Democratic Odyssey

FLORENCE
21 - 23 February 2025

EUROPE COMES TO TOWN

The Democratic Odyssey's Second Assembly meeting

REPORT FROM FLORENCE

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Executive summary

The Democratic Odyssey aspires to establish a permanent, transnational People's Assembly for Europe. Inspired by ancient Greek citizen assemblies and leveraging modern participatory practices, this initiative links grassroots democratic innovation with institutionalised citizens' engagement. The pilot Assembly's second meeting in Florence brought together 120 diverse members from across Europe (22 countries) and beyond, to deliberate on how citizens can improve the EU's preparedness for future crises.

THE QUESTION WE ARE ASKING THE ASSEMBLY:

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

FIND OUT MORE UNDERLINE

KEY THEMES

- **Radical Participatory Democracy:** Assemblies like ours formed through random selection ensure inclusivity and societal reflection.
- **Addressing Crises Collectively:** By focusing on lessons from past crises we can create pathways to 'crisis citizenship' and envision resilient democratic systems.
- **Empowering Citizens:** Our deliberations emphasized civic agency, solidarity, and transparent governance.

MAJOR ACTIVITIES IN THE FLORENCE ASSEMBLY MEETING

- **Friday** (Onboarding and the Village for Civic Action): The assembly started with a thought-provoking program designed to bridge systemic crises with grassroots activism, cultural expression, and political debate.
- **Saturday** (Reconciling contradictions): Discussions focused on the contradictions that came up from the Athens Assembly. 10 key trade-offs in crisis governance were deliberated.
- **Sunday** (Our recommendations):Reflections culminated in 10 actionable pathways for crisis management.

KEY OUTCOMES OF THE FLORENCE ASSEMBLY MEETING

10 draft policy recommendations, forming the basis for a Citizens' Charter for Europe.

Focus: on democratising crisis management across borders and levels of governance.

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Key proposals: strengthen transnational democratic structures, institutionalise citizens' assemblies at all governance levels, enhance civic education.

Emphasis: Inclusivity, crisis preparedness, transparency and the role of citizens as decision-makers.

REPORT FROM FLORENCE

Inspired by ancient Greek assemblies and diverse democratic experiences worldwide, the Democratic Odyssey is a contemporary journey to revitalise democracy at the transnational level. It merges Athens' legacy of citizen-driven democracy with today's digital tools, advocating for a **permanent People's Assembly for Europe.** Through a crowdsourced, pluralistic campaign engaging academics, practitioners, journalists, civil society, and institutional actors, the project aims to embed participatory democracy in the European landscape. Our work is also informed by grassroots democratic movements and the EU's previous, though limited, steps towards institutionalising citizen participation.

