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# Advancing Participatory Sovereignty: Analysis of Civil Society Engagement in European Union Governance

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**Executive Summary and Strategic Context** The European Union stands at a decisive inflection point in its democratic development.

The era of passive, elite-led integration has given way to a constitutional expectation of active, bottom-up legitimacy. This report, based both on desk research and the experience and practices implemented by partners in the Ways of Europe project framework, provides a preliminary analysis of the forms, practices, and efficacy of civil society participation in EU policymaking, by situating the 2025–2026 paradigm shift within a longer institutional trajectory, and by translating strategic recommendations into operational templates and timelines. It focuses on legal safeguards, subsidiarity, and the practical mechanics of inclusion while substantially resting on evidence base and providing a set of implementable tools. The aim is practical: to help EU institutions, Member States, municipalities, and civil society convert strategic commitments into durable, inclusive, and effective participatory practice.

### **Core takeaways:**

- **Participatory sovereignty is now a constitutional and administrative obligation.** Article 11 TEU and Article 10(3) TEU create duties for institutions to design regular, transparent, and accessible participation across the policy cycle. This requires administrative redesign, budgetary commitments, and cultural change inside institutions.
- **Two contradictory dynamics shape the present moment.** On one hand, institutional modernization — the 2025 EU Strategy for Civil Society, the Civil Society Platform, and the European Democracy Shield — expands capacity for inclusion and resilience. On the other hand, a pattern of procedural shortcuts invoked under claims of “urgency” risks hollowing out the procedural safeguards that make participation meaningful.
- **Local and regional laboratories of participation are the engine of renewal.** Scalable methods developed in neighbourhoods, cities, and regions demonstrate how to reach marginalised groups and produce actionable policy inputs that are both legitimate and technically useful.



- **Operational detail determinessuccess.** Without narrow legal definitions (e.g., of “urgency”), binding follow-up mechanisms, sustained core funding, and practical facilitation capacity, participatory instruments risk becoming symbolic rather than consequential.

## 1 The 2025–2026 Paradigm Shift: Context and Continuities

### 1.1 From Permissive Consensus to Participatory Obligation

The EU’s democratic trajectory is best read as a sequence of institutional responses to recurring legitimacy deficits. The post-war “permissive consensus” — a period in which integration proceeded with limited public scrutiny — gradually gave way to episodic waves of contestation. Landmark moments (Maastricht referenda, the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, the Eurozone crisis, migration debates) forced institutional reflection and incremental reform. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) represented a qualitative shift: it was not merely another consultation but a large-scale experiment in deliberative democracy that combined multilingual digital platforms, randomly selected citizens’ panels, and a mixed plenary where citizens sat alongside political leaders.

The 2025–2026 period marks the institutionalisation of lessons from CoFoE. This shift is not merely rhetorical. It reflects a deeper constitutionalisation of participation: legal obligations, administrative procedures, and budgetary commitments now converge to make participation a structural feature of EU governance. The 2025–2026 period is best understood as the moment when these elements were brought together into a coherent strategy, even as implementation challenges persisted.

Yet institutionalisation is uneven: some Directorates-General (DGs) and Member States have embraced participatory methods, while others treat them as episodic outreach. The challenge is to convert episodic experiments into durable, resourced practices that shape agenda setting, drafting, implementation, and evaluation.

The EU faces complex, cross-border problems — climate adaptation, energy security, digital governance, and geopolitical instability — that require both technical expertise and public legitimacy. Policies that lack public buy-in are harder to implement and more



vulnerable to reversal. Participatory sovereignty is therefore both a normative and a pragmatic response to contemporary governance challenges.

**1.2 The Strategic Environment: Permacrisis and Policy Speed** The term “permacrisis” captures the reality of overlapping, persistent shocks: climate extremes, supply-chain disruptions, geopolitical conflict, and rapid technological change. These conditions create pressure for rapid policy responses. Yet meaningful participation requires time: to inform, deliberate, and synthesise diverse inputs. The tension between speed and deliberation is not new, but it has intensified.

The Commission’s 2025 Strategy for Civil Society and the European Democracy Shield are institutional attempts to reconcile speed with legitimacy: the former by institutionalising structured dialogue and funding, the latter by protecting the information space and coordinating resilience:

- **The 2025 EU Strategy for Civil Society** attempts to institutionalise structured dialogue, create a Civil Society Platform (CSP), and secure sustainable funding through AgoraEU.
- **The European Democracy Shield** and the European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR) aim to protect the information space and coordinate responses to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

**Better Regulation** remains the procedural backbone for evidence-based lawmaking, but its application has been strained by urgency claims.

Policymakers face a trade-off: act quickly to address urgent threats, or slow down to ensure legitimacy and evidence. The optimal path is not binary; it requires institutional design that preserves minimum procedural safeguards while allowing for genuine emergency responses. This report argues that policymakers must design “fast but accountable” procedures: emergency measures that are time-limited, accompanied by retroactive consultations and mandatory impact notes, and subject to independent review. The alternative — routine bypassing of participatory safeguards — risks legal challenges, policy reversals, and erosion of trust.

### 1.3 Institutional Tensions and Political Economy



Two structural tensions shape the political economy of participation:

**1. Procedural integrity vs. executive agility.** Better Regulation prescribes impact assessments and consultations. When urgency is invoked, these steps are sometimes compressed or omitted. The result is a concentration of agenda-setting power in executive offices and a reduced role for affected stakeholders. This dynamic benefits actors with rapid response capacity (industry lobbyists, consultancies) and disadvantages grassroots groups that need time and resources to mobilise.

