



Annual Report

2025

This publication was produced by Democracy Reporting International, with input and support from Nets4Dem members, as part of Nets4Dem, funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

07 January 2026



This publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license



**Funded by
the European Union**

Table of Contents



About Nets4Dem	3
Executive Summary	4
European Democracy Trends 2025	8
Connecting Knowledge	9
Institutionalising Democratic Innovation – From experiments to long-lasting practices in decision-making	10
New technologies for citizen participation	12
Opportunities and barriers to technology use for democracy	13
Building Capacity	14
Incentives and barriers to implementing democratic innovation on the ground	15
Worker-led assemblies: Designing sustainable industries for the future	16
From Mapping to Scaling Democratic Innovations	17
The Democratic Innovation Knowledge Map	17
Scaling Grounds	17
Developing Solutions	19
Nets4Dem Democracy Labs: Developing Solutions for Cities' Challenges	20
Transferring new solutions between cities through structured exchange	22
Shaping Policy	24
The European Democracy Shield	25
Members corner: democratic innovation in Ukraine	26
Learning with Ukraine – The Resilient Democracy Toolkit	26
Democracy That Travels: Youth Participation and Community Dialogue in Wartime Ukraine	28

About Nets4Dem



Nets4Dem is a **meta-network** of civil society organisations, research institutions, and public bodies advancing democracy in Europe and beyond. Together, we work to strengthen our joint capacity to implement innovative democracy initiatives at the local, national, and European levels.

Nets4Dem applies an **ecosystems-approach**, going beyond silos to create better conditions for systemic change and connecting groups and regions traditionally underrepresented in the democracy conversation.

In 2025, Nets4Dem's 56 members now bring together 200 cities, 50 universities and think tanks, 400 civil society organisations and 38 countries.

56

Members

200

Cities

50

Universities and think tanks

400

Civil Society Organisations

38

European Countries



Our work is organised across 4 pillars:

1

Consolidating knowledge

Reducing fragmentation and collectively identifying future research agendas.

2

Building capacity

Equipping democratic actors to implement and adapt innovative democracy initiatives.

3

Developing solutions

Co-creating and testing evidence-based innovations.

4

Shaping policy

Translating new insights, practices and solutions into meaningful policy reform, embedding democratic innovation in public decision-making.



At our annual meeting in October 2025, the network has also decided to establish **4 new working groups** for strategic collaborative action:

The Nets4Dem **Working Group 1: Democracy & Technology** explores how technological developments interfere with democracy, and how technology can support democratic innovation. **Working Group 2: Democracy & Emotions** seeks to gain deeper understanding of the emotional dynamics shaping political decision-making. **Working Group 3: Democracy & Polarization** explores how democratic innovation can help bridge socio-political divides.

Finally, **Working Group 4: Embedding Democratic Innovation** fosters the institutionalization and mainstreaming of innovative participatory and deliberative decision-making processes.

Across our activities and working groups, Nets4Dem moves beyond organisational silos and interests towards collective purpose. No single actor, including government, can transform society alone. Together, **we create the conditions for systemic change** by strengthening connections, capabilities, and shared understanding across diverse democratic actors.

Welcome!

We are pleased to present Nets4Dem's Annual Report 2025 — a reflection of a year marked by both democratic uncertainty and renewed commitment to democratic innovation across Europe.

This report is not only a summary of activities. It is the result of the collective effort, creativity, and dedication of our diverse group of members who believe that democratic innovation can make institutions more open, inclusive, and resilient.

Our work continues to focus on a shared challenge: how innovative approaches can move from isolated experiments to durable, institutionalised practices.

The chapter [Connecting Knowledge](#) focuses on new insights into the barriers and incentives for embedding democratic innovation in institutions, as well as into the emerging technologies for citizen participation. In 2025, Nets4Dem expanded its open-access Knowledge Database, bringing together evidence from over 400 EU-funded research projects on democratic innovation. New research based on the gathered information highlighted that participation alone is not enough— effective democratic innovation depends on its ability to achieve true inclusion and clear pathways to concrete policy impact. Furthermore, research on emerging technologies showed that digital tools and artificial intelligence can enhance deliberation and scale participation, provided they are used ethically and inclusively.

The report continues with the [Building Capacity](#) chapter, which highlights the main topics, needs and challenges faced by practitioners and participants of capacity building programs when it comes to the implementation of democratic initiatives. It also gives insight into a new theory of scaling of democratic innovations. By the end of the year, Nets4Dem supported over 90 public bodies and civil society organizations across Europe, contributing to the implementation of 33 democratic innovation initiatives. 60 policymakers and practitioners benefitted

from intensive mentorship support over a period of six months. Experience from these programs shows that practitioners often face limited resources, unclear mandates, and weak institutional support. Nets4Dem's combination of tailored training, mentorship, practical tools, and peer learning has proven effective in enabling participants to move from ambition to implementation, even in challenging political contexts.

The [Developing Solutions](#) chapter highlights new solutions developed by cities in Nets4Dem's Democracy Labs. These Labs enable cities across Europe to co-create and test responses to complex challenges. At the same time, the network strengthened work on the scaling and transfer of democratic innovations, supporting structured exchange between cities and contributing to emerging frameworks that help successful initiatives grow without losing quality or legitimacy.

