain locally embodied.

Crucially, the Odyssey's composition model extended the boundaries of citizenship. By including non-European residents and civil society activists, it signals that the democratic population of Europe cannot be confined to passport holders alone. This is a "Peoples' Assembly" in the plural, one that experiments with giving presence and voice to the often-invisible contributors to Europe's democratic life - migrants, care workers, environmental defenders, and global citizens.

This approach revealed a unique source of legitimacy for the Assembly: "Shadow Citizenship". The inclusion of non-EU residents proved to be a powerful tool for legitimacy. A participant from Vienna's assembly, who is a Ukrainian resident in Austria unable to vote in national elections, described her participation as a moment of "empowerment," giving voice to those Viennese residents often silenced in traditional politics. Similarly, a "transnational" participant who travelled to all the three Assemblies, is an Albanian resident in Greece and stated he felt "part of the European community" not through a passport, but because "the issues at hand were also my issues." As a non-EU participant living in Greece noted:"I felt part of a European community because the issues at hand were also my issues... I live in Europe now." Another non-EU participant living in Vienna stated: "30% of people in Vienna can't vote... I felt like I have the voice... giving people a voice who just feel silenced."

These testimonies validate the Odyssey's shift from "citizenship-based" to "residence-based" representation.

Such participants effectively represented millions of non-voting residents testifying that the Assembly was the only political space where their voices counted. This empirical validation, supported by an interviewee's description of the project as "anti-colonial", suggests that the Odyssey's permanent niche could specifically be to serve also as the "Chamber of Residents".

The final survey reveals a distinct tension between perceived and actual inclusivity. While 59% of respondents affirmed that the Assembly was 'broadly representative' of European diversity, a significant 41% expressed reservations. This internal skepticism is empirically reflected in the respondent demographics, which were dominated by university graduates (91%) and lacked participants aged 16–24, highlighting a "civil society bubble" within the evaluation feedback loop.

However, this data must be contextualized against the Assembly's actual recruitment reality, which was significantly more diverse than the survey suggests. Design protocols explicitly overrepresented youth and utilized targeted local outreach to include precarious workers and migrants, with facilitators in Athens qualitatively confirming a genuine pluralism of voices, including Eurosceptics, that the survey failed to capture. Furthermore, even within the limited survey sample, the group maintained near-perfect gender parity and embodied a deeply transnational reality, with numerous participants residing outside their country of origin.

To bridge the gap between presence in the room and engagement in evaluation, future research must move beyond standard linguistic questionnaires. Adopting art-mediated evaluation offers a non-discursive pathway to capture the agency of youth and those with lower formal education, while targeted "silent and dissenting focus groups" should be implemented to specifically engage those who withdrew, ensuring structural barriers to participation are understood rather than ignored.

The Odyssey also sought to innovate by making present the “absent” in the assembly - the unborn, the non-human, the natural world - a creative challenge embraced by the Civic Arts Task Force, which included the ‘unheard voices’ like the Arno river, through dialogical, and symbolic means (see more in Module 10). This dimension should certainly be deepened in future iterations.

Finally, as a prototype for a continuous assembly in the future, the Odyssey’s approach to composition embraces continuity through rotation. Members from the transnational sphere attend successive meetings before being replaced by new cohorts, while local members pass on their deliberative experience through emissaries or ambassadors, reports, virtual meetings, and digital tools. This ensures that the assembly retains institutional memory without ossifying into a ‘civil elite’. Like a ship on an ongoing voyage, the Odyssey’s crew changes while the mission continues and the ship endures - each port adding new voices, new perspectives, and new democratic energies.

In this way, composition becomes the heartbeat of the Democratic Odyssey: an ever-renewing practice of collective self-reflection that blends randomness and deliberate inclusivity. The balance has been thought and re-thought through the pilot year experimentation. It is both mirror and engine of the democratic imagination that drives the project - a picture of Europe in motion, drawn by the very hands of its people.

In short, lessons learned from compositional design include:

- Hybridisation works: Combining transnational and translocal pools strengthened both legitimacy and connection to place.
- Continuity matters: Keeping the same membership with variations in presence allowed cumulative learning without ossification.
- Inclusion challenges persist: Reaching underrepresented groups (elderly, rural, digitally excluded) required proactive outreach and financial support.
- Attitudinal diversity enriches deliberation: Including Eurosceptical voices prevented ideological homogeneity.
- Reflexivity matters: legitimacy in experimental democracy stems less from perfect proportionality than from reflexive openness: the willingness to continually question who is represented and why.
- Symbolic power of composition: The visible diversity of the assembly itself became a pedagogical and communicative tool-citizens embodying a plural Europe.

The Odyssey's composition thus fulfilled both descriptive and performative functions. It mirrored demographic realities while narratively expressing Europe's democratic imagination. Nevertheless, the Athens, Florence and Vienna evaluation reports underline recurring tensions:

- Statistical vs. symbolic representativeness: some criticised the absence of strict statistical precision while most participants reported that the assembly "felt European"-a sign that symbolic composition can generate a shared imaginary.
- Equity vs. equality: Equal national representation risked overrepresenting smaller states; proportionality risked dominance by larger ones.
- Volunteer vs. random: Mixing motivated participants with randomly selected ones created energy but also uneven deliberative experience.
- Translocal vs. transnational: While local anchoring enhanced realism, it sometimes produced divergent expectations between short-term local participants and transnational "core" members.

5 – Sortition

5.1 Description

Sortition, i.e. stratified random selection of citizens to participate, is both a procedural instrument and a political statement. It operationalises equality by giving every citizen an equal chance to take part in public deliberation, while also challenging entrenched hierarchies of expertise and representation.

The Modular Framework defined sortition as "a practice of democratic justice and epistemic humility." By introducing chance into democratic design, it dislodges the logic of control and allows representation to emerge rather than be imposed. Sortition is situated in the lineage of ancient Athenian democracy and contemporary deliberative experiments (e.g. Irish Citizens' Assembly, French Citizens' Convention for the Climate, Ostbelgien model).

However, transnational sortition introduces unprecedented complexities. The random selection of citizens across 27 EU member states-or beyond-must navigate differences in data protection law, population size, and logistical feasibility. Thus, the Framework distinguishes between *macro-sortition* (selecting participants across Europe) and *micro-sortition* (local recruitment in host cities). The aim is to:

1. Ensure procedural fairness through transparent and verifiable selection;
2. Guarantee diversity through stratification across socio-demographic variables;
3. Preserve legitimacy through independence from political institutions.

Sortition should not be mistaken for pure randomness. Democratic randomisation is *structured chance*: it balances equality of opportunity with correction of historical exclusions. Hence, it favours stratified random sampling -a combination of statistical representation and targeted outreach.

Ensuring that a Citizens' Assembly genuinely reflects the communities it aims to serve is both a democratic imperative and a practical challenge. Sortition, also known as civic lottery, is foundational to this legitimacy: through random selection combined with demographic stratification, assemblies aim to create a 'mini-public', a small group mirroring the diversity of the larger population. The principle is straightforward but powerful: if the group reflects society in miniature, their collective decisions carry broader social weight.

But as discussed in module 4 above, in transnational contexts, defining this 'mini-public' becomes far more complex. When an assembly crosses borders, who exactly counts as 'the public'? How do we ensure representation of not only demographic diversity but also geopolitical, linguistic, and cultural differences? Traditional sampling frames based on national census data no longer suffice, as they cannot capture the multiple societies and lived realities involved.

Therefore, transnational assemblies must move beyond statistical representativeness alone. They need to actively acknowledge historical inequalities related to mobility, citizenship rights, and access to participation. **Sortition** remains essential but alone is insufficient. **Recruitment** in this context is both a technical task and a deliberate act of inclusion. Volunteers and civil society organisations play a crucial role by connecting with communities often invisible to formal institutions, such as migrants, racialised minorities, and precarious citizens, ensuring their voices can be part of the assembly.

As discussed under "composition", defining representativeness across borders is one of the greatest methodological and political challenges of a transnational assembly. **Traditional approaches** to sortition rely on a single national sampling frame, a population database from which participants are randomly selected and stratified according to variables such as age, gender, education or region. But when an assembly spans several countries, there is no shared registry (in some countries there is not even a registry), no common demographic baseline, and no single definition of who 'the public' is.

In practice, constructing **a sampling frame** across borders requires both creativity and collaboration, particularly in transnational assemblies that operate without a governmental mandate. In such cases, access to national population registries is rarely guaranteed, making institutional partnerships essential yet often difficult to secure. Recruitment relies on

assembling data from diverse national or regional sources and, crucially, on working with civil society networks capable of reaching those who exist beyond formal records: mobile citizens, refugees, people without stable residency, or those excluded from official statistics for administrative or political reasons.

5.2 Forum discussions

The crew and the constituent network held vibrant debates about the philosophy and practice of randomness. Contributors agreed on the symbolic power of sortition: it conveys trust in ordinary citizens and enacts equality in its purest form. Yet they diverged on implementation details.

Several practitioners questioned whether full transnational sortition was feasible or desirable. Should the lottery encompass all Europeans (potentially 400 million adults) or a limited pool derived from willing registrants? Some worried that relying on volunteer databases compromises randomness by favouring the civically active. Others countered that voluntary sign-up enhances motivation and reduces attrition.

A second debate revolved around the *independence* of the sortition process. Should external, specialised organisations (e.g. Sortition Foundation) conduct the draw, or should it be internal to the assembly's governance? The prevailing consensus-reflected in the *Modular Framework*-favoured third-party oversight to avoid perceived bias.

Ethical and data-related concerns also surfaced. How can personal data be handled across jurisdictions while complying with GDPR? How to ensure the inclusion of digitally excluded populations? Several contributors proposed hybrid approaches: combining online and offline outreach, using local intermediaries (municipalities, NGOs) to access hard-to-reach groups.

Stratification criteria were also discussed. Some argued that they should not stop at the usual demographic variables but also reflect deeper social and political cleavages, urban and rural contexts, linguistic and cultural communities, differing relationships to European institutions, and varied experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

The Constituent Network's discussions developed these tensions into design proposals. Notes reveal an early recognition that random selection across Europe would require creative decentralisation. The Network agreed that **transnational sortition** must be complemented by **translocal recruitment** to capture Europe's lived diversity.

Members debated whether to rely on Eurostat or national census data as the baseline for stratification. Some argued for a pan-European demographic model (weighted by population and diversity indices). Others insisted that national data should remain the unit of reference, given administrative reality. The compromise proposal was to combine both: pan-European weighting for the transnational pool and local demographic mapping for each host city.

The notes also record conceptual reflections. One participant phrased it memorably: *"Sortition is our ritual of equality."* This ritual dimension was widely acknowledged. The draw itself-when made public-could symbolise transparency and shared ownership. A few suggested livestreaming the selection or transforming it into a civic ceremony, akin to drawing lots in ancient assemblies.

Another recurrent theme was *trust*. As the Brown Bag discussions highlighted, citizens' trust in random selection depends on both technical transparency and communicative legitimacy. Citizens must *see* that fairness is enacted. Several members proposed creating a "sortition explainer" to demystify the process and celebrate its democratic meaning.

More broadly, some argued that sortition, in transnational settings, functions as a *boundary-crossing device*: it transforms a legal and political abstraction ("European citizenship") into a tangible democratic practice. By inviting individuals from multiple jurisdictions into a single deliberative body, random selection performs the very act of *demos construction* that the EU's representative institutions struggle to achieve.

Discussions also stressed that transnational sortition must negotiate between **statistical representation** (ensuring a fair sample) and **deliberative potential** (ensuring participants can meaningfully engage). Too much emphasis on representativeness risks overcomplicating logistics; too little undermines legitimacy.

Discussions echoed the tension between equality and efficacy in random selection which has long preoccupied theorists of deliberative democracy. Fishkin's (2009) model of *deliberative polling* emphasises statistical representativeness as a condition of legitimacy; Landemore (2021) advocates *open democracy* where sortition ensures cognitive diversity; Smith (2022) underlines that random selection without continuous accountability mechanisms risks becoming tokenistic. In the Odyssey's design, all three logics intersect.

5.3 Lessons from the Pilot

As discussed in Module 4 – Composition - the *Democratic Odyssey*'s pilot assembly put these principles into practice through an ambitious hybrid model whereby recruitment occurred through eight participant pools, four transnational and four translocal.

A two-tiered procedure

STAGE ONE: EUROPEAN DRAW (Spring 2024).

At the macro level, a random sample of citizens from EU member states received invitations to participate. Stratification criteria included age, gender, region, education, and EU attitude (from questionnaire proxies). From this pool, approximately 120 citizens were selected to form the core transnational group.

STAGE TWO: LOCAL DRAWS (2024-2025 - ATHENS, FLORENCE, VIENNA).

Parallel local lotteries were organised in each host city. Local participants were selected from municipal or community databases, with extra outreach in marginalised neighbourhoods. Each local draw aimed to reproduce the host city's social composition, balancing nationals, EU residents, and third-country nationals.

This two-tiered procedure exemplified the Modular Framework's ideal of *layered equality*: equality across Europe, nested within equality within each locality.

Sortition was handled by **two independent organisations**: the Sortition Foundation (for the transnational pool) and the QED Foundation (for the local pools). Both applied transparent, GDPR-compliant methods, and two-stage lotteries. In each city, invitations were disseminated digitally and in person (flyers, phone calls, community networks). Selection considered age, gender, region, education, and attitude towards the EU. For translocal pools, organisers collaborated with municipalities and community groups to reach marginalised populations (migrants, youth, precarious workers).

Approximately two-thirds of participants were randomly selected and one-third came via targeted civic channels. This hybrid approach reflected both normative and practical considerations: Budgetary and carbon constraints led to adding local to transnational randomisation, while inclusion goals required some targeted recruitment.

Participants were recruited via mail, phone, and community outreach, supported by local partners in Athens, Florence, and Vienna. Each invitation explained the principle of random selection and the assembly's democratic purpose. The transparency of this communication was crucial to legitimacy: as one participant noted, "I trusted the process because I could see the fairness in it."

Athens marked the Odyssey's first compositional trial. Local groups, including migrant associations and students, enriched the cultural mix. While coordination proved complex (visa issues, travel funding, interpretation), the diversity of voices was widely celebrated (however, facilitators noted underrepresentation of older citizens and rural participants.. Facilitators observed that random selection had produced genuine pluralism of perspectives, including Eurosceptical citizens, migrants, and youth. The experience confirmed the feasibility of multilingual deliberation (interpreted in 7 languages). One logistical challenge was *attrition*. A small but visible number of randomly selected participants declined or withdrew before attending. Replacement through supplementary draws preserved balance but revealed that civic participation depends on material enablers (stipends, time compensation).

In Florence and Fiesole, new members joined, recruited mostly by students and civic volunteers, with the presence of half of those already present in Athens. The mix of "fresh voices" and "returning members" created dynamic tension between continuity and novelty. This echoed the Odyssey's metaphor of a travelling ship: the crew changes, but the journey continues. This iterative rotation allowed fresh perspectives without losing collective memory. Feedback from facilitators noted improved cohesion: returning members helped onboard newcomers, embodying deliberative continuity.

Florence also piloted digital randomisation verification: participants could view anonymised selection data, demonstrating transparency. This feature, inspired by discussions in the Brown Bag sessions, was hailed as a milestone for procedural trust.