After setting the foundations in **Athens,** and continuing online, the **Florence Assembly** was a pivotal moment where citizens from across Europe drafted the first concrete **policy recommendations towards a Citizens' Charter for Europe.** Florence was not just another stop — it was the space where deliberation deepened around the big democratic dilemmas and crisis management, allowing citizens to shape actionable proposals. These will now be refined and brought into dialogue with political actors, before converging in the next Assembly in **Vienna.**
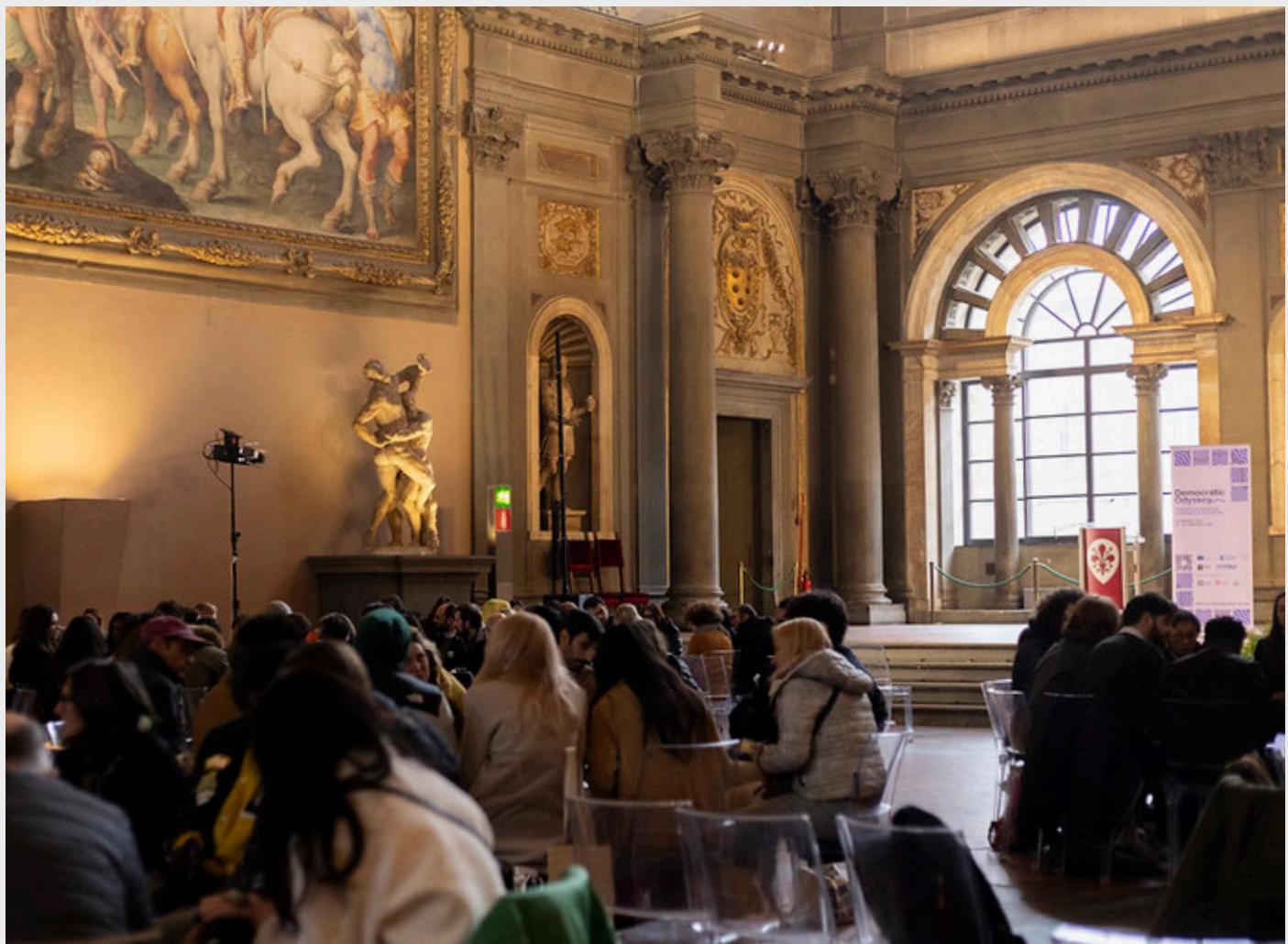
THE ROAD TO FLORENCE

WHY?

The Democratic Odyssey demonstrates that citizens are capable of tackling Europe's most complex and controversial challenges through **deliberative democracy.** Our assemblies, formed by random selection across Europe and open registration, reflect a cross-section of society and provide a space where everyone has a stake. In Florence, participants tackled pressing questions about Europe's ability to weather crises and strengthen democracy beyond elections, proposing ways to institutionalise citizens' assemblies, integrate citizen oversight in AI governance, democratise crisis preparedness, and ensure transparency in public decisions.

This is more than an experiment, it's a **proof of concept** for a permanent transnational assembly, moving across cities and stages: from **Athens and now to Florence,** finalising in **Vienna,** via online deliberation and growing citizen involvement at every port.

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WHERE AND WHEN?

The Florence Assembly took place from February 21 to 23, 2025, hosted across three of the city's most symbolic and historic sites. The journey began at Le Murate, a former convent and prison transformed into a contemporary cultural hub. On Saturday, the Assembly moved to the magnificent Palazzo Vecchio, a living symbol of civic power and democratic innovation.