Finally, the [Shaping Policy](#) chapter analyses the EC's newly established European Democracy Shield (EDS). It also describes new approaches in fostering democratic innovation in times of crisis, focussing on Ukraine's unique example of democratic resilience and reinvention. Throughout 2025, Nets4Dem engaged with key European debates on democratic resilience, including the EDS. Through Nets4Dem's policy dialogues and retreats, we help bridge institutional policymaking with democratic practice, bringing together over 250 policymakers, practitioners and researchers in diverse settings.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all members, partners, and contributors who made this work possible in 2025. Together, we strive to continue to learn, adapt, and build democratic practices that are inclusive, meaningful, and resilient.

Sincerely,
The Nets4Dem Secretariat

Our Impact in 2025



90+

public bodies and CSOs supported with capacity building to implement democratic innovation



60+

policymakers and practitioners mentored through intensive half-year programme.



400+

democratic innovation research projects mapped, with key learnings and findings captured in open source database



11

new participatory solutions designed together with cities and regions



380

policymakers, civil society and experts convened for high level discussions on pressing democratic innovation issues



108%

membership growth in our network

European Democracy Trends 2025



Gentiana Gola
INTERNATIONAL IDEA



Emily Bloom
INTERNATIONAL IDEA

In 2025, International IDEA's Democracy Tracker captured a democracy landscape in Europe that was being tested by **security challenges and technological change**, while at the same time resolute **efforts to advance rights** continued to shape the region's democratic story. Between January and October, the Democracy Tracker reported 137 events describing these and other trends.

Governments across the region prioritized **order and security**, often in response to fears of foreign interference and domestic unrest. While many measures were well-justified and proportionate, some have sparked concerns about oversight and civil liberties. For example, [Italy](#) penalized passive resistance and nonviolent blockades, while the [United Kingdom's](#) proscription of Palestine Action made membership or support in the group a criminal offense. In [Estonia](#), draft legislation aimed at curbing the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church proposed tighter oversight of religious groups. Large-scale protests and government responses to crime (for example in [Slovenia](#)) raised concerns about excessive measures that single out certain communities and deepen social exclusion.

Rapid technological advances (particularly concerning generative artificial intelligence—AI) combined with mounting pressures from hybrid warfare intensified security fears across Europe. Observers noted

that [Moldova's](#) elections were marred by foreign interference and disinformation, including the circulation of unlabeled deep fake AI generated videos and bots to artificially boost engagement with unofficial campaign posts on social media. Legislation passed in [Hungary](#) authorised the use of facial recognition technology to crack down on protesters participating in LGBTQIA+ marches.

Efforts to strengthen rights, civic participation and democratic resilience persisted. Protections against gender-based violence were strengthened in countries like [Norway](#) and [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). Important steps to address ethnic, minority or indigenous discrimination, colonial legacies or war crimes were taken by several countries, including [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Denmark](#), and the [United Kingdom](#). Efforts to broaden participation and ballot access also advanced, with [Cyprus](#) lowering the voting age to 17 and [Moldova](#) expanding postal voting for citizens abroad. It was also an extraordinary **year for protest movements, both in scale and impact**, including in [Serbia](#), [Slovakia](#), and [Türkiye](#). Finally, the European Union has recently introduced two key policy initiatives, the European Democracy Shield and the European Civil Society Strategy, which have the potential to strengthen democratic resilience across the region. Sustaining these efforts will be essential, but will continue to require states to find the right balance between security and civil liberties.

1



Connecting Knowledge

Knowledge on democratic innovation is often fragmented, with outputs failing to reach non-academic audiences or inform policymakers, as these groups are rarely involved in shaping research agendas. Nets4Dem works to reduce fragmentation, identify research gaps together with policymakers and practitioners, and improve interoperability across research infrastructures.

The work presented in this chapter reflects a shared effort to identify what enables democratic innovations to move beyond experimentation and become embedded in institutions. By consolidating research findings and examining emerging technologies, Nets4Dem members help clarify the conditions under which participation can be inclusive, meaningful, and durable.

Our Key Work:

- [Nets4Dem Knowledge Database on Democratic Innovation](#): This open-access, searchable database features the results of over 400 EU-funded research projects on democratic innovation.
- Special issue: [Towards an Innovative Democracy: Institutionalizing Participation in Challenging Times](#) on embedding democratic innovation
- [Nets4Dem Knowledge Hub](#)
- Arantzazulab's [Democracy in the Digital Era](#) Report

Institutionalising Democratic Innovation

– From experiments to long-lasting practices in decision-making



Tara Tepavac

INSTITUTE FOR PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL THEORY, IFDT, UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE

Despite growing experimentation worldwide, little is known about how these practices become embedded within institutions. Over the past year, our team examined how democratic innovations—such as participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, and digital participation—can move from one-off experiments to stable components of public decision-making. This question emerged while developing Nets4Dem’s Democratic Innovation Knowledge Database and reviewing research for the Multi-Dimensional Framework for Democratic Innovation.

This gap guided our work in 2024–2025. We began by analysing the documents collected in the Knowledge Database. To do this, we combined digital tools with more traditional reading strategies and used topic-modelling software to identify recurring themes and then examined a selected group of cases more closely. This closer analysis helped us understand what works, for whom, and under what conditions when governments invite people to take part in decision-making.

