

CITIZENS AS DEMOCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURE

THE EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE AND CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION



Executive Summary

The European Democracy Shield (EUDS) and the proposed European Centre for Democratic Resilience (CDR) represent an important and necessary step in strengthening Europe's capacity to respond to growing democratic threats, including foreign interference, disinformation, online manipulation, attacks on civil society, and declining public trust in democratic institutions. The recognition that democracy requires resilience, preparedness, and a whole-of-society approach marks a significant evolution in EU democracy policy.

However, while the current approach strongly focuses on defending democracy, its participatory dimension remains underdeveloped. Democratic resilience cannot rely solely on institutional protection mechanisms, platform regulation, or threat detection systems. Democracies are strongest not only when they can resist attacks, but when citizens feel ownership over democratic life itself.

Participation should therefore not be treated as a secondary or symbolic component of democratic resilience, but as democratic infrastructure. Citizens, civil society organisations, local initiatives, participatory practitioners, election observers, educators, journalists, and civic tech actors often function as democratic sensors and trust-builders within society. They are frequently the first to identify democratic vulnerabilities, local distrust, manipulation patterns, intimidation, or emerging disinformation narratives before institutions do.

The Centre for Democratic Resilience presents a major opportunity to operationalise participatory democratic resilience across Europe. Beyond coordinating responses to democratic threats, the CDR can help strengthen democratic culture, civic trust, local engagement, and citizen ownership of democracy itself.

This paper proposes three concrete recommendations to strengthen the participatory dimension of the CDR:

1. Establish a European Democratic Resilience Participation Network connecting civil society, participatory actors, democratic innovators, and local resilience initiatives across Europe.
2. Create structured citizen deliberation and advisory mechanisms within the CDR, including a biennial European Citizens' Panel on Democratic Resilience and a permanent Citizen Advisory Group.
3. Support local democratic resilience and civic innovation initiatives that strengthen trust, participation, democratic literacy, and community resilience at the local level.

The European Democracy Shield and the Centre for Democratic Resilience

The European Democracy Shield and the proposed Centre for Democratic Resilience reflect the European Union's growing recognition that democracy faces increasingly complex and coordinated threats, ranging from foreign interference and disinformation campaigns to AI-driven manipulation, attacks on journalists and civil society, and declining public trust in democratic institutions. The creation of the CDR aims to strengthen coordination, preparedness, information-sharing, and democratic resilience across the EU and potentially candidate countries through a whole-of-society approach.

However, while the current approach places strong emphasis on defending democracy, its participatory dimension remains comparatively weak. There is a growing risk that democracy becomes framed primarily as a security issue: something to shield, monitor, and defend, rather than something to actively practice, strengthen, and co-create with citizens. Institutional resilience alone is insufficient if citizens increasingly feel disconnected from democratic processes and decision-making.

The CDR therefore presents an important opportunity to embed participatory democratic resilience into the EU's democratic architecture from the outset. Participation should not be viewed as a soft or secondary component of resilience policy, but as one of its foundations. Citizens who feel engaged, heard, equipped, and connected to democratic life are significantly more resilient to manipulation, polarisation, and anti-democratic narratives.

Participation as Democratic Resilience Infrastructure

The debate surrounding democratic resilience often focuses on institutions, platforms, cybersecurity, and information integrity. While these elements are essential, democratic resilience is also built socially and locally through participation, trust, and civic engagement. Citizens and civil society actors are not merely passive recipients of democratic protection. They often function as democratic sensors within society: identifying local distrust, manipulation, intimidation, coordinated disinformation narratives, democratic blind spots, and emerging vulnerabilities long before institutions are able to detect them.

At the same time, participatory processes themselves strengthen democratic resilience. Citizens who actively participate in democratic life are more likely to trust institutions, engage critically with information, develop democratic literacy, and defend democratic systems against manipulation and authoritarian narratives.