The Palazzo Vecchio is not only an architectural marvel but also a site of profound democratic heritage. In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, Florence practiced sortition, the random selection of citizens, to appoint members of the Signoria, the governing body of the Florentine Republic. This method was designed to prevent corruption, reduce factionalism, and ensure fair representation of the city's guilds and neighbourhoods.

Gathering in this venue was a deliberate choice, connecting the Democratic Odyssey's contemporary use of sortition and deliberation with Florence's rich legacy of citizen participation. It provided a deeply resonant setting for the Assembly to draft their policy recommendations, bridging centuries of democratic practice. On the third day, the Assembly concluded its work at the Palazzo Buontalenti, the home of the European University Institute's School of Transnational Governance (EUI - STG).

WHO?

The pilot Assembly is growing towards 300 members by 2025, with participants from 22 European countries. For the Florence Assembly, we brought 60 participants from the Athens gathering—including 20 ambassadors and 40 transnational

members, who are traveling to each on-site assembly. We also randomly selected local citizens from Florence and the Tuscany region — Italians, residents, migrants, and refugees. Members were selected via sortition and open registration, ensuring diversity in age, gender, socio-economic status and education. The Florence Assembly brought together citizens from Athens along with civil society actors, observers, and global citizens, reinforcing continuity, inclusion, and fresh perspectives. All members of the assembly will remain members for a year.

WHAT?

The Florence Assembly was a pivotal moment in the Democratic Odyssey, moving from exploration to co-creation of policy recommendations. Citizens engaged in in-depth deliberation on ten key democratic trade-offs, debating how Europe can better manage crises, strengthen transnational democracy, and make institutions more accountable, inclusive, and prepared for the challenges ahead.

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

This discussion was framed within the broader theme of "A Citizens' Agenda in Times of Crisis: Can We Become Effective Change-Makers?"

Participants explored how citizens can play a more active role in shaping policy, responding to crises, and driving democratic innovation at the European level. Florence became a key port in the journey, setting the stage for the **Vienna Assembly in May 2025**, where these proposals will be refined and politically tested.

Our Compass

Agenda Setting for Crisis: As a pilot assembly, we are not focused on specific policy recommendations but on exploring democratic responses to crises, which we call "storms." Moments of crises create winners and losers, highlight who holds power, and can be opportunities for more citizen involvement

Rooted in Local and Transnational Democracy: By travelling across Europe, we connect local actions with broader European politics, aiming to bridge the gap between local communities and transnational efforts.

Addressing Long-Term and Absent Voices: We seek to democratize foresight, balancing present needs with future outcomes, and consider how to include the voices of those absent from current debates, like refugees, non-citizens, non-humans and future generations.

A Laboratory for Change: This assembly is an experiment in moving from individual to collective action, aiming to influence democratic practices and the aspirations of institutions and of people alike in facing future storms.

Focus on Democratic Practices: We explore how the EU can better engage citizens during crises, addressing challenges like disempowerment, disrespect, alienation and anger. We consider past experiences, asking what democratic practices should change, be discarded, or institutionalized to improve Europe's response.

Storytelling and Civic Arts: We start with lived experiences rather than experts, using storytelling, civic arts and Odyssey metaphors to bring these narratives to life.

Connecting Beyond Borders: With participants from around 20 countries, we explore how to build transnational connections that empower citizens across Europe, and connect them to each other, beyond just Brussels-led initiatives.

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The Story in brief: 21-23 February

Friday 21st February:
Onboarding and 'The village for Civic Action'

The Florence Assembly commenced with two parallel events, each setting the stage for an engaging and inclusive gathering.

Onboarding

In Florence, the newly selected residents joining the Assembly for the first time began with a dedicated onboarding session, immersing themselves in the deliberative journey they were about to enter. They were introduced to the history, purpose, and mechanics of citizens' assemblies — some for the very first time — and how these differ from conventional forms of political participation. The session was not just instructional but also intergenerational: ambassadors from

Athens, participants of the first in-person Assembly, shared their experiences of deliberation, the tensions they navigated, and the insights gathered along the way. For many newcomers, it was a moment of realisation — that their contributions were not starting from scratch but were the next layer of a growing transnational conversation. One of them asked: **"What does it mean to inherit someone else's deliberation? Can we truly build on what others have debated before us?"**.