Vienna's assembly added a stronger translocal layer, as the greater inclusion of Central and Eastern European citizens increased geographic balance. The demographic data show improved gender parity and wider socio-economic spread. Participants described the experience as "a living Europe in one room." The draw was symbolically framed as "Europe drawing itself together." Non-EU residents and refugees participated, expanding the meaning of "European citizenship."

Yet the Vienna evaluation also identified practical limitations: while random selection succeeded in ensuring diversity, the process remained resource-intensive. Recruiting across borders required translators, travel coordination, and GDPR compliance for multiple jurisdictions-an operation feasible only through extensive volunteer labour and foundation funding.

Case Example: Partnering with Civil Society to reach refugees. The Democratic Odyssey & MetaDrasi (Greece)

Because the Democratic Odyssey wanted everyone affected by collective decisions to have a voice, it was crucial to reach refugees and people with lived experiences of displacement. In Athens, access to this community was not straightforward, as traditional sampling methods and registries do not include refugees.

To bridge this gap, the Democratic Odyssey partnered with MetaDrasi - Action for Migration and Development, an organisation providing education and language courses for refugees in Greece. Through this collaboration, MetaDrasi reached out to its network to share information about the Assembly and invite participation.

Thanks to them, 60 refugees applied, and 20 were selected to take part in the Assembly to whom we provided a stipend to recognise their time and contribution.

Democracy can't stop at the border of citizenship. When we work with organisations rooted in local communities, participation becomes more real, more inclusive, and closer to the world we want to build

See: Composition, who is who in the Democratic Odyssey?

A Constituent Network Member observed that, despite the sophisticated sortition strategy, the assembly group appeared "auto-selected" and "like-minded," indicating a lack of the necessary friction from contradictory or dissenting views. Another participant revealed joining the assembly via an overflow list after applying for a different civil society workshop, confirming that relying on civil society recruitment, while necessary for reaching "invisible" communities, inevitably biases the sample toward already-engaged citizens.

This suggests that the reliance on pools sourced from active networks, a necessary adaptation due to the lack of access to national registries, may have created a "bubble" of civil society for these sub-section of the assembly and it may have limited the inclusion of the broader, more skeptical public.

To mitigate this in future iterations, the methodology must strictly separate or refine the balance between truly random sortition and civil society recruitment to actively ensure the inclusion of the "un-engaged" and "skeptical" public.

In short, feedback data highlight four key findings:

- High legitimacy: Over 85% of questionnaire respondents (Assembly members) perceived random selection as fair.

- Information gaps: Some members from the first sampling stage, initially confused sortition with standard questionnaires, indicating the need for clearer communication materials.
- Attrition variance: Lower participation rates among low-income and rural invitees persisted, despite stipends.
- Learning effect: Participants' understanding of sortition deepened during the assembly and many later advocated the model publicly.

The process highlighted several tensions:

- *Procedural transparency vs. comprehension:* Transparency alone is insufficient. Participants must also understand why randomness matters.
- *Equity vs. feasibility:* Purely random selection across 27 states risks excluding those unreachable by conventional outreach methods.
- *Randomness vs. motivation:* Voluntary engagement may enhance quality even if it slightly compromises statistical purity.
- *Institutional independence:* While independent oversight bolstered credibility, coordination with host institutions required careful boundary management.

Ultimately, the Odyssey's pilot demonstrated that random selection at continental scale grounded in local embeddedness is not only technically feasible but symbolically transformative. It turned abstract European citizenship into a lived encounter. The Odyssey's experience exemplifies *transnational reflexive legitimacy*: legitimacy generated not by pre-existing institutions but by the transparency and fairness of procedure itself. Sortition becomes a performative act of equality. Europe enacted through the lottery.

6 – Formats and Spaces

6.1 Description

The Formats, Sessions, and Spaces modules of the Modular Framework collectively explore how democratic design materialises through time, structure, and environment. They pose a fundamental question: *how can the choreography of deliberation translate democratic values into lived experience?* The Framework insists that the success of a transnational citizens' assembly depends not only on who participates or what they discuss, but how they interact and where they meet. In deliberative terms, "format is politics". The architecture of participation (encompassing session sequencing, group size, facilitation modes, spatial design and pacing) shapes the assembly's very epistemic quality, as well as its inclusiveness and emotional resonance.

The Modular Framework identifies three dimensions of design: the Temporal (Sessions), which governs the rhythm of meetings and the alternation between plenary and breakout discussions; the Spatial (Spaces), defining the physical or virtual settings in which deliberation unfolds, including accessibility and sensory atmosphere; and the Procedural (Formats), outlining the methods of discussion, ranging from mini-publics to artistic interventions. Each dimension must reflect the values of transparency, inclusion, and care.

At the transnational level, these challenges multiply. Spaces must accommodate linguistic plurality and intercultural interaction; schedules must bridge time zones and travel; and formats must mediate between diverse civic cultures. To address this, the Framework advocates iterative multimodality: an adaptive combination of digital and physical participation, alternating between large-group plenaries for common vision and small-group deliberations for deep dialogue. Furthermore, a central objective of the Democratic Odyssey was to demonstrate that high-quality transnational deliberation is scalable towards permanence by strictly minimizing costs and reducing the carbon footprint. While distinct from pure logistics, the operational aspects of transnational assemblies require extraordinary creativity and intersectional awareness. In the Democratic Odyssey, venues ranged from the historic Pnyx in Athens to Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and the FH university in Vienna. Planning these spaces was not merely operational but deeply relational, relying on human connections and a shared commitment to making participation possible for all. This design philosophy draws theoretically from Parkinson's democratic architecture of public space and Escobar's facilitative ecosystems, emphasizing that spatial and procedural design are moral, not merely technical, choices.

6.2 Forum Discussions

The Forum accompanying this module revealed an experimental ethos, where contributors debated the tension between formal deliberative rigour and creative informality. The central dilemma was whether sessions should emulate parliamentary order (with clear procedural scaffolding, agendas, and voting rules) or civic gatherings fostering fluid, dialogical encounters for trust and empathy. The resulting consensus was not to choose between structure and spontaneity but to interweave them, encapsulated by one participant's observation that "Deliberation needs both choreography and improvisation".

Forum exchanges also highlighted the need to integrate art and affect as legitimate formats of democratic engagement. Drawing on insights from participatory theatre and visual arts, contributors argued that emotion and imagination are not distractions but cognitive resources for deliberation. This perspective aligns with Mouffe's notion of "agonistic spaces", where affective politics become productive rather than divisive as they are anchored in debates about the common good. Practical issues regarding multilingualism were also intensely debated. Some practitioners warned that multilingualism risked slowing discussions or privileging English speakers. The Forum suggested mitigation strategies such as whispered interpretation, visual facilitation techniques, and creative formats to bypass linguistic asymmetries.

The Constituent Network's preparatory meetings captured the design's evolution, describing a long debate on session architecture where the overwhelming preference was not to mirror EU institutional formality but to perform an alternative democratic aesthetic, summarized by the note: "We are not simulating Brussels; we are rehearsing democracy anew". To achieve this, the Network proposed three types of sessions: Foundational for onboarding, Deliberative for core work, and Transformative for reflection. Spatial design discussions focused on "symbolic itinerancy" - travelling from iconic sites of heritage to accessible civic spaces representing possible futures. The E-book situates these questions within a broader theory of translocal democratic infrastructure, arguing that the architecture of deliberation (from seating layout to acoustics) directly shapes power relations and norms of equality.

6.3 Lessons from the Pilot

In the Democratic Odyssey pilot, these design ideals took shape across three in-person assemblies and five online meetings, collectively amounting to more than 100 hours of deliberation. Each session was carefully choreographed to blend continuity and innovation, utilizing plural and adaptive formats. The pilot navigated intrinsic tensions within the itinerant format, revealing crucial lessons regarding temporality and continuity.

While the spatial choreography was successful, the temporal architecture faced limitations. Empirical data from the final survey reveals a tension regarding the density of the format: while the majority found the timing appropriate, 25% of respondents found the time to be 'too little'. Crucially, when asked how they would use extra time, the demand was clearly for active interaction rather than passive reception: 56% of respondents prioritized either 'discussing in plenary' (31%) or 'small-group exchange' (25%) over other options. This echoes broader knowledge in the field of deliberative assemblies that high-quality transnational deliberation requires a slower pace than single-language deliberation; compressed schedules risk undermining the work on lived experience the space aims to create. The challenge to blend the ‘veteran’ travelling with local newcomers was successfully mitigated through a robust onboarding architecture. The dedicated Friday afternoon sessions, combined with evening cultural events and the implementation of a ‘buddy system’ fostered immediate synergies and a shared sense of belonging. These mechanisms ensured that all participants, regardless of when they joined, could enter the narrative arc with confidence and equal standing.

When a first-time participant in Vienna was asked how integrated she felt in an ongoing process, she replied: ‘The Buddy System… it really helped me connect quickly with the other participants.’”

Regarding hybridity, qualitative interviews with participants revealed that digital participation is often best utilized as an asynchronous reflective layer. For example, a participant from the Vienna Assembly noted that using platforms during live discussions felt distracting, preferring instead to access them afterwards to integrate new ideas. The spatial arc of the assembly evolved significantly across the three cities. Athens (2024) prioritised community over content, using the spatial choice of a university hall near the Acropolis to embody continuity between classical and contemporary democracy, while the “democratic olympics” served as an artistic trust-building exercise. Florence (2025) refined the structure with “deliberative circles” and “expert encounters,” balancing focus and creativity, though dense scheduling led to calls for greater emotional sustainability. Vienna represented the climax of spatial experimentation under the theme "Democracy is a collective act of care". The spatial choreography illustrated multilevel symbolism: moving from media space (ORF Funkhaus) to university reflection (FH Campus) to open public space (Volksgarten) for the symbolic Theseustempel picnic.

Ultimately, the pilot validated the “deliberative dramaturgy” approach - sequencing analysis, emotion, and reflection - as effective in balancing structure and creativity. Across cities, participants expressed that the Odyssey “felt like Europe” - not just because of its topic, but because of the way it unfolded: multilingual, itinerant, imaginative, and caring.

Part II – Running the transnational assembly

7. Inclusive logistics and operations

7.1 Description

The *Inclusive logistics and operations* module examine the practical backbone of democratic experimentation: the infrastructures that enable people from different countries, languages, and social contexts to deliberate as equals when converging in the same space. It raises a deceptively simple question: *How does democracy travel?*

In the Modular Framework's vision, "transnationalism" is not only a geographical extension but a *democratic quality*: it requires the ability to think, deliberate, and decide across borders while respecting difference. For a transnational assembly to function, it must build what the Framework calls *"logistical equality":* the material and communicative conditions that make participation equally possible for all.

This entails three interconnected layers:

1. **Mobility:** enabling citizens to cross borders physically or digitally;
2. **Accessibility:** ensuring linguistic, economic, and social inclusion;
3. **Sustainability:** minimising environmental impact while maximising translocal connectivity.

Transnational democracy, the Framework argues, is both *material* and *imaginative.* It requires visas, flights and trains, interpreters, large and welcoming venues with space for sub-group discussions, considerations about time zones, but also symbols, stories, and shared spaces of belonging (also see module 6). As early internal notes put it:

"Without appropriate logistics, there is no legitimacy. The scaffolding of participation is the architecture of equality."

The Framework distinguishes two operational scales:

- **Macro (transnational):** coordination across multiple jurisdictions, travel, visas, cross-border payments, and translation.
- **Micro (translocal):** local hosting, venue design, catering, accessibility, and safety.

It further insists that logistics is a political question: resource allocation, travel funding, and spatial choice all shape who can belong. Even technical questions like chronology of allocating daily allowances for participants can make a significant difference in the way members experience the assembly, as well as the commitment they will have in the space.

7.2 Forum discussion

The Forum accompanying these modules showcased vivid debates between cosmopolitan aspiration and practical constraints. Participants celebrated the Odyssey's transnational ambition but warned that it risks reproducing privilege if logistics are not deeply egalitarian. Who can travel across borders, take time off work, or engage online in multiple languages?

Several contributors proposed criteria for *fair transnationalism:*

- Equal travel support and stipends for all participants;
- Visa facilitation for non-EU residents;
- Rotation of host cities across Europe's peripheries, not only its centres. Long-term, many argued there should be a turn to rural areas not only for sortition, but also for hosting.

The *climate footprint* of travel subsequently became a central tension. Should assemblies prioritise face-to-face encounters, which are vital for trust-building, or shift towards hybrid models for sustainability? Also to future-proof the assembly from a political lens, minimising the footprint also means steering clear of double-standards - e.g. about deliberating on climate while convening hundreds of individuals via plane (the COP meetings are often criticised for this and therefore delegitimised prior to any substantive debate).

The Forum converged on the need for **translocal balance**: combining a smaller, itinerant transnational core with locally rooted assemblies and online plenaries. This model-later adopted by the Odyssey-reduces travel while expanding participation.

Finally, space and logistics were discussed in symbolic terms. Several practitioners argued that physical spaces should "speak Europe": accessible, multilingual, inclusive, and inspirational. Aesthetic design-light, sound, seating-should make participants feel welcomed as equals.

The Constituent Network spent months wrestling with these logistical dilemmas. So did the Consortium, picking up on the Network's recommendations, anecdotal reports or structured insights. Notes record debates about ideal venues, visas, budgets, and the ecological footprint of travel. The compromise proposal was the "itinerant anchor" model: three in-person sessions (Athens, Florence, Vienna), each hosting local members while maintaining a rotating transnational cohort.

One logistical innovation discussed in these meetings was the **"Democracy travel corridor"** - a proposed partnership with cities and airlines to facilitate visa and travel arrangements for future assemblies. Accessibility was another priority. Brown Bag Lunch participants insisted on multilingual facilitation, gender-sensitive accommodation, and child-care options. Notes emphasise the "politics of hospitality": how participants are greeted, housed, and fed can shape their sense of equality and trust.

The E-book situates these reflections within a theoretical lens of transnational democratic infrastructure. It defines transnational deliberation as "a choreography of interdependence,"

in which logistical systems (such as travel, translation, scheduling) materialise solidarity as well as intergenerational access (such as tech support for youth, transfers for the elderly and so on). The book warns that without logistical fairness, transnational democracy risks becoming participation for the mobile elite. To counter this, it advocates **translocal modularity:** assemblies anchored in local civic ecosystems but connected through shared methodologies, as already discussed. This model - later embodied in the Odyssey's Pilot Assembly - translates cosmopolitan ideals into pragmatic equality.

7.3 Lessons from the Pilot

Digital infrastructure was treated as a logistical as well as democratic tool. The *Info Hub* space in the automatically translated digital platform was planned not only as a communication interface but as a *public transparency portal,* allowing citizens to see deliberation in progress, share the livestreaming links to their networks and also to quickly access logistical information about the different sessions.

Over eight months, hundreds of citizens met across three European cities: Athens, Florence, and Vienna and in multiple online sessions. The process involved thousands of logistical decisions that collectively constituted the "hardware" of democracy.

Participants came from across Europe and beyond, including citizens from candidate and neighbouring countries. The organisers managed visa support, travel booking, and stipends through a dedicated coordination team. Local hosts provided accommodation and meals, with special attention to accessibility needs.

