

Democracy Lab: Call for city challenges - guidelines

Bilbao, 10-12 February 2026

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Context

About Nets4Dem

[Nets4Dem](#) is an initiative to foster collaboration among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers across Europe to enhance civic deliberation, participation, and democratic innovation. Recognising the pressing need for democratic renewal in the face of challenges such as citizen dissatisfaction, polarization, and technological disruptions to civic discourse, Nets4Dem seeks to address these issues by facilitating better connections, collaboration, and knowledge dissemination.

The initiative acknowledges that traditional approaches to democratic renewal have not been sufficiently impactful and that there's a lack of consistent and meaningful democratic practice. This is exacerbated by fragmented knowledge and siloed work among practitioners, researchers, and organisations. Nets4Dem aims to bridge these gaps by establishing a European community focused on fostering inclusive societies and resilient democracies through collective action.

Key objectives of Nets4Dem include promoting greater connectedness among diverse stakeholders to facilitate holistic conversations and mutual learning, providing better access to research and knowledge resources, and fostering collaboration and innovative partnerships across sectors and levels of governance. Additionally, Nets4Dem is committed to empowering countries, populations, and communities that stand to benefit the most from civic engagement efforts.

[Eurocities](#) is one of the twelve founding members of Nets4Dem. Next to Eurocities, the project consortium consists of [Democracy Reporting International \(DRI\)](#) – project coordinator, [Demos Helsinki](#), [Democratic Society \(Demsoc\)](#), [European Partnership for Democracy \(EPD\)](#), [Coglobal](#), [Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade](#), [Opensource Politics](#), [Trans-European Policy Studies Association \(TEPSA\)](#), [Egmont Institute](#), [Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra](#), and [People Powered](#).

The initiative creates a range of possibilities for local government officials and policymakers to train their democracy muscles and enable mainstream democracy innovations across urban policy-making through capacity-building programmes and initiatives. Democracy Lab, coordinated by Eurocities, is dedicated to urban actors to foster peer exchange and capitalise on the broad Nets4Dem network of democracy experts and practitioners. Bilbao will host the third edition of the Democracy Lab from 10 to 12 February 2026. The event is co-organised by Eurocities and the Bilbao City Council, with the support of Arantzazulab.

About Bilbao City Council

For many years, the Bilbao City Council has been consolidating its own model of citizen participation, based on the principles of good governance, transparency, accountability, and collaboration. This model reflects a firm commitment to involving citizens and giving them a voice in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public services and policies—an opportunity to advance in quality and democratic maturity.

As a result, various mechanisms, spaces, and tools have been established to shape and implement this model.

Citizen participation, in addition to being a right, is an essential element for building democracy and fostering active, tolerant citizenship. Aware of this, the Bilbao City Council has defined its strategic lines on participation in the Participation Strategy 2024–2027, one of whose key objectives is to increase citizens' involvement in public affairs, with particular attention to youth and children.

About Arantzazulab

Arantzazulab is a laboratory for democracy innovation, supported by a diverse range of public and private actors in the Basque region. It is a space for shared reflection, action, and collaboration, where we connect people and organisations, both locally and internationally.

Through innovation and experimentation, we work to activate local capacities, foster collective intelligence, strengthen democratic culture, and explore new forms of interaction between citizens and institutions, contributing to a stronger democracy.

We combine the knowledge generated through theoretical analysis and research with the knowledge that emerges from practice, experimenting with innovative tools and methodologies that drive democratic strengthening.

About these guidelines

These guidelines are to help local government officials and other interested entities understand the process of applying their local challenges to participate in the Democracy Lab. The guidelines outline the event format, objectives, requirements, and selection criteria.

This call for challenges aims to select up to six cities/regions/affiliated local actors to present their challenges and act as team leads and challenge owners at the Democracy Lab in Bilbao. The call is open **until 7 November 2025**.