Our findings show the following key barriers to effective participation:



1. Design

Unstructured participation can exclude marginalised groups, reinforcing existing inequalities. It also reduces the quality and legitimacy of outcomes and risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.



2. Timing

Opportunities offered too late in the policy process limit people’s ability to shape problems or solutions.



3. Capacity

Resource-intensive formats (like citizens’ assemblies) are unevenly available, creating unequal access across regions.



4. Evaluation

Limited evidence on long-term impacts of direct democracy tools suggests participation alone does not guarantee sustained influence.

These insights led us to focus on institutionalisation, exploring how democratic innovations can become embedded in political systems without losing the creativity that made them successful in the first place.



Our special issue [Towards an Innovative Democracy: Institutionalizing Participation in Challenging Times](#) brings together 18 scholars with diverse regional and thematic expertise, aiming to resolve the tension between the need to build strong institutional support for participation while preserving openness and creativity needed to engage communities meaningfully.

Contributions covered a wide range of contexts:

- Research from **Latin America** shows how participation policies evolve under political pressure and shifting priorities
- Work from **Poland** illustrates how different designs of citizen assemblies influence their capacity to function and persist in the long term.

- In **Italy**, analysis shows how internal rules and regional laws can stabilise participatory practices.
- Studies from **Central and Eastern Europe** covering Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia describe how political instability or weak local institutions can limit efforts to scale up democratic practices.

Across cases, a recurring insight emerged: **formal rules can strengthen democratic innovation, but overly rigid frameworks risk limiting experimentation.** Moving on, further research is needed to examine how governments and civil society can collaborate to sustain effective participation.

New technologies for citizen participation



Naiara Zoia

MANAGING DIRECTOR, ARANTZAZULAB

Technologies such as artificial intelligence, automated algorithms, and digital platforms are transforming how information is produced, how people interact, and how public decisions are made. For our laboratory, this rapid technological change creates major opportunities to strengthen democratic culture, community life, and large-scale citizen involvement. It is within this shifting landscape that we position our work.

We believe that engaging with new technologies is not optional—it is a responsibility. As AI and digital tools spread across all sectors, we must ask how they can serve democracy, and how they can amplify our mission as a laboratory for democratic innovation.

This year, we have done extensive research examining the intersection of technology and democracy. In the field of citizen participation and deliberation, emerging technologies offer great opportunities for governments, and institutions willing to incorporate these approaches in their governance models and improve decision-making, but there are also barriers to an effective use of technology for this purpose.

Technology alone does not transform democracy. It is a tool—one that must be used critically, ethically, and inclusively to strengthen democratic practice. Based on the findings, we identify five strategic areas for using technology in favour of democracy:

1.

Enhancing deliberative processes through technology, especially by integrating AI to support high-quality public dialogue.

2.

Developing hybrid models that combine artificial intelligence and collective intelligence to reinforce democratic decision-making.

3.

Creating a meeting point across institutional levels to reflect and act on the relationship between democracy and technology.

4.

Using digital tools for awareness-raising, training, and strengthening democratic culture across communities.

5.

Supporting citizen science and data-driven participation to deepen public involvement and shared knowledge production.

Emerging technologies are reshaping the democratic landscape at remarkable speed. By approaching this transformation with care—anchored in values, ethics, and inclusion—we can help ensure that technology becomes a powerful ally in building more meaningful, participatory, and resilient democracies.



Opportunities



Favourable context for digital solutions with the support of international programmes and the existence of international references for institutional transformation.

Fostering accessibility and the inclusion of under-represented profiles and groups thanks to innovation in functionalities and methods of digital engagement.

Increasing the scale of processes by relying on technological capabilities

Managing the information overload generated in participatory processes through the analysis of large volumes of data.

Barriers



Economic: Innovating in digital democracy requires significant investments, especially at local level. The development of effective technological solutions is compromised without specific and continuous funding.

Technological: The main current technical challenges include ensuring interoperability between platforms, efficiency in data handling and universal accessibility.

Political: Digital citizen participation needs political support and adequate regulation for its implementation. Organisational culture: Digital engagement requires the administrative culture to be transformed and new capacities developed in institutions.

Socio-cultural: Digital participation must adapt to socio-cultural diversity, ensuring the inclusion of all groups.



2



Building Capacity

Policymakers and practitioners often face context-specific challenges at the local, regional, and national levels and can have difficulties accessing practical information to help them launch or improve participatory programs. Nets4Dem's Democracy Accelerator and Rising Stars programs provide tailored, long-term training and mentorships, with a total of 33 democratic innovation initiatives already implemented and finalized. These include participatory budgeting, youth assemblies, and new digital participation tools. They took place in Turkey, Romania, Poland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Lithuania, Germany, North Macedonia, and the United Kingdom.

This chapter highlights insights from Nets4Dem's capacity-building programmes that supported actors working with limited resources, uncertain political backing, and complex organisational environments. The experiences presented here show how targeted training, mentorship, and peer learning can turn ambition into viable democratic practice. The chapter also introduces a new theory and program for scaling democratic innovation.

Our Key Work:

- [Online Resource Center](#): A curated selection of top tools, guides and materials on the practice of democratic innovation.
- [Participation Playbook](#): A practical tool guide that helps practitioners and policymakers develop step-by-step plans for implementing participatory initiatives in their individual contexts.