The onboarding became, in itself, a microcosm of the Democratic Odyssey: a collective reflection on how citizens across borders can pick up, deepen, and transform each other's democratic work.

Civic Arts and the sails

The onboarding session also immersed participants in the civic arts dimension of the Assembly — a thread running through the Democratic Odyssey to connect the imagination with deliberation. Each city the Assembly visits leaves a visual trace: symbolic sails that embody the collective journey, carrying the reflections, tensions, and hopes gathered along the way. In Florence, citizens added their contributions to these travelling sails, embedding their voices not just in policy drafts but in a shared artefact that sails on to the next port.

The session was marked by a visit from **Dario Nardella,** former Mayor of Florence and now a Member of the European Parliament. He personally welcomed the new citizens, reminding them of Florence's long-standing civic legacy — a city that once experimented with sortition, public deliberation, and citizen governance. Nardella's words reinforced the historical weight of the Assembly's work and offered a bridge between past democratic traditions and the urgent need to reinvent them for the European future.

The village for Civic Action

The Village for Civic Action unfolded within the thick walls of Le Murate, once a cloister, then a prison, now a beating heart of Florence's civic and cultural life. It offered a dynamic program that wove together systemic crises, grassroots activism, cultural expression, and political debate. Designed as an open forum parallel to the Assembly, the Village brought together over 100 people from Florence and beyond. It served as a vibrant bridge between the transnational deliberations of the Democratic Odyssey and the civic pulse of Florence, amplifying local voices and linking them to broader European struggles.

Held at Le Murate, the event brought together diverse voices through panels, screenings, and artistic performances, fostering connections between local and transnational struggles. With an audience of more than 100 people, the event with panels in Italian and English was a strong bridge with the civic local reality of the city of Florence.

The evening opened with a sharp debate on **Big Tech, Populism & Free Speech,** hosted with **Ponte Europa,** where scholars from the **European University Institute** wrestled with democracy's digital battleground. The screening of **Food For Profit** followed, exposing the violent nexus of the meat industry, politics, and exploitation, setting the tone for a panel on **Anti-Speciesism & Climate Struggles,** which urged a more intersectional approach to justice.

As night settled, **Giuliano Logos,** World Poetry Slam Champion, took the stage. His verses were sharp, electric, restless. He spoke of borders, of bodies, of refusal, of hope that insists on speaking even in the ruins.

Saturday 22nd February: Reconciling contradictions

From Athens to Florence

The Florence Assembly opened within the magnificent Salone dei Cinquecento at Palazzo Vecchio, where over 200 participants gathered beneath frescoed walls that once witnessed the governance of the Republic of Florence. The day began not with speeches, but with theatre: a Civic Arts performance brought Niccolò Machiavelli to life, searching the horizon in a scene inspired by Waiting for the Citizens. As he watched, a small group of Greeks arrived by boat on the Arno — a symbolic bridge from Athens to Florence, from one cradle of democracy to another.

This connection deepened as the Athenians passed a bottle to the Florentines, carrying messages from past assembly members, a symbol of continuity across cities. Participants then paired up through a buddy system, weaving links between Italians, non-Italians, and transnationals. The opening closed with the children proclaiming: "We are ready to sail together."

Engaging with key representatives

The morning then shifted to dialogue with key institutional figures. Laura Sparavigna, advisor to the city of Florence, reaffirmed the city's commitment to participatory democracy. Cristina Scaletti, Mayor of Fiesole, offered reflections on how local governance can engage citizens meaningfully, while Susha Vladimir from the European Commission shared insights on how citizen assemblies are shaping EU policymaking.

THE DELIBERATIVE THEMES

The Assembly then broke into ten thematic groups, each tackling one of the democratic trade-offs in crisis governance — from executive power vs citizens' power, to transparency vs complexity. The ambassadors from Athens offered reflections from previous discussions, ensuring that Florence built on the journey rather than starting anew. With the support of facilitators, note takers, and whispered interpreters, participants navigated disagreements, dilemmas, and new possibilities.