About Democracy Lab

Background

Cities face complex societal challenges, from housing crises to rising inequalities to the threats of climate change and environmental degradation. These issues often stem from interconnected systems involving and impacting multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives and needs. Addressing these challenges in a democratic fashion creates opportunities for people from all walks of life to be heard and seen. Democratic innovation encompasses various participatory approaches, empowering citizens to actively engage in decision-making beyond traditional electoral cycles. It allows for the engagement of community members in shaping policies and solutions that directly affect their lives, thus improving the quality and impact of policy. By embracing democratic innovation, cities can tap into the collective wisdom of their residents, leading to more sustainable, fair, and effective outcomes that reflect the needs and aspirations of communities

Democratic innovations are processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence. (...) We identify four families of democratic innovations: mini-publics, participatory budgeting, collaborative governance and referenda and citizens' initiatives, while highlighting the proliferation of hybrids often aided by digital participation. (Elstub & Escobar, 2019)

Democratic innovations in Basque Country

Scientific and technological innovation, coupled with economic globalisation, is reshaping societies, economies, social relations, and political structures, and exposing democracies to new vulnerabilities. The resulting erosion of institutional legitimacy, together with the rise of populism and technocracy and the spread of disinformation, have generated profound democratic fatigue. In this context, liberal democracies urgently need to renew their social contract to sustain legitimacy and adapt to contemporary technological, environmental, and social challenges. Strengthening democracy requires coordinated efforts to enhance institutional functioning, deepen citizen participation, revitalise democratic culture, and reinforce community ties through innovative governance and participatory mechanisms.

Engaging young people is essential to this democratic renewal. Despite generally pro-democratic attitudes among youth, political disengagement and dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy remain widespread, especially among young men. Studies across the world highlight limited political interest but also a strong desire to express their worldviews and perspectives through accessible and meaningful forms of participation. Bilbao, as many other European cities, is prioritising youth engagement to rebuild trust, strengthen democratic culture, and empower younger generations to co-create more inclusive and sustainable communities. Failure to do so

risks deepening civic disengagement and further eroding the legitimacy and resilience of democracy in the long term.

Alongside efforts at the city level, initiatives led by Arantzazulab and the Basque Government are contributing to the development of a wider ecosystem of democratic innovation in the Basque Country. Together, these initiatives seek to empower younger generations to co-create more just, sustainable, and democratic communities.

Democracy Lab Bilbao - thematic scope

The Democracy Lab in Bilbao is an opportunity for participants to explore Basque region's conditions, cultural roots, and extensive experience in deepening the relationship between citizens and public institutions. The Lab will place particular emphasis on **engaging young people and children**, strengthening democratic values with them, and harnessing the opportunities that new technologies offer for reflection and practice.

Drawing on the experience of Bilbao City Council and the wider democratic ecosystem in the Basque Country, three main challenge areas have been identified.

1. Strengthening democratic values among young people

Democratic values are deeply rooted in the Basque Country, forming a natural part of the local culture. Yet the current global context is eroding these values and requires new approaches to reinforce them, particularly with younger generations. Young people can contribute fresh perspectives and experience that reflect today's challenges while imagining the futures they wish to build.

Bilbao City Council recognises the urgency of promoting the principles of Collaborative Governance and Open Government.

Embedding these principles effectively should nurture a new culture of the institutions-society relations, enabling collaborative problem-solving, improving citizen trust, and driving democracy innovation at the local level.

Collaborative Governance refers to fostering deeper collaboration of the administration with city stakeholders and citizens, grounded in common responsibility and reciprocity, aimed at achieving better outcomes and the common good.

Open Government is built on transparency and accountability, participation, and collaboration across all levels of municipal organisation.

At the level of the Basque Country, the Basque Government, together with diverse stakeholders such as Arantzazulab, has promoted a process to identify the Collaborative Governance values underpinning our culture and our local worldviews: political culture, trust, shared responsibility, effectiveness, and equality. Efforts are now being made to explore ways to strengthen these values.

Questions for reflection:

- How can democratic values be enriched with the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of young people in order to strengthen democracy?
- What are the democracy and collaborative governance values shared by European cities, and how can we learn from one another to reinforce them?
- How can new technologies enrich and support the adoption and transfer of democratic values? What are the solutions, instruments and platforms that could be designed?
- How can we revitalise the principle of shared responsibility, and raise awareness that citizenship entails both rights and responsibilities?