Incentives and barriers to implementing democratic innovation on the ground



Juan Fancisco Suárez

EU PROJECT MANAGER, COGLOBAL

Over the past year, Nets4Dem’s capacity building work focused on understanding how practitioners develop **the skills, confidence and institutional connections needed to make democratic innovation viable** in their local contexts. The programmes brought together people working in environments where political support is uncertain, resources are limited and organisational structures offer little clarity.

Across these settings, the central question was how practitioners can move from intention to implementation when designing assemblies, participatory budgeting processes or community dialogues. The experiences gathered through the Democratic Innovation Accelerator and the Rising Stars programme shed light on the everyday challenges involved in this work and on the forms of support that make progress possible.

Analysis of participant experiences shows **that the difficulty is rarely a lack of ambition**. Many practitioners have strong ideas about the processes they want to initiate, but they face constraints that directly shape their capacity to act. They often work alone

or in very small teams and must carry responsibility for recruitment, learning design, facilitation and evaluation. They also need to secure institutional support while managing limited or unstable funding. Participants consistently emphasise that they need clearer frameworks, accessible tools and guidance that helps them navigate uncertainty. Their accounts point to several recurring obstacles:

- limited time and human resources
- difficulty engaging stakeholders and securing buy-in
- uncertainty about process design, especially learning phases, facilitation and evaluation
- challenges in keeping participants engaged, including communication and accessibility
- resource constraints that restrict the scale or ambition of initiative

These patterns reflect the complexity of implementing democratic innovation in real-world contexts where enthusiasm is often high, but operational capacity is not.



Worker-led assemblies: Designing sustainable industries for the future

The experience of George Hibberd from Safe Landing illustrates how these challenges manifest in practice and how targeted support can transform a promising idea into a credible democratic process. George works in the aviation sector, where climate pressures and industrial uncertainty shape the everyday lives of workers. He sought to introduce Workers' Assemblies as a structured way for workers to influence decisions about the future of the industry. Before joining Nets4Dem, he had piloted a small workshop to demonstrate the potential of deliberation among aviation workers. However, the demands of designing a robust process, recruiting participants and building relationships across unions were difficult to manage with limited staffing and resources. The vision was clear, yet the path to realisation remained complex.

The capacity building programme provided George with structured learning, examples from other contexts and practical tools he could adapt. More importantly, one-to-one mentorship helped him transform abstract plans into a sequence of concrete steps. With guidance, he refined the design of his Visioning Assembly, clarified recruitment criteria, prepared learning materials and developed communication tools for participants. He was also connected with practitioners who offered advice on facilitation and engagement strategies. What had previously felt overwhelming became manageable. The process gained coherence, and confidence grew as each stage of the design became clearer.

As a result, George now leads a well-developed participatory process which ran from April to November 2025. The Assembly will bring aviation workers together to imagine a sustainable future for the sector and generate recommendations that unions can use in advocacy. His work has already influenced larger organisational actors, including the British Airline Pilots Association, which is exploring its own worker-led assembly. Interest from other unions suggests that the idea is gaining traction across the sector.

George's experience shows how comprehensive guidance can enable practitioners to introduce democratic innovation in environments where participation is rarely part of established decision-making.

Key components of effective capacity-building

Across the programmes, similar developments are visible. Participants report that training gives them a clearer sense of direction, while personalised mentorship helps them adapt methods to their political and organisational environments. They also gain from participating in a European peer community, where they can exchange experiences, compare approaches and recognise that the challenges they face are widely shared. This reduces isolation and encourages collaboration. The elements they describe as most valuable include:

- practical templates that can be adapted to local needs
- examples that show how different design choices affect outcomes
- step-by-step guidance for managing complex processes
- a community of peers who offer feedback and support

Together, these components strengthen the confidence and strategic position of practitioners who often work in demanding conditions.

Taken together, the experiences from this year underscore that **capacity building in democratic innovation requires more than technical training**. It involves strengthening the strategic position of practitioners, supporting them as they navigate institutional complexity and providing the tools that allow them to build credible, inclusive and context-appropriate processes. The work of Nets4Dem demonstrates that when practitioners receive this kind of support, their projects can influence broader organisational cultures and open new paths for democratic participation even in sectors where such practices have little precedent.

From Mapping to Scaling Democratic Innovations



Camille Dobler

HEAD OF RESEARCH, MISSIONS PUBLIQUES

In last year's Nets4Dem report, I borrowed the Fibonacci sequence as a metaphor: each new step builds on what came before, and at some point, growth becomes exponential rather than linear. This is how [ScaleDem](#) builds on Nets4Dem's efforts by focussing on scaling democratic innovation.

Over this first year, much of our work has been foundational. ScaleDem developed a conceptual lens that starts not from "does this work?" but from "what blocks this from scaling?" We grouped the main obstacles into four families, one for each scaling dimension: institutional/legal (scaling high), diffusion/replicability (scaling out), cultural/narrative (scaling deep), and quality/integrity (scaling in). We have started sketching the research architecture for a [Theory of Scaling](#) democratic innovations: cases, variables, and methods that allow us to compare cases and follow them over time. And doing so, gave depth to our collaboration with Nets4Dem.