**2. Representative vs. participatory legitimacy.** Representative institutions (Parliament, national governments) retain formal authority. Participatory mechanisms (ECIs, Citizens' Panels) add a complementary source of legitimacy. Tension arises when participatory outputs call for policy directions that elected bodies resist. Managing this tension requires institutional pathways that translate deliberative outputs into formal decision processes — the Binding Loop proposed later in this manuscript.

Understanding these tensions is essential for designing institutional responses that are both effective and democratically legitimate.

It's also worth noting that funding and resource allocation shape who participates. Short-term project grants favour campaign-style mobilisation; multi-annual operating grants sustain watchdog capacity. AgoraEU's design choices will therefore influence the balance between independent civil society and instrumentalised participation.

## 2 The Constitutional Framework: Rights, Duties, and Subsidiarity **2.1 Article 11 TEU and the Four Pillars**

Article 11 TEU provides a multi-faceted architecture for participation that is both broad and operationally demanding. The four pillars — horizontal dialogue, vertical dialogue, the Commission's consultative mandate, and the ECI — create overlapping duties and opportunities.

- **Horizontal Dialogue (Article 11(1)).** Recognises the role of self-organised citizen exchange. Practically, this means institutions should facilitate spaces (digital



platforms, funding for networks) where citizens can deliberate independently of institutional framing.

- **Vertical Dialogue (Article 11(2)).** Requires institutions to maintain regular, transparent dialogue with representative associations. This pillar implies institutional commitments: stable consultation calendars, resourced civil dialogue units, and mechanisms for long-term partnerships.
- **Consultative Mandate (Article 11(3)).** Places a specific duty on the Commission to carry out broad consultations. Operationalising this duty requires accessible consultation design, multilingual materials, and clear feedback loops.
- **European Citizens' Initiative (Article 11(4)).** Is a transnational instrument that allows citizens to request legislative proposals. The ECI's design — signature thresholds, verification, and Commission response — must be matched by credible follow-up mechanisms to maintain trust.

These pillars create both rights for citizens and duties for institutions. Operationalising them requires administrative procedures, resource allocation, and cultural change within the Commission and other institutions. Yet, Article 11 leaves significant discretion to institutions on how to implement them. This discretion has produced variation in practice.

The 2025 Strategy attempts to reduce this variation by setting common principles and institutional mechanisms.

## 2.2 Subsidiarity of Participation (Article 10(3))

Article 10(3) TEU's subsidiarity principle — decisions taken “as closely to the citizen as possible” — has two implications for participation:

1. **Decentralisation of deliberation.** Local and regional deliberative experiments are not peripheral; they are constitutionally relevant. EU institutions should therefore design channels to integrate local outputs into supranational policy cycles.

2. **Respect for local knowledge.** Many policy problems (energy grids, flood resilience, social services) have place-based dimensions. Subsidiarity of participation recognises that local actors hold critical knowledge that must inform EU decisions.



On a practical level, there is a need for the creation of vertical pipelines: municipal facilitation hubs → national aggregators → EU Citizens' Panels. These pipelines require funding, translation, and data standards to ensure local inputs are comparable and usable at higher levels.

## 2.3 The EESC and Institutional Houses of Participation

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) plays a unique role as a formal consultative body representing organised civil society. Its strengths include institutional continuity, sectoral expertise, and convening capacity. The EESC can act as a “house” of participation by:

- Hosting the Civil Society Platform (CSP) with a clear mandate and resourcing.
- Operating permanent monitoring groups (e.g., FRRL) that track civic space and fundamental rights.
- Serving as a transmission belt for local networks to reach EU decision-makers.

**Limitations and remedies.** The EESC's influence depends on institutional uptake. To be effective, its outputs must be integrated into Commission and Parliament processes. This requires formalised referral mechanisms and commitments to respond to EESC opinions within defined timelines.

## 3 The Better Regulation Engine: Principles, Practice, and the Crisis of Urgency

### 3.1 Better Regulation: Intent and Instruments

Better Regulation is the administrative backbone of evidence-based EU policymaking. Its core instruments — impact assessments, public consultations, fitness checks, and evaluation — are designed to ensure that laws are proportionate, effective, and informed by those affected. The agenda also aims to reduce unnecessary burdens and improve regulatory coherence.

Better Regulation is not only a technical toolkit; it is the procedural mechanism through which participatory inputs are solicited and integrated. If impact assessments and consultations are robust, participation can meaningfully shape policy. If they are perfunctory, participation becomes symbolic.



### 3.2 The “Have Your Say” Portal: Strengths and Limits

The “Have Your Say” portal centralises consultations and provides timeline visibility, multilingual information, and multi-stage feedback. It reduces fragmentation and creates a single entry point for stakeholders.

#### Strengths.

- Centralised access lowers search costs for participants.
- Timeline visibility helps stakeholders plan engagement.
- Multilingual summaries reduce geographic bias.

#### Limits and potential fixes.

- **Over-reliance on written consultations** favours organisations with research capacity. **Fix:** complement written consultations with local deliberative modules and mobile labs.
- **Jargon and technical complexity** exclude lay participants. **Fix:** require plain-language executive summaries and explainer videos for every consultation.
- **Feedback vacuum:** participants rarely see how inputs influenced outcomes. **Fix:** mandatory feedback templates and machine-readable datasets.

Proactive outreach, local facilitation, and hybrid methods that reach under-represented groups should also be pursued.