Funding from the CERV program, European foundations and crowdfunding covered travel costs, ensuring no participant paid personally. Stipends compensated for lost income, embodying what one organiser called "material equality of voice." In the case of the global citizens, the interface with the local migration centres sometimes required direct coordination on their monitored itineraries, in a way that the work of the Task Forces would still make it a hopeful, thought-provoking and liberating experience towards experiencing democratic engagement in action.

The in-session livestreaming of the Vienna moment, 2025.

Between cities, hybrid sessions kept deliberation continuous. The *Info Hub* provided translation, updates, and interactive tools. *Talk-to-the-City* and *Polis* were deployed to visualise collective preferences. In the final survey, respondents indicate that 75% found digital tools easy to use, and 62.5% found online sessions useful for acquiring new knowledge. This positive reception, supported by the finding that only 9.4% of respondents found the time 'too long', validates the methodology deployed in the 2024/25 Pilot Assembly, where online sessions were intentionally kept short and split over multiple evenings to prevent digital fatigue.

The date and time of the event was also crucial: in-presence assembly moments were Friday to Sunday, so as to ensure a minimal need for annual leave being requested to employers. The online sessions were conducted in the early evenings or during weekends, to maximise attendance and minimise fatigue.

The logistical team implemented hybrid facilitation training, ensuring online and in-person groups were treated as one assembly, not separate entities. This hybrid cohesion - not an area of focus in most deliberative practice - proved essential to maintaining trust and focus across distance.

Each city contributed its civic and symbolic fabric - nevertheless, this also required great mobilisation of resources (predominantly staff time and local connections) to obtain authorisations to utilise highly guarded and truly meaningful historical heritage sites. Synchronisation with local administrations for the Athenian Pnyx and the Florentine Palazzo Vecchio proved complex and yet very rewarding when both became available through institutional endorsements.

Environmental concerns were a constant consideration. Travel between cities was mostly by train; digital sessions replaced two in-person meetings. Catering prioritised local, vegetarian suppliers wherever possible, yet with an eye to inclusive options for all members. Carbon emissions were estimated to be significantly lower to those of the European Citizen Panels, despite larger participation, as a result of the translocal-itinerant approach.

The Odyssey's spatial design reinforced equality and imagination. Seating was circular, lighting warm, acoustics optimised for dialogue wherever possible. Artistic installations (e.g. sails painted by citizens) transformed spaces into co-created symbols of Europe. Observers noted that physical arrangement influenced deliberation quality: proximity fostered empathy; flexible furniture encouraged movement and interaction. In Vienna, open-air sessions blurred the line between assembly and public gatherings, embodying the principle that democracy should be *visible and porous.*

Behind the scenes, a dedicated *crew* coordinated all logistics, blending professional project management with volunteer energy. Coordination across time zones, languages, and legal systems required constant communication. This spirit of cohesion and co-creation in logistical coordination action was itself a democratic experiment: horizontal, self-reflective, and transnational. As one crew member put it, *"We were building democracy while running it."*

The Democratic Odyssey's approach to mobility was validated from the participants' experience perspective, but it revealed a clear compromise in terms of operational efficiency for producing detailed recommendations.

On one hand, the logistical choice of physically moving between cities (the itinerant model) was perceived as essential to the project's mission. 84% of respondents (final survey) approved of the Assembly's 'itinerant nature', confirming that travel was not a decorative component, but vital to 'feeling Europe'. This logistics had a profoundly positive impact on group dynamics, with 78% of Assembly members reporting a strong realization that people from different countries share 'similar life experiences and challenges', an observation that supports the hypothesis that face-to-face deliberation dismantles national stereotypes. One Assembly Member summarized the effect by stating that:

"*Traveling together created a bond that online meetings simply cannot replicate*"

This emotional cohesion was described as crucial for uniting previous strangers, transforming the journey into a necessary "story to follow" and "spiritual journey", in their own words.

On the other hand, this same mobility risked imposing an 'itinerancy tax' on policy production. The complex logistics, the operational *reset* at each stop, and the time dedicated to *onboarding* new local groups caused a "time-compression effect". One of the facilitators reports the danger of symbolism coming potentially at the expenses of process quality if it compromises group cohesion. Here, it is extremely important to note how the nature of the funding made it so that the sortition would be done in each city as the DO approached to dock it. In an ideal design and building on the findings from the Pilot, the participants will all be selected at the very start and logistical arrangements (including onboarding moments) would be inherently minimised.

Notes from Athens, Florence and Vienna

- *Athens:* The transnational arrival created logistical strain but very visible presence and 'a buzz' in the city. Citizens reported awe at the diversity of voices and places.
- *Florence:* The hybrid model was refined; participants alternated between academic and monumental/public spaces
- *Vienna:* The assembly reached full logistical maturity. More time was spent in a University building, more well-versed for deliberative operations than other institutional buildings. The final event combined in-person and online written contributions seamlessly, setting a precedent for future itinerant deliberation.

Quantitative results show:

- 94% of participants rated logistics as "smooth" or "very smooth."
- 87% appreciated multilingual support; 78% noted that travel arrangements were equitable.
- Extractable lessons: digital fatigue and occasional time delays due to interpretation.

As stated in the e-book, the Odyssey demonstrates the concept of materialised solidarity. A strategy built not only on ideas but on infrastructures of care, where transnational democracy becomes a choreography of logistics, mutual recognition and translocal interconnectedness.

8 - Deliberation and Facilitation

8.1 Description

Deliberation, in the Odyssey's framework, was defined as a collective act of reasoning, imagination, and care rejecting purely procedural notions of debate. The modular framework foregrounded deliberation as a *relational practice* - not only an exchange of arguments but an encounter among diverse experiences, emotions, and knowledges. Facilitation is its ethical infrastructure, while hybridity is its operational environment.

Thus deliberative process reflects the living texture of democracy - how citizens engage in dialogue, how equality is sustained through facilitation, and how digital and in-person methods combine into one deliberative experience.

Once participants are at the table, the quality of their engagement depends on how the assembly is facilitated and how deliberation is structured. In transnational assemblies, facilitation requires much greater effort and sensitivity than in national or local settings. It is not just about guiding conversation, it is about navigating linguistic, cultural and epistemic diversity, creating a space where everyone can contribute meaningfully despite vast differences. Even when participants are selected to be representative, facilitation is essential to level the playing field, ensuring that historically marginalised, divergent or minority voices are not drowned out.

Good facilitation directly shapes the quality of deliberation, the legitimacy of the assembly and the trust participants place in the process. Facilitators are there to enable collective

intelligence, not to impose their own ideas. They must remain neutral toward the content of the discussion and cannot steer the conversation toward a particular outcome. At the same time, they cannot simply listen to the strongest voices; their role is to ensure that marginalised or divergent perspectives are heard and can co-exist alongside dominant ones.

In international settings, facilitation is deeply shaped by cultural differences. While rational debate is often privileged because it is the system's established mode, it is not the language that matters. Facilitators must be attentive to different political cultures, communication norms, and prior experiences with deliberation. Effective facilitation also involves attending to emotions, storytelling, body language, and alternative forms of expression, recognising that participants communicate and understand the world in many different ways.

Transnational assemblies are experimental spaces, where the very assumptions of deliberative democracy are tested. Facilitation methods should be flexible, iterative and reflective, continuously adapted to the context and the participants to foster truly inclusive, just and meaningful deliberation.

Moreover, cross-border representativeness demands an awareness of epistemic diversity, recognising that different life experiences, histories, and perspectives bring essential forms of knowledge to collective imagination. Designing a transnational deliberation is a democratic negotiation in itself: about who gets to be seen, who gets to speak, and who gets to define what 'Europe's public' means.

8.2. Forum discussions

Most seemed to agree on a starting point: deliberation at transnational scale requires a rethinking of classical deliberative ideals. Unlike local assemblies with shared context, a European mini-public must mediate across cultural norms, languages, and communicative styles. Hence, facilitation becomes both an art and a science - the act of weaving a "translingual commons."

Beyond this, the Forum debates on this module revealed fundamental tensions. Some contributors emphasised deliberation as rational-critical exchange - a tradition traceable to Habermas. Others called for "emotional rationality" (Nussbaum, 2013), recognising that transnational democracy must engage the whole person, not only the mind.

Practitioners from feminist and postcolonial traditions argued that deliberation without emotional and cultural care risks reproducing exclusion. As one participant observed, *"A safe space is not a soft space - it's a space where difference can speak."*

Facilitators also debated neutrality. Should they merely enforce time and turn-taking, or intervene when power imbalances arise? The consensus leaned toward *empowered facilitation*: active correction of asymmetries (e.g., linguistic dominance, gendered interruption) and inclusive prompting for quieter participants.

Hybridity provoked practical and philosophical debates. Some feared that online participation would dilute the intimacy essential for deliberation. Others argued that hybrid design

expands equality by reducing travel and broadening access. The group agreed that hybridity is not a technical fix but a new democratic skill - one that must be learned, scaffolded, and emotionally managed.

The Constituent Network discussed the value of experimentation with deliberative "formats of feeling." Several sessions explored how to balance analytical reasoning with creative expression. "Deliberation" said a participant "must feel like democracy. People should leave a session not just thinking differently, but feeling recognised."

There was broad agreement that language is central to participation. Multilingualism requires robust interpretation and translation services, as well as culturally sensitive communication strategies that go beyond literal translation. Supporting different modes of expression, storytelling, visual methods, or nonverbal communication, helps ensure all participants can engage meaningfully, regardless of linguistic background or literacy levels.

Overall, there seemed to be broad agreement on three normative principles:

- Equality in voice: Everyone must have the material and social capacity to speak, listen, and be heard.
- Empathy in encounter: Emotions are not distractions from deliberation but essential to mutual understanding.
- Plurality in medium: Digital and in-person interactions should reinforce, not replace, each other.

And the Modular Framework identified four functional roles for facilitation:

- Cognitive: guiding reasoning and ensuring informed dialogue;
- Emotional: cultivating trust, empathy, and comfort;
- Linguistic: managing multilingual exchanges fairly;
- Aesthetic: shaping the sensory and symbolic atmosphere of deliberation.

8.3. Lessons from the Pilot

The Democratic Odyssey pilot treated deliberation as methodology, pedagogy and philosophy. To prepare for the sessions, a taskforce worked over several months on the facilitation roll-out of the first session of the assembly and later on the next two.

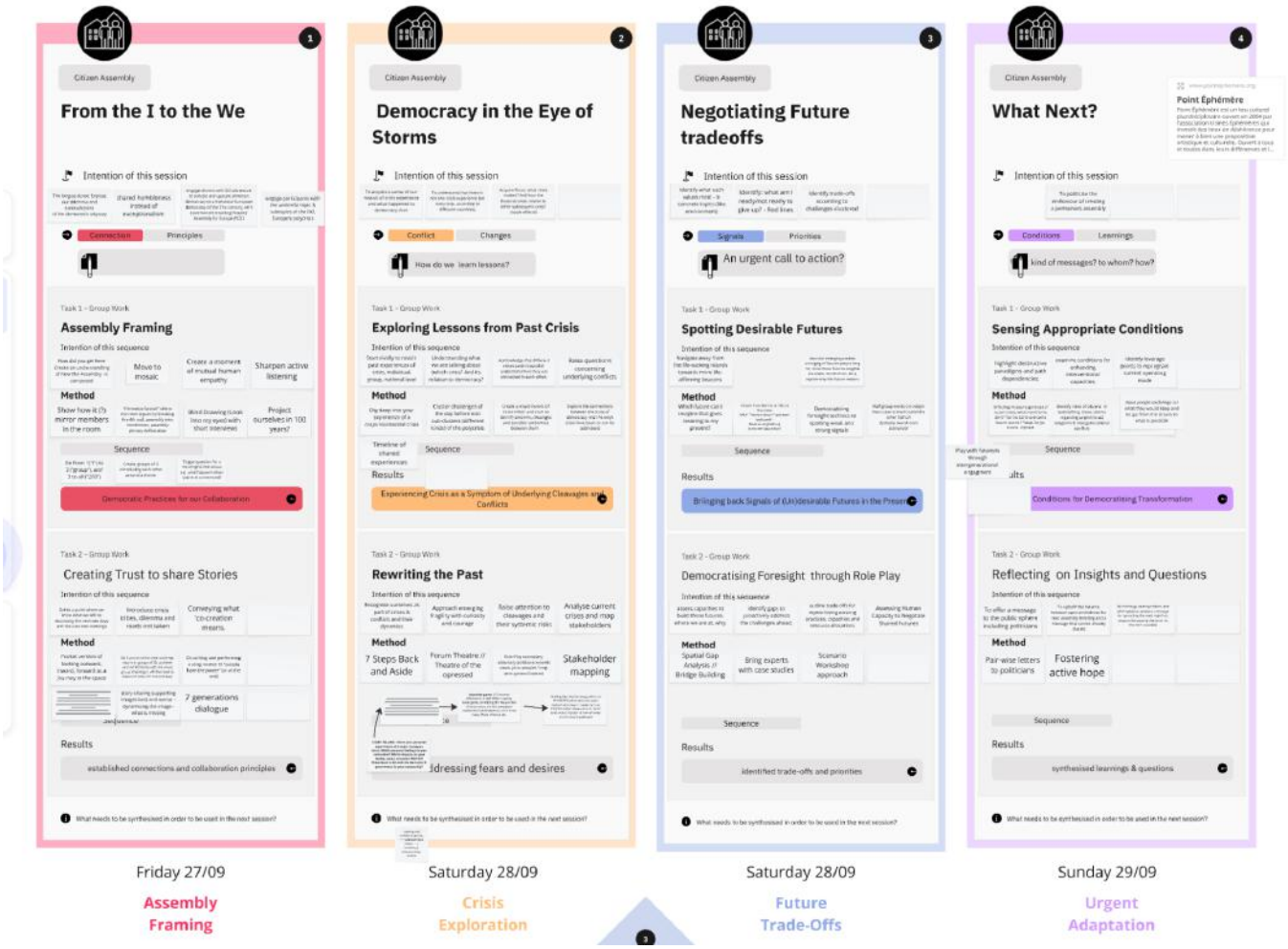
Notably, many members of the crew were simultaneously involved in observing, evaluating and drawing lessons from the various European citizens panels facilitated by Missions publiques and IFOK for the Commission, while both active members of the DO consortium, especially with regards to facilitation methods (see evaluation of the ECP on countering hatred here for instance). From this they drew both positive lessons but also a commitment to much more systematic bottom-up approaches to deliberation.

The group started by discussing the overall goal of deliberations summed up in the following statement: "Our goal for this meeting is to start to make the case for a Standing Peoples' Assembly as an agenda setter for Europe. We do so by exploring and reimagining the ways our democratic practices affect our capacity to address crises and navigate through storms. Since this experimental pilot will continue to meet in different European cities, we will

co-design the Assembly with its members through an engaging, reflective, and transformative experience over time, bringing together deliberation and civic arts. Its output will be a living document."

In addition, the group agreed on "horizontal methods": (i) to make explicit the fact that we move permanently from "I" (personal reflection, journaling) to "small We" (groups) and to the "bigger WE" (assemblies); (ii) to use DO as narrative metaphor; Mutual engagement 2 or 3; Participatory filming teams; Media updates; the political corner; accumulate visuals.