The Deliberative Themes:
Exploring Democratic Trade-Offs in Crisis Governance

At the core of the Florence Assembly's work was a profound engagement with ten key democratic trade-offs — complex tensions that arise when societies confront crisis governance and democratic renewal. These trade-offs reflected competing values, priorities, and institutional arrangements that demand careful balancing in the pursuit of resilient, inclusive democracy.
These trade-offs guided participants in grappling with the tensions at democracy's heart during crisis. Their deliberations laid important groundwork for envisioning a resilient, inclusive Citizens' Charter for Europe and advancing democratic innovation across borders.

1. Executive Powers vs. Citizen Power
Strong centralized governments can act swiftly in crises, but without genuine citizen involvement, decisions risk missing the public's real needs. The challenge is balancing necessary control with meaningful local agency.

2. Immediate Crisis Response vs. Long-Term Planning
Political urgency often prioritizes quick, visible emergency actions, while long-term systemic prevention is harder to maintain yet essential. Democracies must better integrate foresight alongside immediate response.

3. Collective Responsibility vs. Delegated Accountability
Citizens entrust leaders during emergencies but need robust ways to hold them accountable—drawing on ideas from ancient practices of recall or ostracism to prevent overreach.

4. Quick Public Votes vs. Informed Deliberation
Direct democracy reaches many but risks superficial or manipulated outcomes. Deliberative assemblies ensure richer, reflective discussion but require time and commitment.

5. Technology-Driven Participation vs. Human-Centered Engagement

Digital tools expand scale and speed but risk excluding those without access, while in-person deliberation fosters trust and deeper understanding.

6. EU-Driven Crisis Governance vs. Grassroots Transnational Collaboration

EU institutions coordinate transnational crises, yet grassroots cross-border dialogue builds solidarity and mutual understanding necessary for sustainable cooperation.

7. Collective Security vs. Individual Freedom

In times of crisis, measures like emergency laws or surveillance are often justified to ensure societal security and equity. However, such restrictions risk infringing on civil liberties and personal autonomy, potentially eroding democratic freedoms. Assembly members weighed the need for collective responsibility against the dangers of permanent limitations on rights.

8. Locally Autonomous Responses vs. Cross-Border Coordination

The Assembly examined how local, context-specific crisis responses are essential for effective implementation, while also highlighting the necessity of coherent strategies and collaboration across cities, regions, and borders to tackle shared crises.

9. Inclusivity vs. Efficiency in Decision-Making

Expanding inclusivity through participatory mechanisms enriches democratic legitimacy but can slow decision-making processes— a critical concern in emergency situations demanding swift action.

10. Transparency vs. Complexity

Transparency is fundamental for democratic trust, yet overwhelming citizens with excessive or overly complex information risks confusion or disengagement.

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Sunday 23rd February: Our recommendations

The day began at Palazzo Buontalenti, where participants gathered to continue their collaborative journey. Facilitators for each trade-off shared the evolving insights and adjustments from Saturday's deliberations, guiding their groups as they worked to crystallize their recommendations. Through focused dialogue and mutual listening, consensus gradually took shape.

The process deepened with a dynamic World Café, where participants rotated through tables to present, critique, and enrich the proposals. This lively exchange ensured that ideas were challenged, refined, and strengthened through diverse perspectives, embodying the spirit of collective intelligence.

The morning culminated in a plenary session, where each group unveiled their polished recommendations. This moment of shared presentation illuminated the full tapestry of proposals—highlighting areas of agreement, respectful disagreement, and emerging themes that bind the assembly's vision.

While these recommendations mark a milestone, they are part of a living process. An upcoming online gathering will open space for all assembly members—including those unable to join in Florence—to review and contribute further. The final adoption of these proposals will take place at the next assembly in Vienna, carrying forward the collective work of this transnational democratic journey.