### 3.3 Ombudsman Findings and the Abuse of “Urgency”

Recent Ombudsman inquiries documented cases where the Commission omitted mandatory impact assessments and consultations, citing “political urgency.” These findings highlight the need for a narrow, codified definition of urgency and for mandatory documentation when exceptions are invoked. Without such safeguards, the procedural shortcuts risk legal instability and the privileging of well-resourced actors. In several high-profile files, the Commission justified the omission of consultations on the grounds of geopolitical or economic urgency while justifications for bypassing procedures were often vague or absent. In some cases, the Commission has attempted to justify omissions after the fact rather than providing contemporaneous evidence of necessity.



Consequences may include legal instability (omitting impact assessments increases the risk of successful legal challenges); policy fragility (decisions made without stakeholder input are more likely to encounter implementation problems and resistance); democratic erosion (routine bypassing of participation undermines trust and fuels narratives of technocratic unaccountability).

In practice, this meant that complex trade-offs—such as environmental safeguards versus industrial competitiveness—were decided without the usual evidence base. The Ombudsman recommended that urgency be defined narrowly and that any departure from Better Regulation procedures be accompanied by a public memorandum explaining why assessments could not be completed and how stakeholder input would be obtained retroactively.

Operational remedies could be, among others:

1. Narrow, codified definition of urgency. Administrative guidelines should specify the narrow circumstances that justify bypassing standard procedures (e.g., imminent threats to public safety, legally mandated deadlines, or sudden external shocks with demonstrable, time-bound impacts). Political convenience or strategic advantage should not qualify.

2. Mandatory contemporaneous documentation. Any invocation of urgency must be accompanied by a public memorandum explaining: the factual basis for urgency; why impact assessments could not be completed; which stakeholders were consulted (if any); and a plan for retroactive consultation and assessment.

3. Expedited retroactive consultations and impact notes. Where full assessments are impossible before adoption, the Commission must open an expedited consultation within a defined window (e.g., 30 days) and publish a retroactive impact assessment within a further defined period (e.g., 90 days). These retroactive processes should be subject to independent review.

4. Independent audit and Ombudsman oversight. The Ombudsman should have a streamlined mechanism to review urgency invocations and issue binding recommendations on procedural compliance.

Illustrative scenario: in response to a sudden cyberattack affecting critical infrastructure, the Commission may need to adopt emergency measures. Under the proposed



framework, the Commission could adopt temporary measures but must simultaneously publish an urgency memorandum, open an expedited consultation, and commit to a retroactive impact assessment and parliamentary debate within specified timeframes.

### 3.4 Sum up: Operational Remedies for Better Regulation

- **Define “urgency” narrowly** and publish a public register of urgency invocations with justifications and retroactive impact notes.
- **Introduce expedited retroactive consultations** with clear timelines and independent review.
- **Standardise feedback reporting** with machine-readable datasets and plain-language summaries.
- **Embed local facilitation** by funding municipal hubs that translate EU consultations into local languages and formats and aggregate local inputs for EU use.
- **Require plain-language executive summaries** and short explainer videos for every consultation to reduce jargon barriers.
- **Mandate stakeholder mapping** at the outset of each initiative to ensure outreach beyond Brussels networks and to identify under-represented groups.

These measures aim to preserve the integrity of Better Regulation while enabling necessary agility in exceptional circumstances.

## 4 Direct Democracy: The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) Revisited

### 4.1 The ECI’s Promise and the Impact Gap

The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) is a unique instrument of transnational direct democracy. It allows citizens to set the EU agenda by collecting one million verified signatures across Member States. The ECI’s promise is twofold: to democratise agenda setting and to create a channel for cross-border mobilisation on issues that transcend national boundaries.

Yet the ECI’s first decade revealed an “impact gap.” Many initiatives successfully collect signatures but few lead to binding legislative outcomes. The reasons are structural (legal limits on Commission obligations), procedural (verification complexity), and political



(institutional reluctance to act on contentious proposals). The result is a credibility problem: if success does not lead to meaningful follow-up, citizens may become disillusioned.

## 4.2 Reforms Since 2020 and Remaining Barriers

The 2020 reform addressed several technical barriers: a central online collection system, Commission-funded translations, and a two-stage procedure for competence issues. These changes lowered the technical threshold for organisers. However, practical barriers remain:

- **Resource asymmetry.** Grassroots organisers often lack funds for translation, legal advice, and secure signature collection.
- **Verification complexity.** National verification rules and data protection requirements create administrative burdens.
- **Follow-up uncertainty.** The Commission's response is non-binding; organisers face an uncertain path from signature collection to legislative action.
- **Media attention cycles.** ECIs require sustained media attention to maintain momentum; many initiatives fade after the signature phase.

**Operational fixes.** Rapid capacity grants, a Commission organiser support hub, and a binding follow-up loop (with timelines and public scoreboards) would reduce these barriers.

## 4.3 Case Studies and Examples

**Right2Water (revisited).** This initiative succeeded because it combined mass mobilisation with technical engagement. The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) provided organisational infrastructure, legal advice, and technical annexes that translated public demands into concrete regulatory proposals. **Lesson:** mass mobilisation must be paired with technical credibility.

**Save Cruelty-Free Cosmetics (revisited).** The initiative used a staged advocacy strategy: public mobilisation to create political pressure, followed by technical dossiers and targeted legislative allies to negotiate a roadmap. **Lesson:** public pressure opens doors; technical dossiers convert pressure into policy.

**End the Cage Age (ongoing litigation).** After collecting 1.4 million verified signatures and receiving a Commission pledge, organisers sued the Commission for failure to act. The



litigation highlights the ECI's credibility risk and the need for enforceable follow-up mechanisms. **Lesson:** without credible follow-up, high mobilisation can produce legal conflict and public disillusionment.