2. Building democratic culture with children and youth

Opportunities and spaces to learn and practise democratic culture are often scarce in our societies. Yet, like any evolving set of skills or mindsets, those underpinning democratic culture must be cultivated deliberately. This requires creating the right conditions, infrastructures, and spaces for development and practice.

Bilbao City Council emphasises the importance of equipping young people with the knowledge and skills required for democratic participation, we refer to it as *civic education*: understanding institutional structures, competences and functioning, regulatory literacy, critical information management, social structures, rights, and obligations.

Moreover, if we want to address the deepening of democratic culture, one must recognise that it is not confined to institutions or procedures, but is grounded in a set of shared values and attitudes that enable democracy to be lived as a way of life; these include respect for human dignity and human rights, equality and non-discrimination, freedom and autonomy, pluralism and appreciation of diversity, justice and fairness, solidarity and commitment to the common good, active participation and shared responsibility, reciprocity, dialogue and deliberation, respect for the rule of law, and civic responsibility with accountability. Together, these values nurture mutual trust, enable peaceful coexistence, and strengthen the foundations of democratic life.

The Basque Government's Collaborative Governance Framework, drawing on the research and experiences of Arantzazulab, identifies a series of mindsets and capabilities essential for this task¹, such as flexibility, resilience, courage, self-knowledge, action orientation, critical reflection, curiosity, empathy, and strong local roots.

In terms of practical capabilities, the action skills required for Collaborative Governance processes can be grouped into three categories:

1. Facilitating relationships and collaborations: working together effectively and fostering collective initiatives.

¹ Arantzazulab (2024). Skills for democracy innovation <https://ezagutzataria.arantzazulab.eus/wp-content/uploads/Skills-for-democracy-innovation.pdf>

2. Designing and promoting innovative experimentation: analysing, testing, and iterating new ideas, while making the learning process explicit.
3. Leading change: mobilising resources and legitimacy to drive transformation.

These skills and attitudes must be developed at multiple levels—individual, institutional, community, and system. Building capacity solely within public administration is insufficient: all actors engaged in collaborative governance must nurture the attitudes and competencies that enable effective collaboration.

Questions for reflection:

- What conditions, infrastructures, and spaces are needed to strengthen democratic culture from children and young people's perspective?
- How can the necessary capabilities and mindsets be developed by children and young people to reinforce democracy?
- How can new technologies support awareness-raising, training, and the consolidation of democratic culture?
- How can children be taught from an early age the importance of active and sustained involvement in their communities?

3. Experimenting with new technologies to involve young people in public institutions

In today's world, it is impossible to reflect on democracy without considering the transformative role of new technologies. The Bilbao Democracy Lab offers a valuable space for deepening this reflection and brainstorming innovative practices.

Bilbao City Council stresses the importance of designing both analogue and, especially, digital tools that empower citizen participation—providing access to resources, information, communication channels, and public services. At the same time, legal and administrative structures must adapt to new forms of operation, organisation, interaction, and communication among young people. This includes adjusting administrative language, building partnerships with informal youth organisations, and creating new systems for opinion-gathering and voting. New technologies can significantly accelerate progress in these areas.

In 2025, Arantzazulab published [a report examining the intersection between democracy and new technologies](#). The report highlights how rapid innovation in the technological field creates both opportunities and risks for democratic systems, underscoring the need for focused reflection and action. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, automated algorithms, and digital platforms are reshaping how information is produced, how interactions take place, how opinions are formed, and how decisions are made. Making technology work for democracy is, therefore, a defining challenge of our time.

Questions for reflection:

- How can we leverage the opportunities of new technologies—especially artificial intelligence—to strengthen democracy from the perspective of children and young people?

- How can local public institutions adapt to incorporate young people's knowledge and perspectives into decision-making by making use of new technologies?
- Specifically in relation to children and young people, and leveraging the opportunities of new technologies:
 - How can public institutions adapt to communicate in their language and through their channels, including digital means of communication?
- How can the new technologies help with designing participatory processes that are attractive, credible and ensure genuine impact involving young people?