As a first step, the group debated the main mission and sub-goals of each of the four half days of the assembly through a MIRO-based brainstorming.



The preparatory work for the three days in Athens, September 2025

This led to an intermediary roll out reflecting great granularity, where each of the session in the above figure were expanded on by tapping into the specific deliberative methods of the Consortium partners with extensive facilitation expertise. Much attention was also paid to onboarding and the onboarding kit meant to ease the members into their new role - a kit posted on the digital participatory platform.

Overall, six principles were followed for facilitation:

1. **Facilitation as Democratic Stewardship**: Facilitation was curated by a transnational team of professional and volunteer facilitators trained in multilingual dialogue. Each in-person session included at least 20 facilitators - one per group of 10-15, plus "floating facilitators" managing hybrid interactions. Facilitators were briefed to ensure fairness in participation, emotional safety, and adherence to time while allowing flexibility. Their mandate went beyond process management to nurture collective intelligence. Facilitators reported that trust-building and emotional containment were as crucial as managing content. They opened each day with collective rituals (breathing, movement, short reflections), grounding deliberation in shared presence.

Extensive facilitators' briefings were developed and refined over the course of the assembly. Facilitators also co-developed a shared *Code of Deliberative Care*, which included principles such as: "Listen for understanding, not for reply." "Disagree without diminishing." "Translate generously." "Reflect before responding." These guidelines later became the backbone of training sessions held before each assembly. The Network also tested the inclusion of *Civic Arts facilitators*, who worked alongside traditional moderators to integrate creative and embodied exercises into deliberation (e.g. drawing, storytelling, role-play).

Transnational Assemblies and Deep Diversity

In the Democratic Odyssey assembly in Florence, an Italian and a Ukrainian participant talked about migration from very different experiences.

The Italian shared how migration affects their community. People often leave to find work elsewhere, and immigrants come looking for jobs. For them, migration is about the economy and changes in their town.

The Ukrainian had recently fled war and talked about migration as a fight for safety and a new start. They spoke about the difficulties of leaving home and living in a new country.

As they listened to each other, the Italian began to understand migration as more than just money or jobs, it's also about people's struggles and hopes. The Ukrainian saw that migration is connected to many reasons and affects many communities in different ways.

2. Emotional and Artistic Deliberation: Civic Arts interventions (story circles, symbolic gestures, music) complemented traditional dialogue, transforming deliberation into an affective experience. Participants consistently described these as moments of "reset" that deepened empathy. In Athens, *Democratic Olympics* games helped participants overcome shyness. In Florence, artistic reenactments of democratic history sparked reflection on power and exclusion. In Vienna, music and performance embodied one of the assembly's motto, *Democracy is a collective act of care.*

These creative moments were not decorative; they were facilitative tools. They allowed participants to process complexity and difference beyond words - an embodiment of "aesthetic deliberation."

3. Managing Multilingual Dialogue: Deliberation unfolded in many languages, with whispering translation in all the needed languages, with simultaneous translation in the plenaries and whispered translation in the sub-group conversations. Facilitators were trained to slow the rhythm, recap content, and use visual tools to ensure comprehension.

A facilitator highlights a key facilitation trade-off: "Grouping by Language vs. Mixing." In Athens, facilitators made the deliberate choice to "single out the Greeks" into their own working group rather than dispersing them. She argues this was crucial for "freely expressing" among them, also surging some collective trauma and pain (e.g. the prolonged Greek crisis 2008–2015), which might have been diluted in a mixed English-speaking group. This suggests that while transnational mixing is the goal, linguistic affinity groups may be necessary in the early stages to validate local emotion.

Feedback indicates strong appreciation for multilingual inclusion, though interpreters noted challenges in rapid exchanges. Facilitators adopted adaptive pacing - alternating between plenary synthesis and slower small-group reflection. This linguistic care made deliberation feel truly European: no one language dominated entirely, and silence itself was treated as a legitimate form of contribution.

Nevertheless, only one simultaneous translation was provided in each of the cities, which meant that when whisper translation was temporarily unavailable, some participants fell into the cracks. For Vienna, the main four languages of the assembly (English, German, Greek, Italian) were made available in plenary as this was the conclusion of the Pilot and all local ambassadors were present.

4. Hybrid facilitation and online deliberation: Between assemblies, online sessions allowed reflection and preparation for subsequent meetings. Facilitators adapted their techniques: shorter rounds, visual polling, and shared documents. The *Info Hub* platform hosted live translations and real-time feedback. Hybrid facilitation became a discipline in itself - combining digital etiquette, visual communication, and empathy across screens. Facilitators learned to read facial expressions and adjust interventions accordingly. When working at continental scale, *hybridity* can be seen as an epistemic opportunity: by combining digital and embodied forms, assemblies can enlarge participation without losing authenticity. Yet some warned of “technological asymmetries”: participants’ digital literacy and comfort vary across age, region, and class.

The Citizen Charter: Blending onsite and Online deliberation

During the final stage of the Democratic Odyssey in Vienna, participants worked collectively to draft what became known as the *Citizen Charter*, a text that distilled months of discussions, reflections, and encounters across borders. But this process did not happen only within the walls of the assembly.
While participants deliberated in person, online participants were following the sessions live and engaging through the Democratic Odyssey platform. In real time, they could read,

comment, and suggest additions to the evolving text. This exercise required a strong logistical coordination by the organising team.
This experiment in hybrid deliberation blurred the boundaries between physical and digital spaces, showing that transnational assemblies can nurture democratic participation across multiple layers of presence. The Citizen Charter was not the product of a single room, but of a distributed community.

5. Balancing rationality and emotion**.** The Odyssey deliberately blurred boundaries between rational deliberation and emotional connection. Facilitators encouraged participants to speak from both experience and analysis, using “lived experience” as data. This integration of feeling and reasoning enriched discussions on crisis governance, allowing participants to connect abstract institutional reform to concrete experiences of vulnerability and care.

6. Learning by doing: stimulating reflexivity and co-facilitation**.** Facilitation evolved through feedback. After each day, facilitators and crew held *reflection circles* to evaluate what worked, what didn’t, and how to adjust. Participants were also invited to self-facilitate portions of discussions - practising peer moderation and meta-deliberation. This reflexive loop made facilitation itself a democratic process. The boundaries between facilitator and participant blurred; both became co-authors of the process.

In spite of this deliberative care, some pitfalls emerged from the interviews with members. An assembly member argues for instance that a "knowledge vacuum" emerged in the final stages, noting that subject-matter experts were largely missing during the drafting phase in Vienna. Another participant who experienced the entire process reported that "facilitators were the experts for me," guiding the content as well as the process. This blurs the line of neutrality. Future designs must ensure that Technical Experts remain available "on-tap" until the very last minute of drafting to prevent facilitators from being forced into an epistemic role they are not designed to fill.

Human facilitation was clearly the critical infrastructure of the process. 94% of respondents agreed that facilitators successfully created opportunities for everyone to participate. It is noteworthy that, to manage complexity and disagreements, respondents relied overwhelmingly on human facilitators (75%) rather than digital tools (22%), reiterating that technology cannot replace expert human mediation in multilingual contexts.

Comparing the post-Athens survey with the final survey reveals a remarkable stability in satisfaction. Regarding 'Feeling Heard', 84% of final participants felt free to express themselves openly in plenaries and small groups, demonstrating that the facilitation model held up even as complexity increased. Similarly, the perception of having 'learned something new' consolidated over time, with 63% of participants reporting significant cognitive shifts at the end of the process.

Quantitative indicators from iterative feedback confirm this positive assessment;

- 92% of participants rated facilitation as “good” or “excellent.”
- 88% felt “listened to.”
- 66% reported that art and emotion enhanced understanding.

Differences emerged from one city to the next. The **Athens** meeting prioritised onboarding and trust. Facilitation focused on building relational bonds through cooperative games, storytelling, and open dialogue. The main challenge was to introduce the topic of crisis across a very heterogenous public where members cared and knew about different crisis while managing linguistic diversity and uneven familiarity with deliberation. Facilitators compensated with embodied exercises and visual summaries.

Florence introduced a more structured deliberative model. Sessions were organised by themes; facilitators guided groups through evidence-based reasoning, expert Q&A, and synthesis. They also experimented with "fishbowl" formats allowing spontaneous input. Participants praised facilitators for balancing guidance and openness. However, some facilitators noted fatigue from constant multilingual mediation - prompting calls for shorter sessions and more emotional breaks.

Vienna showcased the maturity of facilitation. Groups revisited recommendations, refined formulations, and presented outcomes to the plenary. Facilitators coordinated real-time synthesis using shared screens and multilingual summaries. Observers noted that trust and cohesion, built over previous sessions, allowed deeper disagreement without fragmentation. Facilitators successfully channelled tension into creativity - embodying agonistic pluralism in practice.

Post-assembly reports by facilitators emphasise four key learnings:

- Care precedes clarity: participants engage better when they feel emotionally safe.
- Translation is facilitation: interpreters are co-facilitators, not mere technicians.
- Rituals matter: shared gestures (e.g. collective breathing, songs, or hand symbols) ground equality.
- Digital empathy: hybrid facilitation demands new literacies of presence and pacing.

In short, the Odyssey experiment helped demonstrate that facilitation is democracy's connective tissue - the relational infrastructure holding plural publics together. It sought to translate cosmopolitan ideals into felt experience. The Odyssey's deliberative philosophy was not to have facilitators as neutral moderators but as *democratic* stewards, curating conditions for equality and deliberative mediation - the role of intermediaries in bridging epistemic and cultural divides. Facilitators tried to embody "careful authority" - neither directive nor absent, but present in support of collective thinking. Moreover, in this transnational context, facilitators tried to act as cosmopolitan translators, holding together a fragile communicative commons. This resonates with Jane Mansbridge's emphasis on mutual respect and epistemic humility, John Dryzek's notion of discursive representation, which values diverse ways of knowing, and Helène Landemore's advocacy for collective intelligence through openness.

9 – Spaces, Emotions, and Arts

9.1 Description

This module articulates one of the Democratic Odyssey's most distinctive convictions: that democracy is not merely procedural or institutional, but deeply *experiential* and *affective*. This perspective aligns with what scholars identify as a "third democratic transformation",

shifting from purely representative politics to a model that is embodied, deliberative, and cross-border. Within this framework, **space, emotion, and art** do not function as separate entities but as an interconnected democratic sensorium, a shared environment of feeling and imagination that bridges cultural and linguistic divides.

In this project, physical venues are viewed as symbolic infrastructures that embody values of openness, equality, and inclusiveness. The spatial design, encompassing how participants sit, what they see, and how they move, directly shapes perceptions of voice and belonging. This is operationalized through **Itinerancy**, where the Assembly performs democracy *as a movement.* By traveling between cities, the project becomes a **pilgrimage of democracy**, linking ancient democratic traditions to future imaginaries of transnational citizenship. However, as noted in the Modular Framework, this itinerancy is not just logistical; it is an odyssey of shared meaning-making where the journey itself carries narrative weight.

Civic Arts: Connecting Beyond Words with Playback Theatre

In transnational assemblies, participants often come from diverse cultural backgrounds with different communication styles and social codes. Sometimes, traditional verbal dialogue alone isn't enough to bridge these gaps, words can fall short when meaning and emotional expression differ. This is where creative methods like Playback Theatre become powerful tools.
Playback Theatre is an improvisational form of theatre where participants share personal stories, which actors then enact on the spot. This process creates a space for people to see their experiences reflected and acknowledged in a deeply empathetic way. In the first Democratic Odyssey assembly in Athens, we used Playback Theatre to explore the concept of crisis, and the multiple, overlapping crises people face. This technique helped participants express complex feelings and perspectives that might have been difficult to convey through words alone.

The framework posits that democratic deliberation is never purely rational; **emotion is both the fuel and texture of political engagement**. Drawing on Nussbaum's concept of political emotions and Mouffe's reframing of passion as a democratic resource, this experiment demonstrated that assemblies that fail to engage emotion risk abstraction and detachment. Conversely, emotionally attuned deliberation fosters 'affective legitimacy', the idea that for transnational democracy to be valid, it must be felt, cultivated through hospitality, vulnerability, and co-creation.

Finally, Civic Arts are defined not as aesthetic decoration, but as democratic infrastructure (as argued by Christian Recchia). They represent a practical synthesis of space and emotion, using artistic methods like performance, visual expression, storytelling, and ritual to create conditions for reflection and empathy. As outlined by Recchia, this approach draws on Freire's problem-posing education and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, which aims to represent reality and transform it through collective action, aesthetic experience, and symbolic meaning-making, transforming spectators into active participants or 'spect-actors'. Civic Arts practices invites participants to "make the system see and sense itself" (Scharmer, 2009) by cultivating collective awareness, deep listening and sensing, "connecting to earth

and source–as a Civic Arts facilitator notes–this might lead to finding new pathways for social transformation."

In transnational assemblies where words often fall short due to language barriers, civic arts offer a universal language of connection, helping participants navigate complex feelings and perspectives that are difficult to convey through verbal dialogue alone.

9.2 Forum Discussions

The integration of these soft dimensions into the hard work of democracy was not accepted without scrutiny. Inputs from Constituent Network's discussions, along with subsequent facilitator interviews and qualitative feedback from Assembly's Members, revealed deep conceptual divides and passionate exchanges regarding the boundaries of this approach.

A primary debate centered on the **role of emotions**. A rationalist school of thought among participants, facilitators and observers remained wary of *emotional manipulation*, arguing for a neutral space where reason prevails. In contrast, a constructivist approach argued that emotion is constitutive of democratic agency. From this view, emotion must be curated rather than suppressed. The consensus emerging from these debates was that anger, grief, and hope can coexist productively, but only if held within shared frameworks of care.

A parallel tension emerged regarding the **utility of arts**. Some Constituent Network's Members and facilitators warned that artistic interventions proposed during the three assemblies (such as 'Artivism', referred to as the combination of *art* and *activism* the use of artistic expression as a means to promote social or political change) could trivialize deliberation or impose elitist viewpoints on citizens. Furthermore, there was a fear that art might become a distraction that takes valuable time away from policy work. Countering this, artists and practitioners insisted that art is the heartbeat of deliberation. As a facilitator and Consortium Member noted, civic arts nurture a form of '**perma-democracy**', acting as the soil that sustains the ecosystem of participation rather than just being a garnish on top.

Finally, the concept of itinerancy faced a reality check. While celebrated, it sparked debate over fragmentation. The logistical overload of moving an assembly was highlighted not just as a hurdle, but as a lesson. The friction of travel became part of the story, revealing the very real obstacles to transnational cooperation that the assembly sought to address.

9.3 Lessons from the Pilot

The pilot assemblies in Athens, Florence and Vienna moved these theories into reality, providing ethnographic evidence on how civic arts function under pressure (see Recchia, 2025). The central lesson from the pilot is the vital distinction between "**Performative Arts**", which involve *passive spectatorship*, and "**Generative Arts**", which involve *active co-creation*.