**Youth Climate Pact (composite vignette).** Youth networks across Member States coordinated school networks, youth councils, and NGOs to collect signatures and propose pilot measures. They secured pilot funding at national levels by forming implementation coalitions with municipalities and regional authorities. **Lesson:** cross-level coalitions (local, national, EU) increase the chance of implementation.

**Urban Mobility Initiative (composite vignette).** Municipal coalitions used the ECI to secure Commission commitment to interoperable ticketing pilots. Municipal endorsements and technical annexes demonstrating feasibility were decisive. **Lesson:** municipal buy-in and technical feasibility studies matter.

**Digital Rights for Seniors (composite vignette).** A coalition of senior associations, consumer groups, and local libraries used the ECI to push for accessible digital services. The initiative combined in-person signature drives in libraries with an online hub and produced a set of technical accessibility standards that national governments adopted as pilot projects. **Lesson:** combining offline mobilisation with local institutions reaches under-represented groups.

#### 4.4 Strengthening the ECI: Practical Reforms

- **Binding follow-up loop.** Require a point-by-point Commission response within 12 weeks, a parliamentary debate within 6 months, and a published implementation roadmap for accepted recommendations. A public scoreboard should track progress.
- **Rapid capacity grants.** Provide €5k–€50k rapid grants for translation, legal advice, and secure signature collection. Grants should be disbursed within 10 working days.
- **Organiser support hub.** A Commission-run advisory service offering legal templates, verification guidance, data protection checklists, and best-practice toolkits for outreach and multilingual communication.
- **Youth support measures.** Encourage Member States to lower the support age to 16 and provide school-based signature drives and civic education modules.



- **Post-initiative coalition funding.** Seedgrantstohelpsuccessful initiatives form implementation coalitions that can translate recommendations into pilot projects or legislative proposals.
- **Verification harmonisation.** Simplify and harmonise verification procedures across Member States to reduce administrative friction.

These reforms aim to close the impact gap by ensuring that successful initiatives have the resources and institutional pathways to translate mobilisation into policy.

## 5 The Laboratory of Effective Participatory Practices: Methods, Examples, and Design Principles

### 5.1 Ways of Europe and beyond: A Catalogue of Methods

This part outlines a set of practical strategies, combining digital, artistic, and mixed methods, that have successfully engaged a range of different audiences.

- **River of Life (ROL):** visual life-story mapping that surfaces shared patterns across diverse backgrounds. ROL is particularly effective with marginalised groups because it foregrounds lived experience rather than technical expertise. It can be paired with small-group synthesis sessions to translate narratives into policy themes and scaled by training local facilitators and producing visual summaries that feed into impact assessments.
- **Silent Floor:** written, asynchronous inputs to reduce dominance and enable linguistic inclusion. Participants write on large sheets and the group deliberates based on the written inputs, which reduces pressure on those with lower language confidence.
- **Participation Bingo:** gamified icebreaker that validates diverse forms of civic action. The game reframes participation as a spectrum of actions, not only formal lobbying, and reflect local forms of participation. Digital versions can be created for online events.
- **Digital Story Circles:** asynchronous audio/video testimonies clustered thematically. These are low-barrier and easily translatable, proving to be particularly



useful for dispersed communities or diaspora groups. Potential improvements include building a centralised platform for story collection and thematic clustering.

- **Mobile Deliberation Labs:** pop-up sessions in public spaces for low-threshold engagement. They reach passers-by, commuters, market visitors, festival attendees a.s.o. and reduce selection bias. They can be scaled by creating a mobile lab toolkit and training municipal teams.
- **Community Juries.** Use for technical trade-offs (e.g., local energy projects). Tip: ensure expert witnesses are balanced and provide plain-language briefs. Scale by establishing a roster of trained jurors and standardised evidence packs.
- **Deliberative Polling (hybrid).** Designed for large, representative issues requiring statistical inference. Combining online modules with in-person synthesis helps to maintain deliberative quality; partnering with national statistical agencies allows better sampling.
- **Participatory Mapping and GIS Storytelling.** Use for spatial planning, flood resilience, or service access. Tip: pair mapping with community validation workshops. Scale by integrating community maps into municipal GIS systems.
- **Improvised Theatre and Performance.** Use for sensitive topics (addiction, trafficking) to surface emotional dynamics. Tip: follow performances with structured reflection and co-design sessions. Scale by funding artist-community residencies.
- **Sculptural Interpretation and Artistic Stimuli.** Use to create shared metaphors and to break down technical barriers. Tip: use hidden titles to elicit personal interpretation before revealing artist intent. Scale by commissioning touring exhibitions with facilitation guides.

## 5.2 City-Level Examples

**Torino — Youth Energy Labs.** Municipal youth services, a local university, and an energy cooperative ran Mobile Deliberation Labs on district heating. The process combined technical primers, community juries, and a public exhibition. Labs were staged in neighbourhood centres, with short technical primers translated into three languages, and community juries included stipends and childcare. Outcome: citizen-endorsed micro-projects integrated into the city's energy plan and a municipal commitment to pilot two community heating micro-grids.



**Naples — Participatory Budgeting for Neighbourhood Renewal.** A multilingual campaign used Participation Bingo and street pop-ups to reach migrant communities. The municipal administration ring-fenced €250,000 for micro-projects; local NGOs provided facilitation and translation; seed funding and local procurement rules were simplified to allow small community groups to implement projects. Outcome: greening projects, community gardens, and improved street lighting that reduced petty crime and increased social cohesion.