Overview

Democracy Lab serves as a platform for local government officials and democracy practitioners to promote collaborative problem-solving and democratic innovation at the local level. The event takes place in **Bilbao from 10 to 12 February 2025**, bringing together diverse stakeholders to delve into democratic innovations by jointly working on the real-life challenges presented by cities – the challenge owners. Selected cities will come to the Lab with a specific challenge they face. They will work in small teams of peers, assisted by a facilitator, to design actionable, ready-to-implement democratic interventions to bring them back to their administrations. In this creative effort, the teams will be assisted by mentors: democracy experts and practitioners from the Nets4Dem network, Bilbao staff and experts, and local stakeholders. To ensure learning exchange and breadth of perspectives, participants will take part in study visits and speak with local community members. The working language of Democracy Lab is English. Participation in the event is open to cities and towns in the EU and Horizon Europe countries².

Participating cities will also receive assistance in post-event solutions development and implementation: They will be invited to participate in the capacity-building programme [Democracy Accelerator](#) and/or get tailored mentorship through the [Rising Stars](#) programme. There will also be periodic (online) meetings for the cohort, where participants can discuss the implementation progress and get feedback.

Selected solutions developed during Democracy Lab will be featured in a Democratic Innovation Toolbox – an open-source digital dissemination resource encompassing policy recommendations for embracing democratic innovations and promoting impactful real-life approaches. Cities participating in a Lab will also be entitled to compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted towards the end of the Nets4Dem project (mid-2026).

Objectives

Democracy Lab aspires to empower cities to address complex societal challenges in a democratic spirit by facilitating peer collaboration, enhanced by the involvement of experts and communities affected by the issue. This way, we aim to encourage policymakers to view issues from diverse

² Albania, Armenia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Faroe Islands, Georgia, Iceland, Israel, Kosovo, Morocco, Moldova, Montenegro, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Tunisia, Türkiye, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

perspectives and engage directly with citizens. This process enables a holistic understanding of the issues and ensures solutions are rooted in real-world experiences.

Expected outputs:

- actionable implementation plans / frameworks / roadmaps addressing challenges presented by challenge owners
- a set of novel approaches to addressing pressing urban challenges in a democratic way
- a set of learnings to feed into development of policy recommendations on mainstreaming democratic innovation at different levels of government.

Participants

The event will bring together 50-70 participants. There will be 6 teams, each comprising 5-7 participants, including 1-2 challenge city representatives (challenge owners), 1 facilitator, and 2-4 peers and/or experts. This structure ensures a flow of ideas, expertise, and experience. Teams will be assisted by mentors representing the Nets4Dem network and host city staff members and experts.

Participants categories:

- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **challenge owners**.
- Local government's representation (technicians, policymakers, or representatives of other entities affiliated with the local administration) – **peers** joining the teams as practitioners and experts to share experiences and learn from one another.
- **Stakeholders** – practitioners and experts from academia, civil society organisations, activists, and community and business representatives.
- **Mentors** – Nets4Dem members, Bilbao City Council staff and experts, Arantzazulab representatives.
- **Facilitators** experienced in group process, supporting teams with effective collaboration and ensuring they reach their goals.

Format guidelines

The Democracy Lab concept draws from the social hackathon methodology that brings together multidisciplinary teams who collaborate intensively over a short period to develop prototypes of solutions. Leveraging expertise from the Nets4Dem network, the Lab provides a unique opportunity for cities' staff members to co-create action plans alongside diverse partners, including peers, democracy innovation experts from civil society organisations and academia, and community representatives. Integrating tried and tested methods from Eurocities, the Lab incorporates site visits, guest interventions, and mutual learning to inspire and develop solutions collaboratively with those directly affected by the issues. Teams will be guided by experienced facilitators who understand the group process and are grounded in the principles of design thinking to navigate the iterative process of solutions development.

Indicative agenda

	Tuesday 10 February	Wednesday 11 February	Thursday 12 February
Morning	<i>Participants arrivals</i>	Site visit(s) Innovation Capsule: creativity and lateral thinking.	Final presentations and feedback session Event conclusion
Lunch	Welcome lunch	Networking lunch	Lunch and departures
Afternoon	Welcome and introduction Setting the scene: Keynote City challenges presentations Teams formation and problem-framing	Workshops: creative idea generation and prioritisation. Idea conceptualisation and prototyping.	
Evening	Optional – informal dinner in newly formed teams	Optional – joint dinner for all participants	

Guidelines for submitting city challenge

Who is the challenge owner?