Athens (September 2024): Transnational Healing & Myth-Making

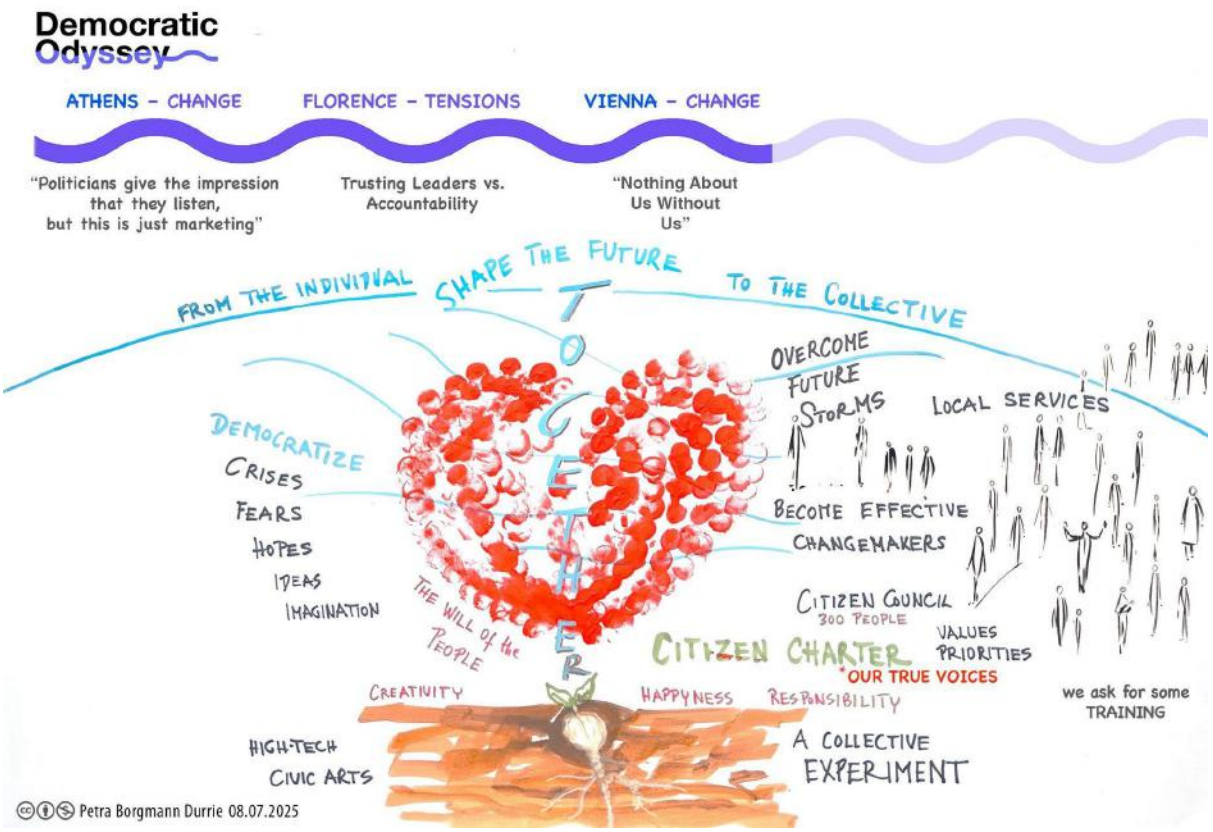
- **Opening Ritual:** "*The Crew Sets the Stage*" broke the fourth wall with a semi-scripted dialogue to frame the assembly as a collective odyssey. The "*Buddy System*" was introduced to foster translocal hospitality among strangers.
- **Generative Art:** *"The European Tapestry"* involved the co-creation of the Odyssey Sails, where participants painted symbols and slogans on blank canvas, turning abstract hopes into a travelling artifact.
- **Core Method:** *Playback Theatre* (performed by the *Palmos* troupe) enacted citizens' personal stories of crisis. This allowed for "transnational healing," validating local trauma regarding the Greek financial crisis and creating a cathartic space for emotional connection.
- **Foresight:** A *2029 Crisis Simulation Game* bridged storytelling with policy, asking participants to role-play societal actors in a future polycrisis.
- **Closure:** A *Thread Weaving Ritual* at the Pnyx connected participants physically and symbolically before passing the "Baton of Participation" to the next city.

Florence (February 2025): Embodied Deliberation & Tensions

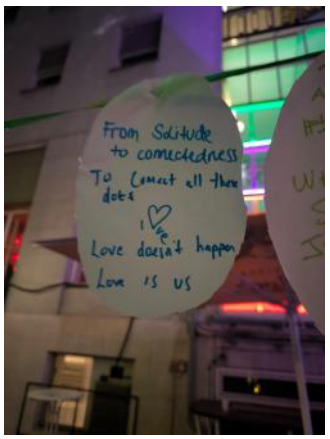
- **Immersive Opening:** Held in the *Salone dei Cinquecento*, a theatrical welcome featured actors playing *Machiavelli and Dante*, alongside children representing the River Arno/Nature. This grounded the assembly in the city's contested republican history.
- **Core Method:** *Tableaux Vivants* (inspired by *Social Presencing Theater*) were used to physically embody political trade-offs. Participants created "living sculptures" to feel the weight of conflicting interests, bypassing linguistic barriers to access "sensory understanding".
- **Continuity:** The arrival of the "Boats" carrying the Athens *Sails* and the *Bottle of Messages* visually reinforced the narrative arc.
- **Closure:** A *Collective Song* ("Citizens Have a Role") was co-composed and sung by the assembly, followed by the *passing of the flame* to Vienna.

Vienna (May 2025): Consolidation & Public Projection

- **Immersive Opening:** A theatrical dialogue between *Empress Sissi and Freud* welcomed the "flotilla" of previous cohorts (Athens, Florence) to the "*Republic of Love*." This ritual transitioned "*from the I to the We*" by initiating the Buddy System, pairing locals with travelers.
- **Core Method:** *Social Presencing Theater (4D Mapping)* was used to "unfold the Charter." Participants physically embodied systemic roles (e.g., Future Generations, The River, EU Institutions) to visualize the transition from current reality to a 2030 future, ensuring deep ownership of the recommendations.
- **Public Interface:** The *"Democratic Olympics"* moved deliberation into the public sphere, inviting citizens and festival-goers to physically "take sides" on normative questions in open space, blending debate with movement.
- **Closure:** The process concluded with *Generative Scribing* and a final ritual connecting the Charter to the broader ecosystem, preparing the output for political handover.



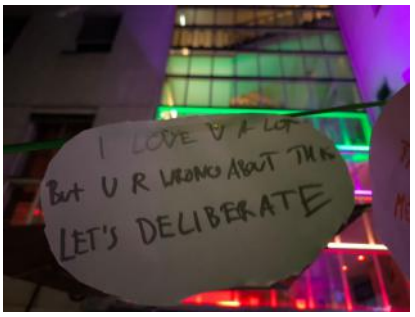
Closure of the Assembly, Generative Scribing of participants' inputs, Vienna 2025

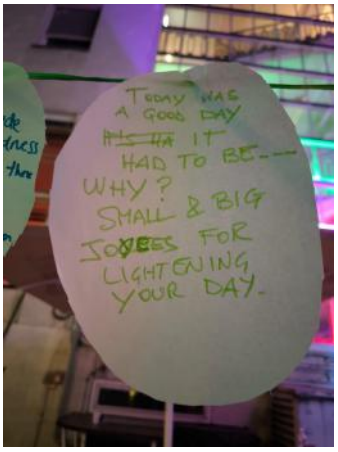

From Solitude
to connectedness
To Connect all these
dots
Love doesn't happen
Love is us


VISIT A NEW
CITY
TASTE TYPICAL FOOD
MEET NEW PEOPLE


LOVE


A viennese part
conversations in gardens
citizens progress


I LOVE U A LOT
But U R WRONG ABOUT THIS
LET'S DELIBERATE


TODAY WAS
A GOOD DAY
IT
HAD TO BE---
WHY?
SMALL & BIG
JOYS FOR
LIGHTENING
YOUR DAY.


EVERY TRUE REVOLUTION
IS AN ACT OF LOVE


DEMOCRACY
FREEDOM
FILIA
DIVERSITY
TRANSPARENCY


FILIA




Data from the pilot validates the experiential approach. Participant feedback indicated that 66% found the arts useful to the deliberation, though with distinct variations across cities: while Athens generated the most intense engagement (receiving the highest 'A lot' rating at 33%), Vienna achieved the broadest consensus on utility (61% positive), whereas Florence elicited a more mixed response with higher neutrality. The emotional climate was overwhelmingly positive, with 81% of participants reporting enthusiasm and 63% reporting confidence.

A facilitator survey reinforced this positive assessment regarding atmosphere, ranking Playback Theatre (14 mentions), Role-play (13 mentions), and Tableaux Vivants (10 mentions) as the most impactful methods for building connection and culture. These narrative and embodied methods were praised for providing emotional depth and validation, confirming that the arts successfully mitigated deliberative fatigue (Recchia, 2025).

However, the pilot also revealed significant challenges and a "Policy Gap." While facilitators rated the impact of arts on "Connection & Culture" highly (4.1/5), they were significantly more skeptical about their impact on "Policy Innovation" (2.6/5), suggesting that arts are currently perceived more as "social glue" or ice-breakers than as drivers of substantive political output.

Furthermore, as Christian Recchia reports in a more detailed and separate study, there is a clear distinction to be made between passive and generative modes. A minority of participants expressed discomfort with abstract or purely performative exercises, describing them as generating distractions or being elitist in nature. The pattern is consistent: participants rejected passive art (such as watching a performance without engagement) but embraced generative art (such as making things together). For example, the Sails exercise, where participants co-painted sails to travel between cities, was highly valued for fostering ownership. Conversely, complex abstract theater without proper framing risked alienating pragmatic participants. The lesson is clear: for civic arts to work, they must result in a shared artifact or insight, avoiding the trap of becoming mere 'feel-good' interludes.

10 – Integrating Expert and Citizen Knowledge

10.1 Description

The *Integrating Expert and Citizen Knowledge* modules jointly address one of the core dilemmas of deliberative democracy: how to combine citizen-generated legitimacy with analysis-driven competence. In a transnational context, this challenge intensifies: multiple knowledge cultures, policy languages, and disciplinary traditions must converge into one collective output that is meaningful, legitimate, and actionable.

The Modular Framework defines **outputs** as the tangible and intangible results of deliberation. Not just recommendations or charters, but also narratives, relationships, and civic capacities that persist beyond the assembly itself. It differentiates between three forms of output:

1. **Substantive outputs** (policy proposals, declarations, or charters);
2. **Relational outputs** (trust, networks, and alliances);
3. **Symbolic outputs** (stories, rituals, and artefacts that embody democratic imagination).

The module on **expertise** identifies a parallel typology of expertise:

- **Technical expertise**, providing evidence and feasibility analysis;
- **Experiential expertise**, rooted in lived knowledge, from anecdotal to more systematic;
- **Deliberative expertise**, referring to skills of listening, synthesis, and mediation and forming a more nuanced reading of a phenomena through collective intelligence.

Many in the Constituent Network have argued how expertise in a democratic assembly should be invited but not imposed. Experts provide context and clarification, while citizens deliberate and decide. This balance prevents a technocratic and consultative mindset in deliberative spaces, while suggesting complementarity with the previously explored civic arts dimension (as gateways to discussing emotions in politics).

The Framework's guiding principle is one of combining scientific fact with acknowledgment of the deeper sociological drives that permeate our politics. Acknowledging the limits of our own knowledge and that of experts, by striving to deepen collective understanding. In the Democratic Odyssey, there are analysts - not experts, as attributing expertise to the most educated also inherently implies a gatekeeping approach to specific areas of knowledge. As discussed in the fourth module (on Composition), analysts would join a corollary of voices that collectively compose the discursive mosaics of societies across Europe.

10.2 Forum discussions

Forum debates on Integrating Expert and Citizen Knowledge revealed persistent tensions between deliberative purity and pragmatic influence. Some argued that assemblies should aim for precise, implementable recommendations to gain political traction. Others cautioned that excessive technocratic focus might dilute democratic autonomy.

One Forum participant asked:

“Should citizens learn from experts, or should experts learn from citizens?”

A lively debate ensued around who counts as an expert. Should only academics and policymakers be invited, or also activists, community leaders, local institutions and agencies, stakeholders at large? The consensus leaned toward pluralistic epistemologies: combining scientific, institutional, and experiential knowledge.

Several contributors urged assemblies to embrace “outputs beyond documents.” Tangible artefacts - performances, art installations, digital archives - can carry deliberative meaning to broader publics. Others proposed iterative outputs: living documents revised across assembly cycles rather than fixed final reports.

The Constituent Network also discussed authorship: who writes the final text? Should citizens draft it directly, or should a synthesis team translate deliberation into accessible language? The balance between authenticity and coherence remained a recurring question in the preparatory phase.

The Constituent Network’s notes show extensive reflection on how to structure expertise flows within the Odyssey. Key decisions included:

- Creating a “pool of experts” nominated by partners and citizens;
- Integrating experts through short, accessible presentations (“lightning inputs”);
- Prioritising dialogical Q&A over introductory lectures, to avoid cognitive load and excessive framing;
- Appointing “expert translators” - facilitators bridging knowledge and citizen experience.

Notes emphasised that expertise should serve curiosity, not control it. Experts were briefed to avoid prescriptive language and to engage as co-learners.

In quite pro-cyclical fashion, the e-book conceptualises assemblies as epistemic commons: spaces where distributed knowledge becomes collective wisdom. Expertise is reframed as a relational process - an “ecology of knowledges” in the way that Boaventura de Sousa Santos would call them. The paper warns against treating experts as external authorities; instead, they should function as epistemic interlocutors and facilitators. The paper also proposes that outputs should be designed for both institutional uptake and public imagination. As discussed previously, assemblies can produce texts that speak simultaneously to policymakers and citizens, translating deliberation into narrative power. This gives an additional responsibility to analysts and other external interlocutors to the process to complement when requested, with wide-ranging pointers.

Dryzek and Niemeyer describe deliberation as “communication across difference”, suggesting that expert inclusion enhances, rather than undermines, collective reasoning. Landemore extends this into the idea of collective intelligence: larger, more diverse groups outperform experts alone. Similarly, Habermas (1996) reminds us that deliberation’s legitimacy lies in communicative power, not expert authority. These theories converge in the Odyssey’s attempt to make expertise dialogical and the outputs multi-layered.

10.3 Lessons from the Pilot

Expert input was coordinated by a knowledge committee led by the academic partners in the Consortium, in coordination with all others. This is clearly a lesson from the Pilot and a vantage point for itinerant assemblies (also at sub-national level). Each site the assembly would travel to, a rather different range of analytical knowledge and expertise could be mobilised also based on the local demographic, research and socio-political landscape. This is a strength of such process, as analysts were invited to each in-person assembly and online sessions to provide concise contextual framing on crisis management, EU governance, and democratic innovation, but always with a more trained eye to recognise local and regional patterns.

The overall timing of contributions was very clear, each expert had a limit of maximum 5 minutes for the plenary interventions and 2-3 minutes for sub-group requests for inputs. The sub-group interventions, which mostly occurred online in the 2024/25, pilot process, were equally as limited to 5-6 minutes.

The Assembly process foresaw the presence of analysts in each of the *in situ* assembly moments. Facilitators were trained to encourage citizens to question assumptions, ensuring knowledge exchange rather than top-down instructions. Experts were instructed to use accessible language and, where possible, to disclose uncertainty or competing viewpoints.