**Ljubljana — Community Jury on Water Management.** A jury adjudicated competing uses of a peri-urban water body; recommendations were adopted as permit conditions. The jury included local farmers, environmental NGOs, and youth representatives; expert witnesses presented trade-offs in plain language; the municipality committed to a monitoring plan co-designed with the jury.

**Kraków — Digital Story Circles for Heritage Planning.** Residents' recorded memories reframed heritage priorities and influenced municipal zoning decisions. The city provided a digital hub for uploads, offered device loans, and convened a synthesis workshop where planners and residents co-authored heritage criteria.

**Lisbon — Deliberative Poll on Tourism Carrying Capacity.** A representative sample deliberated online and in person; recommendations informed a municipal ordinance on short-term rentals. The poll used stratified sampling, provided stipends, and produced a public scoreboard tracking implementation. A lesson was that deliberative polls require investment in recruitment and facilitation but yield high legitimacy for contentious decisions.

**Debrecen — Theatre for Awareness.** The performance “Sanyi és Vali” engaged incarcerated youth on trafficking and addiction; participants proposed peer radio and rap projects as follow-up. The theatre company partnered with prison educators and local radio stations to create follow-up opportunities that were funded through a small grants program.

**Bilbao — Participatory Mapping for Flood Resilience.** Residents used participatory GIS to map flood-prone areas and critical infrastructure. The city integrated the maps into its flood response plan and prioritised neighbourhood investments based on community-identified vulnerabilities.



**Riga — Mobile Deliberation on Public Transport Accessibility.** Pop-up labs at transit hubs collected rapid feedback from commuters with disabilities; the transport authority adopted several low-cost accessibility improvements within six months. Lessons learned: provide accessible formats and immediate low-cost fixes (e.g., tactile signage) to demonstrate responsiveness; rapid, visible fixes increase trust and participation in longer processes.

**Bucharest — Hybrid Citizens' Panel on Air Quality (additional vignette).** A hybrid panel combined online deliberation with in-person synthesis. The panel's recommendations led to a municipal pilot on low-emission zones and a citizen-monitored air quality dashboard. **Operational lessons:** partner with universities for data collection and provide device loans for online modules.

**Valencia — Youth Cultural Co-Design Labs (additional vignette).** Youth councils co-designed cultural programming with municipal cultural services, funded through a micro-grant scheme. **Operational lessons:** integrate youth outputs into municipal budgets and provide mentorship for project implementation.

These vignettes illustrate how design choices — language support, stipends, local facilitation, municipal commitments, and follow-up funding — determine whether participatory experiments produce durable policy outcomes.

### 5.3 Design Principles Distilled

From the laboratory, six design principles emerge. Below each principle is a short operational checklist.

#### 1. Accessibility

- Provide plain-language briefs and easy-read versions.
- Offer translation and interpretation.
- Provide stipends, childcare, and travel reimbursement.
- Ensure venues and digital platforms meet accessibility standards.

#### 2. Proximity

- Stage events in neighbourhood centres, libraries, and markets.
- Use mobile labs and pop-ups to reach passers-by.



- Partner with local NGOs and community leaders.
- Schedule sessions at times that accommodate shift workers and caregivers.

### **3. Hybridisation**

- Combine online modules with in-person synthesis.
- Provide device loans and connectivity stipends.
- Use asynchronous tools (story circles) to include those who cannot attend live.
- Ensure digital platforms are privacy-compliant and easy to use.

### **4. Transparency**

- Publish clear rules, timelines, and feedback templates.
- Provide machine-readable datasets of inputs.
- Document facilitation notes and minority views.
- Make expert witness declarations and conflict-of-interest statements public.

### **5. Capacity support**

- Fund local facilitation hubs with multi-annual grants.
- Provide training for facilitators and civic educators.
- Offer rapid grants for translation and outreach.
- Build a roster of vetted facilitators and interpreters.

### **6. Feedback loops**

- Use standardised feedback templates and public scoreboards.
- Commit to Commission responses and parliamentary debates for major outputs.
- Track implementation for at least 24 months.
- Publish periodic progress reports and independent evaluations.



These principles should guide the institutionalisation of participatory practices across the EU; the checklists translate them into actionable steps for practitioners.

## 6 Systemic Failures: Diagnosis and Remedies

### 6.1 The Feedback Vacuum and Participation Fatigue

A persistent failure is the lack of meaningful feedback to participants and is a central cause of participation fatigue. When inputs vanish into opaque decision-making, trust erodes. Symptoms may include low repeat participation rates, public scepticism, and negative media narratives.

Remedies:

- Standardised feedback template published within 12 weeks of consultation closure. Template fields: number of responses by language and country; top themes; Commission response to each theme (accept / partially accept / reject) with short justifications; concrete changes to policy text; next steps and timelines.
- Local debrief sessions where municipal facilitators explain outcomes to participants and answer questions.
- Public scoreboard that tracks the status of recommendations from Citizens' Panels and ECIs, updated quarterly.

Feedback must be accessible (plain language, translated) and machine-readable to enable independent analysis.

### 6.2 Linguistic and Geographic Exclusion

Consultations often default to a subset of languages and rely on Brussels networks for outreach. Remedy: default translation of consultation summaries into all 24 official languages and targeted outreach budgets for under-represented regions. Local facilitation grants should be available to support translation and outreach in minority languages and migrant communities. Partnerships with national broadcasters and local media to amplify consultations beyond Brussels.



Example: a consultation on agricultural policy that provided summaries in all languages and funded local farm cooperatives to run translation workshops saw a 40% increase in rural participation.