The Democratic Innovation Knowledge Map

The most concrete expression of this collaboration so far is the ScaleDem Knowledge Map. Nets4Dem partners, notably the team from the Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory, from the University of Belgrade, had already done the painstaking work of identifying and documenting cases of democratic innovation born out of EU-funded projects across Europe and beyond.

Rather than starting a new catalogue, ScaleDem uses this shared database as its backbone and asks a fresh question: how do these cases perform when we look at them through the High / Out / Deep / In lens?

The [Knowledge Map](#) as it currently stands organizes

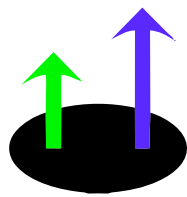
the field into cases, projects and solutions, grouped into six broad families (administrative, deliberative, digital and AI-based, direct, electoral and participatory innovations), tentatively assessing each case's potential to scale Out, In, Deep and High. In short, it is ScaleDem's scaling framework applied to Nets4Dem's empirical groundwork.

In Year 2, we will continue to enrich the Knowledge Map, adding new cases and, most importantly, following up with some existing ones more closely to understand specific scaling dynamics at play. Here we explicitly invite Nets4Dem members to contribute: if you are working on, or have worked on, a democratic innovation that has scaled in any meaningful way, we would like to consider it: enriching the Knowledge Map but also following up with you as we move on from mapping to empirical research. You can propose your case following this [link](#).

Scaling Grounds

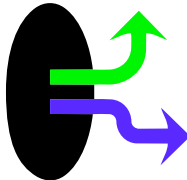
Mapping and analysing cases are only one part of the work. The other is to support organisations directly as they try to overcome the very blockages we have been describing. This is where ScaleDem's two Scaling Grounds – the Piloting and Twinning Programmes – come in.

Their design was influenced by the joint workshop on capacity-building held at the Democracy R&D conference in Brussels, co-organised with Nets4Dem and People Powered. Together, we put the different offers "on the table": Nets4Dem's Democracy Labs, Democratic Innovation Accelerator and Rising Stars Mentorship and ScaleDem's Scaling Grounds. The message from participants was clear: the field does



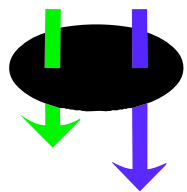
Scaling High

Embedding the innovation into formal institutions gaining traction in laws, policies, or administrative procedures



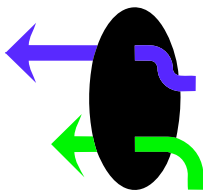
Scaling Out

Reaching more people and places by replicating the innovation across different settings or increasing the number of participants involved.



Scaling Deep

Shaping attitudes, values, and civic identities fostering emotional and normative attachment to democratic participation.



Scaling In

Strengthening the internal quality of participation ensuring processes are more and more fair, inclusive, and deliberative.

not need more fragmentation, but a shared ladder. Nets4Dem helps changemakers design and improve participatory processes, building skills; ScaleDem's Pilots and Twinning should then provide funding and structure for concrete scaling attempts.

The [ScaleDem open calls](#) launched on December 1st were designed with that complementarity in mind:

- The Piloting Programme is an action-focused scheme for “pathbreakers”: organisations already strengthening democracy that want to test bold ways to scale their work. Over 12 months, selected pilots receive up to €100,000, tailored coaching and a European peer network: funds to experiment with the “next step” in scaling.
- The Twinning Programme is a structured peer-learning track for “pioneers”: communities of practice working together to adapt proven scaling

approaches to new contexts. Each Twinning Community runs for 12 months, with up to €65,500 per community: not seed funding, but a boost to design and implement concrete scaling action.

For Nets4Dem members and the wider field of democratic innovation, these calls are a natural continuation of our shared works. With the Knowledge Map, the two Scaling Grounds and the invitations now open to the wider community, Year 2 is where we can move from adding one more project at a time to multiplying cases, pathways and lessons in our Fibonacci sequence. If Nets4Dem members choose to share their examples, apply to the calls and stay engaged in the research, the sequence will not just continue, it will start to look like what it was meant to be from the outset: a growing, shared and co-design Theory of Scaling democratic innovations.

3



Developing Solutions

Democracy practitioners and policymakers on the ground need creative and collaborative spaces to develop, experiment with and test new and adapted democracy solutions to solve concrete policy changes faced by local stakeholders and communities.

In 2025, Nets4Dem deepened its support for the co-creation and testing of democratic solutions to complex local challenges.

Through Democracy Labs and structured exchanges between cities, the network enabled experimentation while strengthening pathways for learning, adaptation, and transfer.

The cases in this chapter illustrate how democratic innovation can respond to climate, social, and governance challenges when embedded in local contexts.

Our Key Work:

- Learn more about Nets4Dem's [Democracy Labs](#)
- [Democracy Lab in Bilbao](#) (10-12 February)

Nets4Dem Democracy Labs: Developing Solutions for Cities' Challenges



Aleksandra Ziętek

PROJECT COORDINATOR, EUROCITIES

In March 2025, Nets4Dem brought the Democracy Lab to Grenoble Alpes Métropole for three days of collaborative work at the intersection of climate action and democratic practice. Practitioners, policymakers and civil society mentors explored how local climate dilemmas can be reframed and addressed through participatory methods. They met community representatives, took part in experimental workshops involving non-human living beings and developed prototypes to test in their administrations.