In Athens, the focus on lived experiences and intersubjectivity informed a novel methodology where the first few days of deliberation would be done without analysts in the room. So that the Assembly Members would get attuned to how far their ownership of the topic could go. In Florence, an analyst was asked to suggest case studies of participatory crisis responses. In Vienna, the Task Forces bolstered the systematic possibility to request the intervention and support (also confidentially) of a third-party professional expert in managing conflict, harassment and more generally emotions in the political space.

Crucially, in none of these domains was the discussion monopolised by professionals. Citizens' lived experiences - of unemployment, migration, pandemic, or climate anxiety - were treated as epistemic resources. Facilitators encouraged participants to speak from experience. This approach embodied the principle of epistemic equality: that knowing one's life can be as authoritative as knowing a dataset. Citizens often challenged experts on assumptions, leading to more nuanced proposals. For instance, during a debate on EU crisis governance, citizens demanded mechanisms for emotional well-being alongside institutional preparedness - an insight drawn directly from pandemic experiences and later reflected in the Charter's recommendation for democratic resilience as social care.

Participants appreciated these exchanges: while the Summary Report on Iterative Feedback indicated high approval for expert input, the final survey provides a more moderate picture, with 62.5% of respondents rating online expert sessions as useful for acquiring new knowledge and 25% explicitly citing 'support by analysts' as a key tool for managing complexity.

One of the possible rooms for improvement, strictly bound to the availability of resources and staff time, was the further fostering of the so-called Info-hub. This is a dedicated space on the deliberative digital platform where Assembly Members could directly access substantive

and as objective-demonstrative contributions as possible in the topic at hand. The DO Consortium felt at times that only a long term, well-resourced knowledge repository would fully bolster the discursive depth of deliberations. Indeed, a well-crafted, pluralistic and non-consensus-biased algorithmic navigator would have also further enhanced the participatory experience of Assembly Members.

Finally, the specific methodology developed by the Democratic Odyssey was to imagine two specific moments where the 'porousness' concept would be specifically applied.

The first one was stretched between the post-Athens (September 2024) and the Florence meeting (February 2025). In this phase, analysts were asked to convene with Assembly Members in an online meeting and provide feedback to any inputs they may have - also sharing not sub-topic specific feedback but rather a more meta one on how they understand crisis management to unfold in Europe.

The second level of gatherings took place between Florence and Vienna (May 2025) and particularly after the online session in early April 2025. The session featured inputs by three contributors: Brando Benifei, Member of the European Parliament, Alexandrina Najmowicz, Secretary General of the European Civic Forum and Richard Youngs from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. They commented publicly on the draft Citizens' Charter, also giving practical feedback to the drafting committee of volunteering Assembly Members on what could be taken into consideration, what risked being out of scope or reach and where the Charter was showing most promising. In general, all analysts were explicitly enthusiastic about the Assembly's work and the prospects of seeing a finalised Charter in Vienna. In the same way it had been set up in all other moments, this online event was also open to feedback by the general public, also in a separate document where they could all add comments and questions. The exercise was a success and certainly gave a quantitatively and qualitatively impressive range of contributions for the drafting committee to build on, as soon as in the following hour of meeting - dedicated to debriefing in a safe and closed-door setting what was heard in the public part.

With the DO-specific understanding of expertise in mind, key debates were set up on the digital platform to widen and foster a public debate. One of them focused on a self-reflection of agency, that many Assembly Members had been debating as early as in Athens. How to start seeing lay citizens not as passive victims but effective changemakers? While the number of contributions could be argued to be quantitatively irrelevant from a statistical standpoint - we still note that the quality and engagement of the comments was high. The results were aggregated and in this Pilot, the aggregation was presented in a summary document to the Assembly Members. We note how other and new methodologies could bring a better interaction. For instance, the online debates on the Charter, put online during a coffee break in Vienna and as the 10 pathways were about to be presented, created much more interest and leverage for the general public to comment directly.

Further methodological developments could further clarify a more specific remit for the interaction between the general public and the Assembly cohort, anchoring it in the broader observations about the need to open up the deliberative black box as the process unfolds.

Part III – Embedding the Transnational Assembly

11 – Citizen Empowerment

11.1 Description

The Citizen Empowerment module conceptualises empowerment not as a fixed outcome but as a continuous, iterative process shaped by participation, learning, and recognition. Within the Modular Framework, empowerment is defined as citizens' expanding capacity to understand political issues, influence decisions, and act collectively to reshape their political environment. In transnational settings, where linguistic, cultural, and institutional barriers are heightened, empowerment requires deliberate attention to accessibility, legitimacy, and continuity. Citizens must not only be invited to deliberate but also meaningfully equipped to act. In this sense, empowerment becomes "the connective tissue between deliberation and democracy."

The Framework distinguishes three interdependent dimensions:

- **Cognitive Empowerment** – developing the knowledge, analytical skills, and civic literacy that enable informed political judgement.
- **Affective Empowerment** – strengthening confidence, belonging, emotional safety, and motivation to participate in public life.
- **Collective Empowerment** – building networks, organisational capacity, and institutional pathways that allow citizens to exert influence beyond a single assembly cycle.

Across all three dimensions, the Framework underscores the risk of treating empowerment as rhetorical tokenism. Genuine empowerment requires structures that ensure citizens' contributions are recognised, integrated, and followed up. It also requires mechanisms that redistribute agency - through co-authorship, shared facilitation roles, and sustained roles for participants beyond the assembly.

Two full years of Brown Bag Lunch discussions added operational depth to this understanding. The Constituent Network emphasised "iterative empowerment": supporting autonomy **before, during, and after** the Assembly through preparatory materials, rotating facilitation, mentoring, and alumni networks. A recurring insight encapsulates this approach:

"Empowerment is not what we give citizens; it is what they learn to claim."

This aligns with existing democratic theory. Carole Pateman highlights the educative function of participation; Jane Mansbridge and Nadia Urbinati underline self-efficacy and recognition; Archon Fung and Pierre Rosanvallon emphasise institutional responsiveness. The DO model synthesises these traditions: empowerment as learning, belonging, and influence - distributed across scales and sustained over time.

11.2 Forum Discussion

Forum contributors debated the core question of *what* empowerment means in a transnational assembly and *how* it should be assessed. One camp emphasised **individual transformation**: increases in confidence, civic literacy, empathy, and political imagination. For these participants, the assembly's enduring legacy lies in the personal growth it generated. Others stressed **collective empowerment**, arguing that without structural follow-up and institutional responsiveness, personal transformation risks turning into frustration or disillusionment. This mirrors tensions in participatory theory between transformative and instrumental participation.

Efforts to reconcile these perspectives led to a shared understanding: individual empowerment is the foundation for collective agency, but empowerment remains incomplete unless institutions create pathways for influence.

A second theme concerned the **cultural variability of empowerment**. For participants from diverse political systems, empowerment carried different meanings, from challenging authority to co-producing public policy. The Forum concluded that a European assembly must sustain *a plural grammar of empowerment* rather than impose a single model. This includes recognising the emotional and symbolic dimensions through which empowerment is experienced: belonging, recognition, and being seen as a political subject.

Insights from Brown Bag Lunch sessions reinforced these discussions with practical strategies. Contributors proposed pre-session civic education, multilingual briefings, rotating roles, co-authorship of outputs, and establishing a "citizens' relay" across cycles. The e-book promotes an understanding of empowerment as distributed **agency**, treating assemblies as training grounds for democratic capacity where citizens move from participation to initiative.

Finally, reflections from the pilot highlighted the uneven distribution of empowerment. While many participants gained confidence and initiative - 94% of the final survey respondents (reported a high likelihood of participating in future civic initiatives - others encountered structural obstacles: linguistic barriers, digital inequalities, and limited time resources. The creation of the Citizens' Council was widely seen as a major achievement, but interviews revealed a "guidance gap": members expressed motivation yet lacked structured operational support to enact their mandate. This refers back to the module "2. Governance and Co-design", which explored the underlying questions of mandate and organisational structure. Should we imagine more or less institutionalisation and embeddedness? What are the trade-offs?

Across discussions, one insight recurred: empowerment is relational. It grows where citizens are recognised, supported, visible, and connected to follow-up opportunities; it diminishes where these conditions are absent.

11.3 Lessons from the Pilot

1. ***Addressing Civic and Political Literacy***: Evaluations across European citizens' assemblies show that participants enter processes with uneven civic and political literacy, shaping their capacity to deliberate. Evidence from the DO pilot confirms this pattern:

pre-session questionnaires in Athens and Florence documented substantial variation in baseline institutional knowledge. The pilot demonstrated that multimodal information tools - multilingual briefings, explainer videos, podcasts, and thematic guides - effectively reduced comprehension gaps across literacy levels.

2. Facilitation and Rotating Roles: Comparative studies identify trained facilitation as a central determinant of participant agency. The DO pilot confirms this empirically: session observations across all three cities show that high-quality facilitation correlates with higher self-confidence, clarity, and inclusive participation, while rotating roles (moderation, note-taking, presenting) reduced hierarchy and increased ownership.

3. Multidimensional Empowerment: Empirical research shows that deliberative assemblies generate cognitive, affective, and collective empowerment. DO's internal evaluation (SenseMaker stories, post-session questionnaires, qualitative interviews) confirms this: participants reported higher knowledge gains, greater confidence in speaking publicly, and motivation to join follow-up activities. Longitudinal contact with alumni from Athens and Florence indicates continued engagement beyond the events.

4. Public Visibility and Recognition: The DO pilot validated that public visibility can enhance perceived political relevance: media coverage, artistic documentation (performative storytelling, participatory arts), and public-facing events in Athens, Florence and Vienna significantly amplified participants' sense of recognition and legitimacy. Participants reported that visibility increased trust that their contributions mattered.

5. Influence and Shared Governance: Evidence from deliberative systems research shows stronger empowerment when assemblies connect to decision-making. The DO pilot's interactions with European Parliament actors, municipal partners, and think-tanks showed that perceived influence rises when recommendations are formally channelled to institutions, even without binding power. Participants consistently described themselves as "ongoing contributors".

6. Translocal Peer-Learning and Nested Scales: Comparative observations show that alumni networks sustain engagement and diffuse democratic practices. The DO pilot confirms this: participants across Athens, Florence, and Vienna spontaneously formed translocal peer-learning groups, exchanged materials, and prepared local initiatives. Municipal partners expressed interest in local replications, illustrating how nested local–transnational scales reinforce participation.

7. Emotional and Relational Dynamics: Emerging research emphasizes emotional safety, belonging, and recognition as predictors of lasting engagement. DO's artistic and ritual components - story telling, participatory arts, and theatre-based methods - generated strong bonds, mutual trust, and collective identity, documented in fieldnotes and post-event interviews.

8. Operational Pathways and Institutional Linkages: Evidence shows that continuity bodies (e.g., Citizens' Councils) enhance uptake of recommendations. DO evaluations demonstrate that participants value clear procedural roadmaps linking assemblies to EU institutions, cities, and civil society. The pilot revealed that when pathways were explained transparently (Florence, Vienna), perceived institutional relevance increased.

***9. Post-Assembly Ecosystems and Longitudinal Empowerment*:** Longitudinal studies show that empowerment persists when institutional or civic infrastructures support follow-up. Echoing these findings, DO's monitoring of alumni revealed sustained motivation where opportunities of follow-up engagement, partnerships or events were available or anticipated. This supports the finding that empowerment is longitudinal, context-dependent, and requires supportive ecosystems.

12 – Public Sphere

12.1 Description

Crucially, the DO assembly pilot is not just a deliberative body but a form of mobilisation, a collective movement and an exercise in advocacy. The political power of transnational assemblies often resides in the mobilisation and continued engagement of their members beyond the formal sessions.

In every democratic experiment, communication and media play a decisive role, yet too often, they remain forever forgotten. While citizen assemblies are still far from being an established democratic practice, their innovative nature makes them a powerful expression of renewal within the political system. But renewal cannot happen in silence. Because they are innovative, they are yet not fully known, and it is also necessary to turn them into a movement. We need people to talk about them, to feel it belongs to them, to see themselves reflected in them.

This is even more vital when it comes to transnational assemblies, where participation crosses linguistic, cultural and political boundaries. These assemblies rarely have the institutional backing, infrastructure, or communication budgets that national or local assemblies might enjoy. They operate in the interstices of existing systems, and precisely for that reason, they must invest in building a living community around them.

Communication, community and outreach are the connective tissue that allows democratic experiments to take root and resonate. Without visibility and shared narratives, assemblies risk remaining isolated exercises.

The DO Public Sphere module therefore starts from a simple premise: **democratic renewal cannot happen in silence**. Citizen assemblies, and especially transnational ones, remain fragile and experimental. Their innovative nature gives them transformative potential, but also makes them unfamiliar and often invisible. Without communication, community-building, and outreach, assemblies risk becoming isolated experiments rather than catalysts of broader democratic change.

The Modular Framework defines the democratic public sphere as *"the connective membrane between the assembly and society"*. It is not a passive audience but a **distributed agora**: a plural field of publics who observe, react, interpret, and co-create meaning around the assembly. Within this understanding, three dimensions structure the module:

- **Deliberative Extension** – opening the assembly's conversations to wider publics via media, digital tools, and artistic forms.
- **Communicative Legitimacy** – building transparency, accountability, and trust through clear and inclusive communication.
- **Civic Resonance** – fostering empathy, narrative continuity, and a sense of identification with the assembly's aims.

At the core lies the notion of **public witnessing**: democratic deliberation must be seen to be believed. Legitimacy is not only institutional but communicative; it emerges when people outside the room can see themselves reflected in the process and its outcomes.

For the Democratic Odyssey, the connection with the public sphere took several concrete forms. The **Democratic Odyssey digital platform**, inspired by Decidim, was designed not merely as a technical tool but as a *living civic space*. It enabled participants, observers, and wider publics to follow and interact with the process across languages and borders. The Democratic Odyssey platform was at the heart of sustaining transnational engagement.

At the same time, **festivals and public events** in Athens, Florence, and Vienna anchored the assembly in local contexts, opening doors not only for deliberation but also for celebration. These festivals blended art, performance, and civic imagination, inviting those not formally selected to nonetheless step into the world of democratic experimentation. They also mobilised local press as accelerators for both visibility and a call to local, joint action. These were moments where art, performance, and civic imagination intertwined, inviting everyone to step into the world of democratic experimentation. In Athens, the free concerts and talks by local activist collectives opened the exercise with a clear message: in order to be seen, an travelling assembly needs to be as public as possible, in the centre of democratic, commercial, everyday-life activities. In Florence we organised 'the village for civic action' (as part of our travelling Festival of Democracy), featuring a documentary, talks, performances, and spaces for organizations working with young people and democracy to engage the public. The festival became a hub for interaction and reflection, connecting assembly participants with broader civic actors. In Vienna, in partnership with Festwochen, we imagined 'Democracy as an Act of love', a festival of games and encounters with social movements. It celebrated the many experiments across the city that seek to transform political life, reminding everyone that democracy is also joy, imagination and care.

Through such festivals, outreach becomes embodied and visible. They are a way of creating spaces where citizens can touch, feel, and participate in democracy. Assemblies must build community and open the possibilities of democratic innovation to everyone.