### **6.3 Corporate Capture and Expert Group Bias**

Expert groups can be dominated by industry, shaping problem definitions before public consultations. Remedy: reform the Transparency Register and expert group rules to require balanced representation and publish membership and minutes in machine-readable formats. Expert group charters should include conflict-of-interest disclosures and quotas for civil society, trade unions, academia, and SMEs.

### **6.4 Technocratic Jargon and Accessibility Barriers**

Jargon-heavy questionnaires exclude grassroots actors. Remedy: require plain-language executive summaries, explainer videos, and one-page “what this means for you” sheets for every consultation. These materials should be translated and distributed through local partners.

### **6.5 The Political Economy of Urgency**

Urgency exceptions concentrate agenda-setting power and advantage actors who can respond quickly. Remedy: codify a narrow definition of urgency, require public justification for exceptions, and open expedited retroactive consultations where feasible. Additionally, create a public register of urgency invocations with justifications and retroactive impact notes and provide for independent review of urgency invocations by the Ombudsman or an independent audit panel.

Example. After a retroactive consultation was mandated in an emergency energy regulation, stakeholders identified unintended consequences that were corrected in a follow-up measure, improving policy durability.

## **7 The 2025 Strategy for Civil Society and the Democracy Shield: Operational Details**

### **7.1 Civil Society Platform: Governance and Functions**

The Civil Society Platform (CSP) should be a permanent, resourced forum hosted by the EESC with a clear mandate:

- Annual policy review and scoreboard publication.



- Structured thematic working groups(rule of law; civic space;digitalresilience).
- Rotating secretariat shared between the EESC and the Commission to preserve independence and institutional memory.
- Transparent membership rules and published minutes in all official languages.

The CSP should have a small permanent secretariat, thematic chairs elected by members, and a public dashboard tracking progress on recommendations. It should also host an annual summit that produces a short, plain-language communiqué with follow-up timelines.

## **7.2 The European Centre for Democratic Resilience (ECDR)**

The ECDR's core functions include early warning on FIMI, rapid incident response, capacity building for national authorities and CSOs, and convening two annual European Citizens' Panels on preparedness. Its stakeholder forum must include independent fact-checkers, CSOs, media, and platform representatives. The ECDR should operate a crisis protocol aligned with the Digital Services Act (DSA) incidents framework.

## **7.3 The Online Knowledge Hub on Civic Space**

Operated jointly by the Commission and the FRA, the Hub should provide incident reporting and SLAPP trackers, legal resources, a rapid response grants portal, and a public dashboard tracking civic-space indicators. The Hub should also host training modules on digital resilience and legal protection for HRDs.

The Hub should include a multilingual helpdesk and a secure channel for HRDs to report reprisals. It should also publish periodic risk assessments and country profiles on civic space.

## **7.4 Accountability and Protection Mechanisms**

The Strategy must embed protection and reprisals mechanisms for HRDs, a legal aid fund for SLAPP victims, and a three-year independent evaluation clause to assess effectiveness and inclusion.

A small independent panel should oversee the legal aid fund and evaluate requests for emergency support. The evaluation clause should commission independent academic audits and publish lessons learned.



## 8 Financing Participatory Sovereignty: AgoraEU and the MFF 2028–2034

### 8.1 AgoraEU Architecture and Strategic Priorities

AgoraEU's proposed €8.58 billion envelope is divided into Creative Europe – Culture (€1.8B), MEDIA+ (€3.2B), and CERV+ (€3.6B). To avoid brand dilution, each strand should have distinct objectives, eligibility rules, and monitoring frameworks. The design must protect artistic freedom and media independence while strengthening civil society resilience. Strategic priorities should include protecting civic space and HRDs; strengthening independent media and investigative journalism; support for cross-border cultural projects that foster European identity; funding local facilitation hubs and civic literacy programmes.

### 8.2 Funding Instruments and Allocation Principles

A balanced mix of instruments is essential. Below are operational scenarios illustrating how funds could be used and governance choices to ensure impact.

**Operating grants (scenario).** A national human rights NGO receives a three-year operating grant (€150k/year) to sustain monitoring, litigation, and outreach. Simplified reporting reduces administrative burden and allows the NGO to plan strategically. Operating grants should be at least 40–50% of the CERV+ strand to preserve watchdog capacity.

**Strategic project grants (scenario).** A consortium of investigative media outlets receives €1.2M to produce cross-border investigations into environmental harms, with capacity building for local reporters and a public dissemination plan. Strategic grants should require measurable outcomes and open data commitments.

**Rapid response funds (scenario).** A CSO facing a SLAPP receives €25k within 10 working days to cover legal fees and translation costs, preventing chilling effects on civic space. Rapid funds should be administered through a streamlined application and independent review panel.

**Capacity-building micro-grants (scenario).** A municipal facilitation hub receives €10k to train local facilitators and run outreach in marginalised neighbourhoods, increasing participation in EU consultations. Micro-grants should be accessible with one-page proposals and light reporting.



### Allocation principles:

- **Equity:** allocate funds to reach under-represented regions and languages.
- **Sustainability:** prioritise multi-annual support to avoid short-termism.
- **Simplicity:** provide simplified application tracks for small CSOs to reduce administrative burden.
- **Transparency:** publish allocation criteria, evaluation rubrics, and grant decisions.

### 8.3 Risk Matrix and Mitigation

Risk	Manifestation	Mitigation (operational)
Brand dilution	Culture subsumed under competitiveness	Distinct calls; separate evaluation panels; ring-fenced budgets
Political capture	Conditional funding tied to political priorities	Independent steering committee; transparent criteria; civil society seats
Administrative burden	Small CSOs excluded	Simplified application tracks; one-page proposals; micro-grants
Short-termism	Project grants only	Minimum multi-annual operating grants quota; multi-year evaluation
Reprisals risk	HRDs targeted after receiving funds	Confidential rapid response mechanisms; legal aid fund

### 8.4 Governance and Oversight

An independent oversight board should include CSO representatives, MEPs, and independent experts. The board should publish an annual AgoraEU impact report with disaggregated data (country, language, target group) and an independent audit every three years.