Their work centered on the tensions that define climate policy at the local level: balancing long-term and short-term choices, addressing global impacts through local action, confronting unequal experiences of climate measures and navigating the interplay between individual behavior and collective

systems. Six local governments selected as challenge owners brought concrete dilemmas ranging from mobility and land-use conflict to sustaining participation beyond one-off exercises and involving tenants in green retrofit strategies.

Bordeaux Métropole focused on biodiversity governance in the Jalles wetlands, where competing interests often polarise debates. Their response was the Jalles Parliament, a standing forum where human and non-human perspectives are considered together. Knowledge sharing, joint field visits and creative exercises help shift perspectives, while commitments are formalised and monitored regularly. This creates a governance model that links awareness to behavioural change and shared stewardship.





Rotterdam examined how to ensure that a climate citizens' assembly becomes a recurring element of governance rather than a one-off exercise. The proposed approach supports long-term visibility for adopted recommendations, mobilises ambassadors inside and outside city administration and anchors responsibility within the mandate of the Climate Councillor. Over time, the aim is for assemblies to be seen as a normal part of democratic life.

In the rural municipality of **PETR Ariège in Pailhès**, tensions between long-time residents and newcomers shaped disputes over housing growth and land use. The team developed a staged mediation process building from public diagnosis to a banquet forum and expert workshops, culminating in a jointly created Future Mural 2040 to guide urban planning. Elections were integrated into the process rather than treated as an interruption.

Reykjavík sought to shift mobility planning from persuasion to shared ownership. Their model activates neighbourhood co-creation through trust-building role-play, conversations about practical mobility needs and rapid tactical urbanism interventions that

show immediate progress. Regular check-ins and clear responsibilities reinforce continuity and a sense of collective authorship.

Prague proposed opening a traditionally technocratic planning culture by organising a short series of workshops with a diverse group of residents to map aspirations and produce a shared vision for sustainable neighbourhoods. The outcomes feed directly into urban project briefs and are validated through a wider online round.

Aix-Marseille Métropole responded to energy poverty and deteriorating social housing conditions by positioning tenants as co-designers of green retrofit strategies. Door-to-door outreach, open meetings, practical information sessions and co-design workshop's structure ongoing involvement, while periodic review meetings help maintain momentum and ensure retrofits serve residents' needs.

Together, these cases show how climate democracy can take shape when local governments combine experimentation, participation, and clear institutional pathways for action.

Transferring new solutions between cities through structured exchange



Adela King

CITY APPLICATIONS AND NETWORK MANAGER, EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF DEMOCRACY



Tijana Zherajikj

CALL AND FUNDRAISING MANAGER, EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF DEMOCRACY

The European Capital of Democracy (ECoD) initiative operates on a simple premise: cities learn best from others when practical knowledge, tested ideas, and concrete democratic solutions circulate openly and systematically. To support this, ECoD NPO created the [European City Network \(ECN\)](#), a strong community of **twenty-four cities** across **fifteen European countries** which foster participation and champion democracy across Europe. This network gives cities a platform to share successful projects which have a lasting impact on the wellbeing of citizens and the environment. City representatives come together regularly to share their expertise and best practices in democracy promotion at the municipal level. Within this broader ecosystem of knowledge exchange, two key instruments have proven particularly effective: the Innovation in Politics Awards' **Best-Practices Hub** and the **ECN Showroom**.

The [Best-Practices Hub](#), developed through the [Innovation in Politics Awards](#) (IPA), functions as an evolving, structured repository of field-tested democratic innovations sourced from hundreds of projects submitted across Europe each year. These initiatives range from **participatory budgeting models and youth engagement programmes to transparent governance mechanisms** and community-driven dialogue processes. Rather than presenting ideas in an abstract manner, the Hub distils the operational essence of each initiative, including methods, implementation steps, challenges, required resources, and measurable outcomes. This practical orientation enables municipalities to understand not only **what works**, but **why it works** and under which conditions it can be transferred.

Complementing the Hub, the European City Network's [Showroom](#) highlights emerging solutions and

experimental approaches that push the boundaries of existing democratic practice. While these innovations may not yet be fully standardised or widely replicated, they provide valuable foresight into evolving trends, such as deliberative micro-forums, hybrid digital-physical participation models, and local strategies to counter disinformation. Both spaces serve cities with different needs: some look for ready-to-scale tools grounded in proven impact, while others seek inspiration and new entry points for innovation.

A crucial advantage of these instruments is their link to the Innovation in Politics Awards community of practice. Every year, the Awards identify and assess cutting-edge democratic initiatives from across Europe through a rigorous evaluation involving a jury of more than thousands of European citizens. Many of these projects feed directly into the ECN's knowledge ecosystem, supplying it with high-quality, field-tested examples that cities can adapt to their local context. This cycle, scouting, validating, showcasing, and transferring, enables the ECN to operate not as a passive knowledge library, but as a living infrastructure that supports the continuous scaling of democratic innovation.

Together, the Best-Practices Hub, the Showroom, and their connection to the Innovation in Politics Awards reflect a clear thematic trend: cities are increasingly seeking structured, evidence-based pathways to adopt democratic innovations, rather than ad-hoc inspiration alone. By organising knowledge in accessible, practice-oriented formats, ECoD contributes to stronger, more resilient urban democracies and equips municipalities with tools they can meaningfully apply, regardless of size, capacity, or political context.