12.2 Forum Discussion

Forum discussions and pilot reflections converged on a central question: *how can deliberative processes be translated into accessible and compelling public narratives without losing their authenticity?*

Participants argued that communication and outreach must be treated as a **core design pillar**, not an afterthought. Some emphasised the need for professional strategies - regular updates, media partnerships, and clear messaging - to secure visibility and credibility. Others cautioned that over-professionalisation risks diluting the participatory ethos and turning the

assembly into a staged media product. The Odyssey's approach sought a middle ground: combining professional support with **citizen-led storytelling**, artistic mediation, and open feedback channels.

A second debate revolved around **who the "public" is** in a transnational context. Rather than assuming a single European demos, Forum contributors proposed a *networked model of publics*: local, linguistic, thematic, and digital clusters interconnected through shared concerns. This aligns with work on transnational counterpublics, in which marginal and cross-border voices co-constitute new democratic imaginaries. For the Odyssey, the public sphere was less a pre-existing audience to be "represented" and more a living community to be **reconstituted** through practice.

The discussions also confronted structural constraints. A Member of the Constituent Network highlighted a pervasive *"media blockage"*: mainstream media often struggle to follow deliberative processes that do not fit the "headline-results" logic of news cycles. This limits how far assemblies can "break the bubble" through conventional journalism. Forum and Brown Bag contributors therefore stressed the need to **bypass traditional bottlenecks** by mapping stakeholders, working with independent and local media, and using alternative channels.

Brown Bag Lunch notes described the ambition to build a **"civic constellation"** around the assembly, connecting civil society organisations, local authorities, independent media, artists, and students. Proposed strategies included:

- partnerships with local radio and press in each host city;
- a multilingual Info Hub as a living archive;
- social media campaigns also spotlighting citizen reflections;
- inviting journalists, artists, and students as *public correspondents*;
- earmarking budget for developing a full-fledged documentary telling the substantive journey of the assembly just as much;
- deliberative tech (comment forums, Polis, Talk-to-the-City) to create feedback loops.

The e-book framed this approach as **"deliberation in the age of circulation"**. Drawing on Habermas, Fraser, Benkler, and Dewey, it treated the Odyssey not as an isolated deliberative event but as a node in a wider **networked public sphere**: decentralised, participatory, and translocal. Publics are not pre-given; they emerge around shared problems - here, the multiple crises confronting Europe. The Odyssey showed how thematic focus on crises could mobilise scattered publics into a reflective, transnational European community.

12.3 Lessons from the Pilot

1. Transparency, Accessibility, and Visibility: The DO Pilot confirmed that livestreaming, multilingual interpretation, and an open Info Hub significantly strengthened trust and visibility. Observers consistently rated transparency as high. Media partnerships expanded outreach in Athens, Florence, and Vienna, though engagement remained uneven across regions, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Language fragmentation and algorithmic filtering limited cross-linguistic visibility.

2. Artistic Mediation and Public Engagement: Art-based formats - festivals, installations,

performances - translated deliberation into tangible experiences, reinforcing emotional resonance and symbolic depth. These formats made democratic participation accessible to broader publics and aligned with findings from related participatory-arts democratic innovations. Some tensions emerged regarding the balance between emotional formats and substantive debate; reflective sessions were introduced to maintain deliberative focus

3. Digital Publics and Hybrid Participation: Online tools created an emerging "European digital agora," extending participation beyond those physically present. Interactive platforms, webinars, and hybrid events broadened engagement but revealed digital divides and language barriers requiring systematic monitoring.

4. Communication Capacity and Polycentric Publicity: Feedback highlighted the need for a dedicated multilingual communications team to ensure high-quality, continuous, and coherent production. The pilot showed that local partners - municipalities, cultural institutions, civil society groups - play a crucial role in decentralised communication ecosystems. Empowering each host city to engage its own media networks contributed to a polycentric European publicity space.

5. Narrative Democracy and Communicative Outputs: The DO experience demonstrated that assemblies function not only as deliberative bodies but as producers of narratives. Storytelling, media training, and communicative design helped translate deliberation into compelling formats. Outputs such as the Citizens' Charter acted as communicative artefacts aimed at inspiring new publics rather than merely informing institutions.

6. Measuring Public Reach and Impact: The Pilot underscored the importance of tracking public reach through indicators such as audience numbers, media resonance, online participation, and perception shifts. Iterative feedback across cycles will help refine communication strategies and sustain long-term engagement.

7. Publics as Co-Authors: Public engagement worked best when publics were treated as active contributors, not passive recipients. Citizens and civil-society partnered with local actors co-hosted events, generated content, and moderated discussions, illustrating that transnational democracy emerges from networks of publics - civic, cultural, digital, and artistic.

8. Recursive Public Spheres: The Pilot showed that deliberation does not end with the assembly: public events continually generated new publics, renewing debate and extending democratic impact. This recursive dynamic reflects Cadmus' insight that "public spheres are where deliberation begins again," a pattern strongly evidenced in the DO experience.

13 – Evaluation and Impact

13.1 Description

The Evaluation and Impact module understands evaluation not as a retrospective audit, but as a **continuous democratic learning process**. In deliberative design, evaluation is central to determining whether an assembly is legitimate, effective, inclusive, and influential. For

transnational assemblies, this task is more complex: evaluation must capture **plural expectations**, **multilevel audiences**, and **translingual communication**.

The Modular Framework therefore advocates reflexive evaluation. This is understood as a cyclical process in which learning, feedback, and adjustment occur throughout the assembly's life rather than only at the end. Evaluation serves three core democratic purposes: (i) **legitimacy assurance by** demonstrating transparency, fairness, and representativeness; (ii) **learning facilitation** by identifying improvements for future cycles; (iii) **impact tracking** by mapping influence on citizens, institutions, and public discourse.

To meet these aims, the Framework recommends triangulating **quantitative tools** (questionnaires, participation data, media analytics) and **qualitative tools** (interviews, focus groups, ethnographic notes, facilitator reports). Evaluation covers:

- **Input legitimacy** - who is in the room, how they were selected, and how inclusive the process is;
- **Throughput legitimacy** - the quality of deliberation (listening, respect, fairness of facilitation);
- **Output legitimacy -** the quality, coherence, and influence of recommendations and outcomes.

Crucially, impact is understood **broadly**: not only in terms of formal policy uptake, but also in shifts in **civic imagination**, **social trust**, **networks**, and **democratic norms**. Drawing on Setälä, Smith, Warren, Elstub & Escobar, Mansbridge and Bächtiger, the Odyssey situates its approach within a **deliberative systems perspective**: assemblies are evaluated not in isolation, but in relation to the wider political and communicative ecologies they inhabit.

13.2 Forum Discussion

Forum debates and design discussions revealed three central controversies around evaluation and impact.

Who should evaluate?
Some contributors argued that **independent academic evaluation** is necessary to ensure methodological rigor and credibility. Others insisted on **participatory evaluation**, where citizens themselves assess fairness, inclusivity, and relevance. The compromise was a **mixed model**: a professional evaluation team working alongside citizen "evaluation panels" and a learning circle of participants and facilitators. This responded to the "evaluation paradox" identified in Brown Bag Lunch discussions: measuring deliberation risks instrumentalising it, yet without evaluation, legitimacy and learning are weakened.

What counts as impact?
Traditional impact metrics (laws passed, policies changed) were seen as **too narrow** for transnational democratic innovation. Forum participants proposed a multidimensional view:

- **Cognitive impact** – learning, informed judgment, enlightened understanding;
- **Affective impact** – trust, empowerment, sense of belonging;
- **Civic impact** – ongoing participation and initiative;

- **Institutional impact** – responsiveness, adoption, and diffusion of practices;
- **Symbolic impact** – demonstrating that transnational deliberation is feasible and meaningful.

This aligns with the e-book's three impact vectors – epistemic, civic, institutional – and with OECD work on democratic learning as an ongoing process rather than a final verdict.

How to balance rigor and resonance?
Another debate concerned the **form of evaluation outputs**. Academic standards call for detailed, methodologically robust reports; democratic accessibility requires clear, engaging communication. The Forum agreed on **dual outputs**: a technical evaluation report for experts, and a **public-facing learning narrative** for participants, policymakers, and wider publics.

13.3 Lessons from the Pilot

As previously anticipated, DO developed an Embedded Evaluation Design. Its Pilot integrated evaluation from the outset, combining dimensions of formative (during) and summative (after) feedback. A multi-actor design ensured triangulation between insider and outsider perspectives through three complementary layers:

- Academic initiation and evaluation (EUI and GloCAN respectively) assessing representativeness, deliberative quality, and all other elements of design;
- Consortium partner's feedback loops, through Consortium meetings, inter and intra-Task Force coordination also with facilitators, local hosts) providing contextual and operational insight;
- Citizen learning cycle, reflecting after each in-person and online session on fairness, inclusivity, and knowledge balance.

This architecture created a reflexive, iterative evaluation culture throughout the pilot. As it pertains to the criteria and methods, qualitative performance indicators followed the Modular Framework's legitimacy dimensions. A broader volume is currently being produced around key observation takeaways by the observers' and evaluators' network, where some of the key indicators are scheduled to trace back to the legitimacy and impact criteria outlined before.

There is no doubt that evidence from Athens, Florence, Vienna revealed about participants a clear learning trajectory, which was exceptionally mutually reinforcing. As forecasted in the design phase, the Athens moment planted the seeds for emotional engagement and trust-building, but a yet uneven grasp of policy complexity. In Florence, improved deliberative balance and deeper citizen ownership, along with arts-based facilitation strengthened comprehension and empathy, towards the goal of discussing more traceable trade-offs. In the spring online sessions, the trajectory became more and more clearer also to evaluators, and transparent to the public (see chapter 10). In Vienna, the assembly reached a consolidated deliberative maturity, stronger synthesis, and clearer articulation of shared reasoning. The final survey to assembly members reveals 84% felt free to express themselves openly; 63% learned something new or changed their mind, indicating the strength of the facilitation model.

4. Impact Across Four Domains:

- Individual: facilitators' feedback and qualitative feedback from interviews points out to growth in civic confidence and political literacy.
- Collective: a post-assembly spur of activities (Citizens' Council, translocal and local initiatives, increased desire to connect with institutions and open the 'black box' of governance).
- Institutional: The Citizens' Charter was presented to the European Parliament and discussed by MEPs in October 2025, sponsored by MEPs and in dialogue with the most critical ones.
- Public: the public sessions around the assembly, the digital platform, the assembly livestreams, the Info Hub, the dedicated platform private space for assembly members and social-media channels, all generated thousands of interactions across many languages. Interviews highlighted a growing transnational sense of belonging and renewed trust in dialogue as an accelerator of political agency.

5. Reflexive Learning in Real Time: Evaluation directly informed adjustments: expanded interpretation addressed early language barriers; visual facilitation improved comprehension; targeted facilitation corrected gender imbalances in speaking time. These adaptations demonstrated reflexive governance and strengthened inclusivity.

6. Civic and Symbolic Impact: Observers emphasised the symbolic significance of demonstrating that a translocal, transnational citizens' assembly is feasible, inclusive, and inspiring. Media and artistic documentation transformed the Odyssey into a broader public-learning experience, functioning as democratic pedagogy and stimulating wider imaginaries of European democracy.

7. Challenges and Forward Pathways: Key limitations included attribution vs contribution, temporal mismatch between policy cycles and evaluation windows, and cross-country comparability. The evaluation team recommended a multi-year monitoring framework to trace the diffusion of practices, narratives, and institutional responses.

8. ***Iterative feedbacks (2024–25)*** Facilitators observed improved deliberative capacity and a growing willingness to engage with disagreement in the assembly members that followed the whole journey and were active in all sessions (i.e. transnational pool and the ambassadors). Observers described the Odyssey as pioneering a translocal evaluation culture, blending academic assessment with civic self-reflection.

14 – Institutionalisation and Political Buy-in

14.1 Description

The Institutionalisation and Political Buy-in module addresses a core challenge of transnational assemblies: **governance and mandate** in a political space where no single authority convenes or guarantees their influence. Unlike local or national assemblies, which are often mandated by a government or parliament with defined policy pathways, transnational assemblies operate in a more ambiguous terrain. Their recommendations carry

moral and symbolic weight, but their direct political impact depends on **voluntary uptake** by EU institutions, national governments, and civil society actors.

The Modular Framework situates this challenge within a broader **democratic ecology**. Institutionalisation is defined as embedding deliberative processes into durable political and administrative architectures; political buy-in refers to the acceptance and support of power-holding actors - governments, parliaments, parties, and civil servants - who can translate deliberation into action. The Framework distinguishes three progressive stages:

- **Recognition**: official acknowledgement that the assembly's outputs have democratic legitimacy;
- **Integration**: formalised channels for transmitting recommendations into policy processes;
- **Consolidation**: recurrent or standing mechanisms ensuring continuity over time.

Institutionalisation is *not* equated with bureaucratisation. The aim is to gain normative weight without losing deliberative independence. For transnational assemblies, this is especially delicate: they suffer from a "double fragility," lacking a constitutional anchor and depending on political goodwill. The Framework therefore calls for "anchoring without capture": building coalitions of support rather than submitting to a single institutional owner.

At the same time, the absence of a formal mandate is not only a weakness; it can also be liberating. Freed from rigid institutional constraints, transnational assemblies can experiment with innovative methods, raise unconventional proposals, and include voices usually marginalised in formal arenas. They function as laboratories of democracy, testing what it means to deliberate across borders, cultures, and epistemic worlds.

This double character - fragile yet experimental - poses a central question: *how to balance aspirational influence with experimental autonomy*? Clear communication with participants about these tensions is crucial for legitimacy and trust. Assemblies are not just deliberative bodies; they are also mobilising movements. Their political power often lies in the continued engagement and advocacy of their members beyond formal sessions.

Finally, transnational assemblies act as diagnostic tools. By bringing citizens from different countries into structured dialogue, they expose how decision-making architectures fail to capture the diversity of experiences and needs across Europe. They reveal the disconnect between where power is formally exercised (often in Brussels or national capitals) and where policies are lived. Governance, in this sense, must evolve beyond hierarchical models towards a distributed collective consciousness: a shared, evolving sense of responsibility and care among participants, mirroring the plural and cross-border nature of the issues at stake.

The e-book, drawing on Dryzek's deliberative systems and Nicolaïdis' democratic interdependence, frames institutionalisation as systemic integration: deliberation should influence decision-making without erasing its experimental quality. Mansbridge's distinction between inclusive legitimacy (voice) and authoritative legitimacy (decision power), and Fung's notion of empowered participation, underline the need for new linkages where these forms of legitimacy intersect rather than compete.

14.2 Forum Discussion

Forum discussions and interviews surfaced several tensions at the heart of institutionalisation, particularly with regards to mandate, architecture, and buy-in.

First, participants grappled with the mandate problem. Existing examples, such as the Global Climate Assembly, demonstrate both the potential and limits of influence: high-quality deliberation is possible, but policy uptake depends on external actors' willingness to engage. This raises questions of legitimacy and trust: if citizens invest time and energy yet see no concrete effects, engagement risks turning into disappointment.

Second, contributors debated what institutionalisation can mean in a Europe without a single demos or coherent polity. Some imagined top-down reforms - for example, treaty change granting transnational assemblies an advisory status akin to the Committee of the Regions. Others argued for a networked model: recurring transnational and local assemblies feeding into each other and interfacing informally with parliaments, municipalities, and EU bodies. The emerging consensus favoured hybridity - legitimacy built simultaneously from above and below.