Among the proposals were both detailed policy pathways and key action points, reflecting the depth and diversity of the trade-off discussions and the commitment to shaping a resilient, inclusive
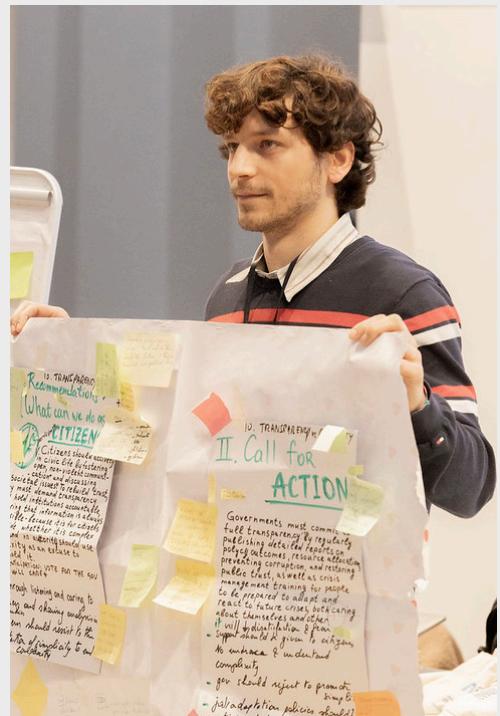
FROM TRADE-OFFS TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Policy Directions

1. Executive Power vs. Citizen Power
The assembly called for strengthening autonomous deliberative communities — local groups engaged in shared governance on issues like housing, environment, and social inclusion. Recommendations emphasized reinforcing their independence, connecting them transnationally, and integrating government representatives as supportive liaisons rather than controllers.
In parallel, countering extremism was seen as a collective challenge, where citizen-led intelligence and independent platforms play a vital role in pushing back against misinformation and authoritarian narratives.

2. Citizens' Role in Crisis: Immediate Response vs. Long-Term Planning
Citizens should have access to spaces that nurture deliberative skills — enabling meaningful involvement not just in emergencies but in shaping long-term crisis prevention strategies. Regular local dialogues, civic education, and empowerment initiatives were recommended as pillars of resilient democratic engagement.

3. Trusting Leaders vs. Accountability
Institutionalizing citizens' assemblies at local, national, and EU levels emerged as a crucial step to balance trust and oversight. Such assemblies, formed through sortition and including cross-assembly ambassadors, could serve as watchdogs and partners to elected officials, enhancing legitimacy and transparency.

4. Direct vs. Deliberative Democracy
Participants emphasized the need for authorities to foster ongoing citizen engagement through both deliberative and direct methods — participatory budgeting, referenda, and public consultations — ensuring citizens contribute meaningfully before, during, and after crises.

5. Digital Tools vs. Human-Centered Engagement
Recommendations urged democratizing EU AI governance by involving civil society and regional voices in oversight, while piloting neighborhood assemblies that blend digital tools with in-person deliberation to build trust and coordination in crisis responses.

Conclusions: The message of the assembly

The Florence Assembly closed on an inspiring and hopeful note. Across rich and diverse discussions, participants showed a deep commitment to inclusive, democratic decision-making that transcends borders. Thoughtful recommendations emerged from this collective effort, reflecting a shared purpose to strengthen democracy in the face of complex crises. The energy and dedication of all involved highlighted the vital role of transnational collaboration in addressing Europe's most pressing challenges.
Florence's momentum now forms a strong foundation for the road ahead — fueling the continued journey toward meaningful democratic change. The Assembly's significance was echoed widely, with coverage in over nine national and international media outlets

NEXT STEPS

The Democratic Odyssey continues with an online gathering on April 3rd to finalize recommendations and select new ambassadors for the Vienna Assembly. Later that month, a feedback session with politicians and civil society will deepen and refine the proposals.

From May 23rd to 25th, the Vienna Assembly will serve as the decisive moment to adopt the recommendations, draft a Citizens' Charter, and hold a closing ceremony with policymakers to formally endorse the assembly's outcomes.

The Florence Assembly built upon the foundation set in Athens, taking the initial messages and beginning to shape them into concrete recommendations. Participants embraced the responsibility of owning these preliminary orientations and integrating new voices joining the process in Florence. As the Assembly continues to grow toward 500 members, this collective effort will transform early messages into final recommendations by the end of the first cycle. In the spirit of democratic respect, Assembly members committed to addressing these proposals both to the wider public and to policymakers, calling for responsiveness, ambition, and a shared commitment to drive meaningful change.

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