Operational safeguards: protect artistic and editorial independence through explicit clauses and independent review panels for media funding. Ensure conflict-of-interest rules for evaluators and require open data commitments for funded projects.

## 9 Deliberative Democracy: Institutionalisation, Limits, and Remedies

### 9.1 Citizens' Panels: Gains and Structural Limits



Citizens' Panels have broadened democratic practice by producing deliberative recommendations, increasing civic literacy, and depolarising contentious topics through structured trade-off analysis. They have demonstrated that ordinary citizens, given time, balanced information, and skilled facilitation, can produce nuanced policy advice that is both practical and publicly legitimate.

However, structural limits persist:

- **Selection bias:** Random draws can still over-represent pro-EU or politically engaged citizens unless corrective weighting and targeted recruitment are used.
- **Limited bindingness:** Panels often produce recommendations without guaranteed institutional follow-up, creating expectations that may go unmet.
- **Resource constraints:** High-quality panels require facilitation, translation, fees, and logistical support that are not always budgeted.
- **Temporal disconnect:** Short panels may lack the time needed for deep deliberation on complex technical issues.

Addressing these limits requires both procedural safeguards and resource commitments.

## 9.2 The Binding Loop: From Recommendation to Accountability

A Binding Loop institutionalises predictable follow-up to deliberative outputs. Core elements include:

1. **Point-by-point Commission response within 12 weeks.** The response must indicate acceptance, partial acceptance, or rejection with reasons.
2. **Parliamentary debate within 6 months.** The Parliament should schedule a plenary debate to discuss the panel's recommendations and the Commission's response.
3. **Legislative proposal or implementation roadmap within 6 months** for accepted recommendations. If legislative action is required, the Commission should present a proposal; if implementation is administrative, a roadmap with responsibilities and timelines should be published.



**4. Public scoreboard and monitoring.** A public dashboard should track the status of each recommendation (accepted; in progress; implemented; rejected) and provide quarterly updates for two years.

This loop could reduce uncertainty for participants and creates institutional incentives for meaningful follow-up.

### 9.3 Remedies to Selection and Representativeness Bias

- **Stratified random sampling with corrective weights.** Use demographic and attitudinal strata and apply post-stratification weights to correct for non-response bias.
- **Reserved seats for under-represented groups.** Allocate a proportion of seats to youth, migrants, low-SES participants, and people with disabilities.
- **Active recruitment through local hubs.** Use municipal facilitation hubs and CSO networks to reach marginalised communities.
- **Participation supports.** Provide stipends, childcare, travel reimbursement, and digital inclusion measures to remove barriers.

### 9.4 Comparative Remedies and National Lessons

- **Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies:** Demonstrate how deliberative outputs can feed into constitutional reform when follow-up pathways are pre-agreed.
- **France's Citizens' Convention for Climate:** Shows the importance of a clear mandate and pre-agreed institutional responses to avoid disillusionment.

These national examples underline that deliberative processes must be embedded in institutional pathways to produce durable outcomes.

## 10 Implementation, Monitoring, and International Standards

### 10.1 Alignment with Council of Europe Standards

The Council of Europe's roadmap on civil society engagement provides practical guidelines that can be cross-fertilised with EU practice. Harmonising standards across institutions improves access, transparency, and the quality of participation.



## 10.2 Rule of Law Monitoring and Civic Space

Including a dedicated “civic space” chapter in the Commission’s Rule of Law Report creates a mechanism to hold Member States accountable for restrictions on assembly and association. This monitoring helps protect the participatory infrastructure necessary for EU-level engagement.

## 10.3 Indicators and Scoreboards

A robust monitoring framework should include:

- **Process indicators:** recruitment success, language coverage, deliberation hours delivered.
- **Quality indicators:** participant satisfaction, deliberation depth, evidence balance.
- **Outcome indicators:** adoption rate of recommendations, policy traceability, public visibility.

A public scoreboard should publish these indicators annually and provide disaggregated data by country, language, and target group.

## 11 Wrap up: Strategic Recommendations

### 11.1 Procedural and Legal Safeguards

- **Define “urgency” narrowly** and require public justification for exceptions to Better Regulation procedures.
- **Institutionalise the Binding Loop** through an Inter-institutional Agreement that sets timelines and accountability mechanisms.
- **Protect scientific and procedural integrity** by ensuring impact assessments are not bypassed and by requiring retroactive assessments when exceptions are used.

### 11.2 Enhancing Inclusivity and Inhabited Debate

To embed participation in everyday civic life, the following operational measures are recommended:

- **Institutional toolkits:** DGs should adopt standard toolkits that include Silent Floor, River of Life, and Mobile Lab modules, with budget lines for local facilitation.



- **Translation pipeline:** A three-stage translation process for consultations—plain-language summary in all languages; targeted full translations for high-impact documents; and local language outreach materials.
- **Local facilitation hubs:** Municipal hubs funded through AgoraEU operating grants to sustain recruitment, translation, and outreach.
- **Civic literacy programmes:** Multi-year investments in schools and community centres to build participation skills and media literacy.
- **Youth pipelines:** Formal links between school assemblies, youth councils, and Citizens' Panels, with curricular integration and stipends.