Third, the question of political buy-in was recognised as relational rather than purely procedural. Buy-in requires trust, visibility, and evidence that assemblies help institutions solve problems. As one Forum note observed: *"Politicians do not fear citizens when citizens help them solve problems."* Yet interviews also warned against co-optation. A Member of the Constituent Network highlighted the risk of "sterilisation": politicians may seek to institutionalise deliberation in "cages for stiff objects," whereas the Odyssey requires institutionalising sequencing and pace rather than rigid rules. An observer stressed that the pilot is "too experimental" for immediate full adoption by an EU Parliament that still lacks methodological literacy. By contrast, another observer argued that institutionalisation should be driven by citizen demand, not political permission.

Brown Bag Lunch discussions reflected a strategy of incremental institutionalisation: beginning with symbolic recognition, moving towards procedural linkages, and ultimately exploring constitutional embedding. Proposals included Memoranda of Understanding with EU bodies, a European Democratic Innovations Forum to connect pilots, co-funding frameworks through CERV and Horizon Europe, and "institutional hosts" (universities, cities) providing continuity between cycles. One note envisaged a Permanent Translocal Peoples' Assembly as a "fourth pillar" alongside Parliament, Council, and Commission - connected yet autonomous.

14.3 Lessons from the Pilot

In the final survey, 72% agreed that the Democratic Odyssey model represents a 'new and legitimate' way to make decisions in Europe. Against this backdrop, the Democratic Odyssey pilot functioned as a laboratory for institutionalisation and buy-in.

From the outset, the Odyssey was recognised at the level of EU institutions. The then-Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography

Dubravka Šuica endorsed the project as early as 2023. Since then, various Members of the European Parliament have been involved in each of the *in situ* sessions and also have specifically intervened in the online sessions. Representatives of the European Commission and the Council of Europe have also contributed to endorsing and giving feedback to the Assembly in plenary settings during both online and on site gatherings.

Local representatives have also endorsed the project at city and region level. This is particularly the case for Athens, Florence and Fiesole, along the strategic goal of what we call 'planting the democratic seeds'. This speaks specifically to the vision of of a transnationalism that is heavily imbued in translocal networks. Some political and institutional environments proved to provide more fertile ground for long-term institutionalisation. This is the case for Florence, that had a regional law and a corresponding cultural context facilitating participatory practices. After the pilot landed in Florence and Fiesole in February 2025, the Democratic Odyssey Consortium has been collaborating with the local administrations to water the planted seeds. On the one hand, the Fiesole Municipality has committed to following up to the Citizens' Charter and has also initiated an ambitious consultation for the town to become Italian Capital of Culture in 2028 (also inspired by the DO methodological design). On the other, the Assembly Members from Florence have engaged directly in a proficuous interaction with their neighbourhood's administrations, organising events and proposing collaborations with local schools where they would like to tell their DO story.

Similarly, the Athens Municipality and the Attica Region, having supported the implementation of the Democratic Odyssey, are now venturing in a series of upcoming initiatives bolstering local participation. One of the findings from the Pilot point to the necessity of having partners nested in the locality, as this does facilitate further embeddedness. These partnerships illustrate translocal anchoring: embedding a transnational initiative in local democratic institutions, making European deliberation concrete and situated.

In Vienna, the mayor's office was less available (perhaps due to recent elections) but outcomes were shared with the municipality and specifically an initiative of the municipality for climate budgeting, were connected to the assembly process of Vienna Festwochen (itself a local institution) and embedded in the Europe's Futures Initiative of ERSTE Bank, a major policy stakeholder in Austria.

At the transnational level, the Citizens' Charter was presented to MEPs and Commission officials on 14 October 2025, prompting exploratory conversations about integrating citizen deliberation into the Conference on the Future of Europe follow-up. These remained informal commitments but signalled emerging proto-institutional linkages.

The Democratic Odyssey's methodology also regarded the creation of the Citizens' Council as an integral new way of imagining follow-up, where the Assembly Members would be empowered and supported to follow-through with demanding institutional responses to the deliberative output. In this sense, we regard this as a vital lesson from the Conference on the Future of Europe and other transnational experiments. Without a few concrete and strategic enabling factors, the momentum built by an assembly risks dying out. The creation of a formal body where 50 Assembly Members decided to take part, paved the way for autonomous decision-making, identity creation and also for other stakeholders to get in touch and seek to converge on key recommendations. Recognition from MEPs and civil society signals political buy-in grounded in civic legitimacy rather than formal decree. At the same time, interviews revealed a "guidance gap": Council members seek clearer operational roadmaps to channel their mandate effectively (see Module 12).
A Member of the Constituent Network and Consortium Member stated:"Many politicians, when they think about institutionalisation, they think about cages where to put stiff objects. [...] The nature of this process is completely different." Another Assembly Member stated:"I felt they had more power than us... authority over us. But still they were supporting us" (referring to the presence of politicians during the assembly sessions). And another Member stated:""It feels like the recommendations are perceived by politicians, but in a way not accepted. [...] I feel this kind of discrepancy."

Despite progress, obstacles remain. Some EU officials still perceive citizen assemblies as symbolic add-ons rather than authoritative partners. The absence of a clear legal framework for transnational participation limits uptake; national sensitivities persist around representation. Political cycles can rapidly change attitudes. Some of our empirical findings articulate an interesting landscape:

- **Political presence is interpreted as commitment:** Interviews show that citizens strongly equate **physical presence of high-level officials** with genuine political buy-in. Attendance by mayors, regional representatives, and MEPs was experienced as meaningful "support" and validation, even within asymmetrical power relations.
- **A visible "validation gap" persists:** When senior officials were absent - most notably the Mayor of Vienna - participants interpreted this as a **lack of commitment**, reinforcing perceptions that institutions were tolerating rather than embracing the process. This demonstrates that legitimacy for citizens is *enacted*, not abstract.
- **Trust is the currency of buy-in:** policymakers may judge the initiative as **innovative and credible**, but emphasise the need for **clearer communication channels** to translate outputs into policy. Trust grew through recurring interaction, transparency, and narrative credibility.
- **Institutional actors seek structured mechanisms:** Some policymakers recommended creating an inter-institutional liaison group to turn citizen recommendations into actionable inputs for committees - an explicit call for pathways that formalise responsiveness.

- **Institutionalisation through flexibility:** Interviews affirmed that the Odyssey's itinerant, recurring model generates a **light, flexible form of institutionalisation**, with recurrence as opposed to permanence, though anchored in guarantees of meaningful and continued citizen involvement.

Our findings also point out to some critical issues that can hinder the process:

- **Reliance on discretionary political attendance:** Because engagement was voluntary, the process remained vulnerable to **signal failures** (e.g., absence of top-tier officials), which undermined perceived legitimacy. This revealed the need for **"structured permeability"** - routine, mandated forms of institutional engagement.
- **Asymmetrical interpretations of political presence:** Participants diverged sharply: some saw official attendance as validating; others viewed absence as decisive evidence of non-commitment. This asymmetry complicates institutionalisation because the same action carries opposite meanings for different publics.
- **Weak formal pathways for uptake:** Policymakers praised the process but noted that **translation mechanisms** into parliamentary or governmental workflows remain underdeveloped. Without these, institutionalisation risks remaining symbolic.
- **Citizen demand vs. institutional permission:** Observers stressed that institutionalisation must ultimately be driven by **citizen demand**, not by elites granting conditional permission - otherwise legitimacy remains fragile.
- **Structural limits of transnational authority:** Absent legal frameworks for EU-level citizen participation constrain deeper adoption. Dynamic institutionalisation can mitigate this, but cannot fully compensate for **missing formal mandates**.

Ultimately, a noteworthy dimension was that of **normative diffusion**. The Odyssey contributed to debates on participatory reform in the European Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee and among city networks, liaising with big networks working in the field for decades (e.g. Democracy R&D, Citizens Take Over Europe, ALDA, scholars' and practitioners' networks, various Horizon Europe projects and their consortia of key actors). By publicly performing a transnational, itinerant assembly, it introduced the idea of **civic co-governance** into political vocabulary and practice. The E-book concludes that institutionalisation requires not only political will but **institutional imagination**. The Odyssey's itinerant, recurring format demonstrates a form of **dynamic institutionalisation**: not fixed structures, but enduring processes, debates and subsequent expectations of citizen involvement.

15 – Elected Representatives and Accountability

15.1 Description

This module starts from the premise that democratic innovation cannot replace representative institutions. Rather, they generate the necessary conditions for their renewal. They provide accountability mechanisms that translate deliberative legitimacy into durable political authority.

The Modular Framework therefore conceptualises the relationship between citizens' assemblies and elected representatives not as one of delegation or competition, but of reciprocal reinforcement. Assemblies bring reflexivity, inclusivity, and experimental capacity into governance. Elected representatives provide continuity, legal authority, and the power to decide.

Key questions guiding this module include:

- How can deliberative and representative mandates coexist without mutual suspicion?
- What forms of accountability are appropriate for citizens chosen by lot rather than by vote?
- How can assemblies hold representatives to account without undermining electoral mandates?

To address these questions, the Modular Framework proposes three **accountability logics**:

- **Public accountability**: assemblies and politicians not only communicating transparently to citizens and the broader public, but interacting publicly in full transparency;
- **Lateral accountability**: structured dialogue and mutual monitoring between assemblies and elected representatives;
- **Reflexive accountability**: internal self-evaluation, transparency, and justification mechanisms within assemblies themselves.

Assemblies are thus framed as 'accountable publics', not mini-parliaments. They earn legitimacy not through elections but by demonstrating integrity, inclusion, and respect for pluralism - and by remaining transparent about their own limitations.

Forum debates and the e-book situate this within systemic democratic theory. In a multi-level polity like the EU, legitimacy stems from a network of representative claims, not a single chain of command. Assemblies enact reflexive representation, where citizens representing themselves collectively through dialogue. Accountability is reframed from "who controls whom" to "who listens to whom": a dialogical, relational practice rather than a purely punitive one.

Drawing on Mansbridge, Urbinati, Rosanvallon, and Dryzek & Niemeyer, the module positions citizens' assemblies as an advocacy-oriented representation (voice and presence); a way of stimulating counter-democratic vigilance (watchfulness between elections); a methodology to ensure discursive representation (making arguments and perspectives, also of minorities, publicly visible). In this sense, assemblies are not rivals to parliaments, but laboratories of vigilance and listening within a wider democratic system.

15.2 Forum discussions

Forum participants discussed the appropriate role of elected representatives inside and around transnational assemblies. Opinions diverged between some who advocated joint deliberation models, where MEPs and randomly selected citizens sit together as peers in the same deliberative process, while others argued for a clear separation, fearing that politicians' presence might intimidate citizens, skew discussions, or instrumentalise the process.
A compromise model gained traction: sequenced interaction. Citizens deliberate first in their own space, and only afterwards meet representatives to share conclusions, discuss implications, and explore follow-up. This preserves citizen autonomy while opening pathways for policy uptake and mutual learning.

Forum debates also reframed accountability as multi-directional. Assemblies are not only a tool for citizens to hold politicians to account. They themselves must be accountable to the wider public - for who is included, how deliberation is run, and what outcomes are produced. Inspired by Rosanvallon's notion of counter-democracy, participants described assemblies as "laboratories of vigilance": mechanisms that scrutinise power but also subject themselves to scrutiny.

Brown Bag discussions developed this into the idea of a circular "accountability chain of conversation":

Citizens ↔ *assemblies* ↔ *representatives* ↔ *institutions* ↔ *citizens*

Concrete mechanisms proposed included:

- Public hearings between assembly delegates and elected officials;
- Publication of institutional responses to recommendations;
- Citizen follow-up teams tracking policy adoption;
- Clear mechanisms for defining mutual obligations: representatives commit to responding; assemblies commit to transparency and inclusivity.

Risks were also acknowledged: representatives might use assemblies mainly for symbolic legitimacy; citizens might inadvertently delegitimise elected institutions. The agreed solution was co-designed accountability norms, not imposed hierarchies.

15.3 Lessons from the Pilot

The Democratic Odyssey pilot approached the relationship with elected representatives as a learning partnership rather than a one-way advocacy process.

Representatives and officials engaged at different stages:

- Athens (September 2024): Greek Members of the European Parliament and the National Parliament, as well as municipal officials attended the opening plenary, framing the Assembly within the city's democratic heritage.
- Florence (February 2025): Italian regional councillors and MEPs linked to the AFCO Committee joined dialogues on "crisis and democracy", also joining the Council of Europe's General Rapporteur on Democracy in endorsing the initiative and connecting with the Athens municipal representatives (also present).
- Vienna (May 2025): the European Commission representative Vladimir Šucha took part in the presentation of the Citizens' Charter, marking the first formal interface with EU-level executives.
- Online and Post-Assembly session in October 2025: Representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission and Joint Research Centre as well as local councillors regularly attended online sessions and14 MEPs committed to exchanging with the Democratic Odyssey on site, on a symbolic day of national strike and to engage in a broad ranging conversation - from curious skepticism to political strategy perspectives on how to move forward with the creation of a movement and a campaign.

This incremental exposure strategy built familiarity and trust, which were identified as key components of political buy-in. The latest steps also opened up to the strategic fostering of reciprocal accountability with representatives. In other words, the beginning of a campaign also looking to understand which political forces (and therefore groups) would be most likely to do justice to the final recommendations.

Additionally, the Pilot Assembly proved how accountability can be stimulated through transparency and self-monitoring. It did so by making the process visible:

- All plenaries were livestreamed and archived;
- Reports, minutes, and background documents were made public;
- The Info Hub functioned as an open accountability archive;
- Facilitators and citizens regularly offered reflexive updates.

Citizens also monitored themselves through dedicated reflection sessions evaluating fairness, inclusivity, and respect. Facilitators documented these reflections, which fed into design adjustments. This fostered a culture of self-accountability: assemblies learning accountability "by doing." Additionally, this socialised all parties involved in the accountability and transparency ethos. The openness emerging from the very nature of an experimental pilot are aspects that should not be forgotten when seeking to institutionalise or indeed, anchoring participation in interactions with political representatives. Observers summed it up:

the Odyssey “made accountability visible, relational, and emotional - it was not just a report, it was a conversation.” The e-book interprets this as relational accountability: citizens and institutions co-producing legitimacy through ongoing interaction rather than one-off scrutiny. Nevertheless, the EP event in October 2025 also showed that key embeddedness tensions remain at the forefront. Some representatives questioned the mandate of the assembly, explicitly stating that the true assembly of Europe is the European Parliament. Some of the citizens shared informally a growing perception of a gap between being listened to and being acted upon - recommendations were heard but not necessarily accepted.

As anticipated in chapter 14, the creation of a Citizens’ Council, composed of volunteering members of the Assembly, became one of the key strategic ways of ensuring follow-up. It convenes regular online meetings with to track progress on the Charter’s ten pathways. It also invites the DO Consortium and all other actors willing to support the call for action, but is also ultimately not bound to the operationalisation constraints of a Consortium whose project cycle is transitioning and has inherently less temporary capacity to support. This practice turned accountability into joint stewardship: citizens and representatives possibly sharing responsibility for democratic renewal.