Samples from the ECN Showroom:



- [“Participatory Children and Youth Million” project by the City of Vienna \(Austria\)](#): The Participatory Children and Youth Million is one of the 193 measures from the Children and Youth Strategy in which children and young people can contribute ideas for projects via an online platform. Vienna’s children and young people had the opportunity to vote on these projects in an online voting system. This resulted in 20 winning projects confirmed by the Children’s and Youth Parliament, and which will now be implemented with funds from the Participatory Children’s and Youth Million by the responsible departments of the City of Vienna, again with the participation of the idea submitters.



- [“Vcentri Hub” project by the City of Kyiv \(Ukraine\)](#): The network of municipal open public spaces Vcentri HUB was created to establish a dialogue between the government and the community for the first time in Ukraine. As of today, 3 open public spaces of Vcentri HUB are functioning: in Obolonsky, Shevchenkivskyi and Holosiivskyi districts of the capital. Open public spaces offer visitors a comfortable platform for networking, modern co-working on a free basis and a number of free services, including: providing legal and psychological assistance, as well as holding cultural, social, consulting and educational events.



- [“GPB+Youth: Young Voices, Real Choices” project by the City of Gaia \(Winners of IPA, Portugal\)](#): GPB + Youth strengthen democratic engagement and promotes youth participation at the decision-making level in the municipality of Gaia. With a total budget of €240,000, this participatory budgeting project enables young people to propose and vote on initiatives across three key areas: Arts & Creativity, Well-being & Environment, and Youth Empowerment. GPB + Youth has already involved nearly 5,000 young participants, helping to foster civic engagement, build essential life skills, and celebrate the city’s diversity. The initiative directly supports the Municipal Youth Plan for All Youth(s) 2.0 and contributes to the holistic development of the city.



Shaping Policy

Nets4Dem works to provide policymakers with tailored and evidence-based guidance on how to foster participatory and deliberative approaches in institutional decision-making, embedding democratic innovation in their own processes. This chapter highlights how insights from practice and research fed into policy debates, including around the European Democracy Shield. It also highlights the role democratic innovation can play in politically fragile contexts, drawing on Ukraine's example.

Our Key Work:

- [Nets4Dem Policy Report](#)
- [Nets4dem's European Democracy Shield recommendations](#)

The European Democracy Shield



Emma Quaedvlieg

POLICY MANAGER, EUROPEAN
PARTNERSHIP FOR DEMOCRACY

In November 2025, the European Commission presented its long-awaited European Democracy Shield, representing the EU's umbrella agenda for democracy support for the duration of this commission's mandate. The initiative is built on three pillars:

1. Safeguarding the integrity of the information space;
2. Strengthening democratic institutions, with a focus on elections and media;
3. Boosting societal resilience and citizens' engagement.

The informal fourth pillar discusses the need for proportionate funding to implement the Shield initiative. This is a particularly encouraging commitment given that the negotiations for the upcoming Multi-annual Financial Framework of the EU for 2028-2034 are ongoing. As a political commitment, the Shield needs to be complemented by robust funding in order to have an impact.

A central element of the European Democracy Shield is the Centre for Democratic Resilience. While having a thematic focus on countering disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), a key role of the Centre will be the coordination between existing efforts to boost democratic resilience. This should prevent the siloing of democracy support and ensure its inclusion across the work of the European Commission and the Member States. The proposal of a Stakeholders' platform within the Centre to engage with a broad range of actors, including civil society, is a welcome addition and EPD aims to support its conceptualization and implementation.

The current inclusion of candidate and future candidate countries throughout the Shield is highly encouraging.

A particularly important step is the prioritization of democracy-related issues in the funding of the enlargement facilities, which was not previously the case.

Given the focus of Nets4Dem on participatory democracy, there are several proposals in the Shield that are of particular interest:

- The development of an EU democracy guide for citizens; with an emphasis on young people
- The organization of a European Citizens Panel on Democratic resilience, currently foreseen for the 2nd half of 2026
- An exploration of the interoperability of the Citizens Engagement Platform with national, regional and local public administrations
- The organization of Youth Policy Dialogues on the implementation of the Shield
- The organization of a High-Level event on democracy, and the granting of an annual award for democratic innovation
- A strong commitment to supporting the inclusion of media and digital literacy across the education sector

The current Shield represents a strong commitment by the European Commission to democracy support and marks a crucial first step towards concerted action in this field. However, it should be seen as exactly that: a first step. It includes many stated commitments without clear follow-up actions or timelines. The Shield communication could therefore benefit from a complementary Work Program. Nets4Dem, EPD and our partners will continue to engage with the EU institutions to ensure that civil society inputs are integrated throughout any existing and newly initiated processes.

Learning with Ukraine – The Resilient Democracy Toolkit



Malik Lakoubay

DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND OUTREACH,
RADICALXCHANGE FOUNDATION

Trust in democratic institutions has declined by nine percentage points globally since 1990, yet support for democratic ideals remains high. The gap is not about whether people want democracy, but whether they have access to the tools and knowledge to make it work.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Ukraine, where—despite war, displacement, and institutional strain—public agencies have expanded participatory systems at remarkable speed.