These measures aim to operationalise inclusivity and ensure that participation is not merely performative.

### 11.3 Financial and Operational Resilience

- **Prioritise multi-annual operating grants** in AgoraEU to sustain independent CSOs and local facilitation networks.
- **Transparency Register reform:** Require balanced representation in expert groups and publish minutes and conflict-of-interest statements in machine-readable formats.
- **Decentralise engagement:** Encourage Member States to adopt National Civil Society Engagement Frameworks aligned with EU principles.

## Annex A: Citizens' Panel Handbook (simplified)

### 1 Purpose and scope

**Purpose:** Provide, on the basis of the above described effective and ineffective practices, a ready-to-use operational manual to design and run high-quality Citizens' Panels that produce legitimate, actionable, and inclusive recommendations for policy makers.



**Scope:** National, regional, municipal, and EU-level panels; hybrid and fully digital formats; panels addressing technical trade-offs and value questions.

## 2 Principles and standards

### Core principles

- **Legitimacy:** Representative selection and transparent mandate.
- **Deliberative quality:** Time for reflection, balanced expert input, skilled facilitation.
- **Accessibility:** Plain language, translation, and participation supports.
- **Transparency:** Public documentation of process, participants' profiles, and outputs.
- **Follow-up:** Clear commitments on how recommendations will be treated.

## 3 Governance and roles

### Steering group

- **Composition:** According to the governance level involved, Commission/DG, national, regional or municipal lead; independent academic; civil society representative; facilitator lead.
- **Responsibilities:** Define mandate, approve recruitment plan, select expert witnesses, oversee evaluation.

### Independent observers

- **Role:** Monitor fairness and produce an independent process audit.

## 4 Panel design options and sample models

### Model A — EU Citizens' Panel (Representative, large)

- **Size:** 150 participants.
- **Selection:** Stratified random sample across Member States with quotas for age, gender, education, urban/rural, and attitudes.
- **Output:** Detailed report, 10 policy recommendations, plain-language summary.

### Model B — Community Jury (Local, technical)

- **Size:** 30–50 participants.



- **Selection:** Random sample from affected neighbourhoods with reserved seats for marginalised groups.
- **Output:** Focused recommendations and conditional trade-off analysis.

### Model C — Youth Panel (Targeted)

- **Size:** 60 participants aged 16–29.
- **Selection:** Mixed random and purposive recruitment via schools, youth councils, and NGOs.
- **Output:** Youth-centred policy proposals and implementation pledges.

### Model D — Digital Hybrid Panel

- **Size:** 200 participants with online deliberation and a final in-person synthesis.
- **Selection:** Representative online recruitment with digital inclusion supports.
- **Output:** Data-rich recommendations and interactive dashboards.

## 5 Recruitment and selection protocols

### Recruitment steps

1. **Define target population and quotas.**
2. **Create sampling frame** using national registries, municipal lists, or random digit dialing.
3. **Initial contact** by letter/email/phone with plain-language invitation.
4. **Screening questionnaire** to collect demographic and attitudinal variables for stratification.
5. **Random draw and quota balancing.**
6. **Confirmation and onboarding** with participation support offers.

### Quotas and stratification variables

- **Mandatory:** age, gender, region, urban/rural, education.
- **Recommended:** migration background, income bracket, disability status, language proficiency.



## 6 Facilitation principles

- **Neutrality:** Facilitators must not advocate for outcomes.
- **Equality of voice:** Structured turn-taking and small-group work.
- **Reason-giving:** Encourage participants to explain reasons for preferences.
- **Time management:** Clear timeboxes for inputs and deliberation.

## 7 Accessibility, inclusion, and multilingual delivery

### Inclusion checklist

- **Translation:** All core materials and summaries in relevant languages.
- **Easy-read versions:** For low-literacy participants.
- **Sign language and captioning:** For in-person and online sessions.
- **Childcare and care stipends.**
- **Compensation for lost earnings.**

### Multilingual delivery model

- **Primary language:** Host language for facilitation.
- **Simultaneous interpretation:** For plenary sessions.
- **Local facilitators:** Use bilingual co-facilitators in breakout groups.
- **Translation workflow:** Draft → review by native speaker → finalise 5 working days before session.

### Digital inclusion

- **Device loan program** for participants without hardware.
- **Connectivity stipend** for online participation.
- **Digital literacy support sessions** prior to deliberation.

## 8 Reporting, feedback loops, and the Binding Loop model

### Reporting standards

- **Final report:** Executive summary (plain language), methodology, findings, recommendations, minority views, and annexes.



- **Data transparency:** Publish anonymised response datasets and deliberation transcripts where consented.
- **Machine-readable outputs:** JSON or CSV of recommendations and votes.

### **Binding Loop model (operational steps)**

1. **Publication:** Panel report published publicly within 2 weeks of final session.
2. **Commission response:** Point-by-point reply within 12 weeks.
3. **Parliamentary debate:** Scheduled within 6 months.
4. **Implementation monitoring:** Quarterly updates on accepted recommendations for 24 months.

## 9 Risk management and ethical safeguards

### **Common risks and mitigations**

- **Dominance by vocal participants** → strict facilitation, small-group work.
- **Expert bias** → balanced expert selection and conflict-of-interest disclosures.
- **Drop-out rates** → over-recruitment and retention supports.
- **Data privacy breaches** → GDPR-compliant consent forms and secure storage.

### **Ethical safeguards**

- **Informed consent:** clear forms covering recording, data use, and publication.
- **Anonymity options:** participants may opt out of name publication.
- **Safeguarding:** protocols for distress, harassment, or sensitive disclosures.



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