The challenge owner is a representative from a local government entity, such as a city or region, or organisation affiliated with the local government, tasked with presenting a specific urban challenge at the Democracy Lab. The challenge should be relevant: reflecting the specific context and problems faced by the local administration, with a **strong likelihood that the solutions developed during the Lab will be implemented to address the issue**. The Challenge owner's role is central to the lab's collaborative problem-solving process. Challenge owners provide real-life context and insights into their city's issues, ensuring that the discussions and solutions developed are grounded in urban experiences.

What's in it for your city?

Acting as a challenge owner, these representatives will lead their city's participation in the Democracy Lab, working closely with a dedicated team of peers, experts, and facilitators to co-create actionable solutions (5-7 participants per team). They will present their challenge, contribute to problem framing, and guide the team through the iterative process of developing democratic interventions. This role offers several benefits:

- **Enhanced Problem-Solving:** By collaborating with a diverse group of stakeholders, challenge owners gain new perspectives and innovative approaches to addressing their city's challenges. This is a unique opportunity for cities to work on their projects with an unusual group of collaborators, with the support of diverse experts and in an experimental setting.
- **Capacity Building:** The process provides valuable learning opportunities, equipping challenge owners with new skills and methodologies in democratic innovation and digital transformation.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Challenge owners will connect with experts and peers across Europe, fostering relationships that can lead to future collaborations and support.
- **Implementation Support:** Beyond the event, challenge owners will receive assistance through initiatives like the Democracy Accelerator and the Rising Stars programme, which ensure that the solutions developed during the lab are effectively brought to life.
- **Policy Influence:** Involvement in other Nets4Dem activities, such as policy dialogues, providing input for recommendations to mainstream democratic innovations at different levels of government.
- **Visibility and Recognition:** Selected solutions and successes from the lab will be featured in the Democratic Innovation Toolbox, giving cities recognition for their efforts and contributions to advancing democratic practices.
- **Competing for the Democratic Innovation Award:** Challenge owners can compete for the Democratic Innovation Award, granted by a jury of democracy experts and peers.
- **Reimbursement:** Travel and accommodation expenses for one representative of the challenge cities will be reimbursed. Further information will be communicated to the selected cities.

How will the challenge owners be selected?

The selection will be carried out by the Democracy Lab organisational team, comprising Bilbao's team, Arantzazulab and Nets4Dem representatives, based on the following criteria:

- Overall quality of the application
- Relevance of the challenge to the lab theme: Democratic engagement of youth and children. To help applicants define their challenge, we advise reviewing the four main focus areas on pages 4-5.
- Geographical balance between participating cities to ensure diversity of contexts.
- Commitment to follow-up and implementation of the ideas developed during the lab in your administration.
- Commitment to taking an active part in the Lab over its entire duration and preparing quality materials to effectively guide your team's work.

What is expected of the challenge owners if selected?

If your city challenge is selected, you are expected to:

- Delegate one or more representatives to travel to Bilbao for the whole event and actively engage in teamwork
- Participate in an online preparation meeting with the organisational team member to help you understand your role and prepare for the event. You will be asked to present your city and challenge to all participants, and answer their questions. We envisage 2-3 preparatory online meetings.

- Prepare a poster presenting your challenge and background document (one-pager), based on the guidelines provided by the organisational team.
- Contribute to a follow-up with Eurocities to evaluate how participation in the event has improved democratic practices in your city. You may be invited to participate in or provide input for Nets4Dem initiatives like policy dialogues, working groups, conferences, etc.

How to apply?

Cities interested in submitting their challenge are asked to complete the [online application form](#) by **Friday, 7 November 2025**.

All applicants will be notified about the application results by end of November 2025.

If you have questions regarding this call or Democracy Lab, please contact the Nets4Dem coordinator at Eurocities, Aleksandra Ziętek, at aleksandra.zietek@eurocities.eu.