In just two years, the country climbed from 57th to 1st in the UN E-Participation Index, demonstrating how democratic renewal can emerge even under—or perhaps because of—extreme conditions. To highlight and learn from these experiences, on November 14th, RadicalXChange partnered with the Web3 Institute in Ukraine to host “The Future of Digital Democracy: Learning with Ukraine,” a virtual convening that brought together over 200 democratic innovators to share frontline lessons in resilient governance.

[Katia Lukicheva showed how Ukraine achieved the “impossible”](#): entirely redesigning its health-governance system in only 3 years (!), so that money follows the patient, civic oversight is embedded, and public finance is rewired around citizen agency.

Oleksii Zhmerenetskyi, from the parliamentary foresight caucus, mapped four possible futures for Ukraine and [highlighted what democratic resilience](#)

[requires across all of them](#): secure digital infrastructure, tools for diaspora participation, and strong local platforms that remain functional even under bombardment.

Oleksandra Radchenko demonstrated how everyday democracy gets stronger day-by-day, with [participatory budgeting and online consultations now active in hundreds of communities](#)—often drawing higher engagement than elections and making public decisions visibly responsive.

Interwoven with these accounts were contributions from beyond Ukraine, adding comparative perspectives that broadened the conversation on democratic adaptation.

Taiwan’s Cyber Ambassador Audrey Tang showed [digital democracy can bridge divides rather than deepen them](#). Tools like Pol.is amplify consensus across opposing groups, moving beyond “engagement through enagement” toward constructive collaboration – proving democracy can be fast, fair, and fun.

Japan’s Team Mirai [achieved political party status with 1.5 million votes in 70 days using “broad listening.”](#) AI-enabled tools allowing citizens to propose policy changes through natural conversation. Their system generated over 10,000 policy update requests, making participation accessible to non-technical users through chat interfaces and automated workflows.

Germany's SPRIN-D, the Federal Agency for Disruptive Innovation, is aiming to build on these transformations. [Social Innovation Officer Zarah Bruhn shared their latest plans to launch civic hackathons and experiment with digital democracy tools](#), in collaboration with RadicalxChange.

Drawing on these insights, RadicalxChange will develop the Resilient Democracy Toolkit through 2026 – a practical, mobile-first guide for communities seeking to strengthen participatory governance in

times of crisis and supported by capacity-building workshops.

In an era when traditional democratic institutions face unprecedented strain, the Resilient Democracy Toolkit channels what Ukraine, Taiwan and other innovators have proven: crisis can catalyze innovation, technology can deepen rather than undermine democracy, and communities everywhere can learn from each other's experiments in making democracy actually deliver.

Democracy That Travels: Youth Participation and Community Dialogue in Wartime Ukraine



Olesya Mygal

PROJECT MANAGER - UKRAINE, DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

Even amid the disruption of war, Ukraine's democratic resilience continues to be sustained at the local level. Across the country, young people are organising, advocating, and helping shape the future of their communities. At the same time, millions of citizens from occupied regions now live in displacement, while their local authorities operate in relocation.

War has damaged civic infrastructure and disrupted participation channels, particularly in remote frontline areas and among displaced communities. In response, new models of democratic engagement have emerged that bring participation to where people are — whether in small towns near the front line or in communities now scattered across the country.

Democracy on the Move

Where civic spaces are damaged or inaccessible, participation must travel. One of the most promising examples is mobile youth work. Initiated by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) and piloted in 19 communities in 2024–25, the programme brings trained youth workers directly to remote, frontline, and recently liberated communities where opportunities for civic engagement have been disrupted.

Rather than relying on static training centres, mobile teams conduct outreach in local towns and villages — facilitating workshops on leadership, advocacy, project design, volunteerism, and youth council development using a trauma-sensitive approach. These visits also create temporary civic spaces where young people can exchange ideas, collaborate, and envision their role in rebuilding local life. To date, more than 60 local youth action groups have emerged from this work.

The programme is notable for the collaboration behind it. Implemented with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the All-Ukrainian Youth Centre, and local authorities, it helped develop a coordinated framework for youth engagement in frontline and liberated communities and resulted in the adoption of a National Mobile Youth Work Roadmap, embedding the model into national youth policy and upcoming 2026-2030 State Programme.

Local impact is already visible. In the Semenivska community in the Poltava region, mobile youth work helped catalyse the creation of a municipal Youth Council and several youth-led initiatives. One participant, Tetiana, later joined DRI's Democracy School - a deeper leadership focused programme - and successfully advocated for the establishment of a Youth Center in her town.

Communities on the Move

Democratic engagement must also adapt when communities themselves are displaced. Many municipalities from occupied regions now operate in relocation, governing citizens scattered across the country.

To maintain dialogue, DRI supports community roundtables that reconnect displaced residents, civil society, and relocated authorities. In one example, the NGO Crisis Media Centre Siversky Donets organised dialogue meetings bringing together displaced residents from the Luhansk region, civil society groups, and regional authorities. Insights from these discussions were consolidated into recommendations on engaging internally displaced persons in decision-making and shared with 31 regional and local authorities.

Together, these initiatives show how Ukraine's democratic resilience continues in motion — ensuring that even in wartime, citizens remain connected to the decisions shaping their communities.



Annual Report

2025



[Website](#)



[Newsletter](#)



[LinkedIn](#)



[Bluesky](#)