The CDR therefore has the opportunity to move beyond a purely defensive understanding of resilience by integrating participatory structures directly into its operational model.

Recommendations for Strengthening Participation within the CDR

Recommendation 1: Establish a European Democratic Resilience Participation Network

The CDR should establish a permanent European Democratic Resilience Participation Network bringing together civil society organisations, participatory democracy practitioners, civic tech actors, local democracy initiatives, journalists, educators, media literacy organisations, democratic innovators, election observers, and community-based actors across Europe and candidate countries. These actors should be treated as a democratic resilience infrastructure.

The network would serve as both a resilience detection and a democratic exchange mechanism. Its role would include:

- identifying emerging democratic vulnerabilities and local manipulation patterns;
- sharing local and national democratic resilience insights;
- flagging risks related to disinformation, intimidation, civic disengagement, or declining democratic trust;
- exchanging participatory and democratic innovation practices;
- connecting local democratic resilience initiatives across borders;
- strengthening cooperation between institutional and non-institutional democratic actors.

Importantly, the network should also focus on identifying democratic solutions and resilience-building practices emerging from communities themselves.

The participation network should include both EU Member States and candidate countries, particularly those facing heightened democratic pressures and foreign interference risks.

Recommendation 2: Create Structured Citizen Deliberation and Advisory Mechanisms within the CDR

The CDR should include permanent and structured mechanisms allowing citizens to directly contribute to shaping Europe's democratic resilience priorities.

First, the European Commission should organise a European Citizens' Panel on Democratic Resilience every two years. These panels would allow randomly selected citizens from across Europe to deliberate on emerging democratic challenges, resilience priorities, online information environments, civic trust, participation, and democratic innovation. Their recommendations should feed directly into the strategic priorities and annual work of the CDR.

Second, the CDR should establish a permanent Citizen Advisory Group composed of citizens selected through transparent and representative criteria. The role of this group would not be symbolic, but operational and consultative. It could:

- provide ongoing feedback on the societal impact of resilience policies;
- identify emerging concerns and democratic blind spots;
- contribute citizen perspectives to resilience assessments and policy priorities;
- advise on public trust, participation, democratic communication, and civic engagement strategies;
- help ensure that democratic resilience policies remain connected to citizens' lived experiences.

The CDR should also explore participatory foresight and consultation exercises that allow citizens and communities to identify emerging democratic risks and vulnerabilities before they escalate. Such exercises could help strengthen democratic resilience rather than relying solely on reactive responses.

Crucially, these participatory mechanisms must include strong feedback loops and transparency mechanisms. Citizens must be able to understand how their contributions are used, what impact they have, and how recommendations are integrated into resilience strategies and decision-making processes.

Recommendation 3: Support Local Democratic Resilience and Civic Innovation

Democratic resilience is built locally before it is defended institutionally. The CDR should therefore support local democratic resilience initiatives and civic innovation projects across Europe and candidate countries, particularly in communities vulnerable to polarisation, democratic distrust, disinformation, political exclusion, or declining civic participation.

This support could include:

- participatory budgeting initiatives;
- civic tech experimentation;
- local democratic innovation labs;
- community dialogue and bridge-building initiatives;
- participatory governance projects;
- media literacy and civic education initiatives;
- citizen-led accountability and transparency projects;
- cross-border democratic exchange programmes;
- initiatives strengthening local journalism and civic ecosystems.

The CDR should also create mechanisms for identifying, mapping, and scaling successful democratic resilience practices emerging at local and regional level.

This approach would allow the CDR to move beyond a predominantly centralised and reactive model toward a distributed resilience ecosystem rooted in communities themselves. It would also reinforce the idea that democratic resilience is not only about protecting institutions from external threats, but about strengthening democratic culture, participation, and trust from the ground up.

In this sense, local communities should be viewed as active democratic resilience actors.

Conclusion

Europe cannot protect democracy only by building shields around institutions. Democratic resilience also depends on whether citizens trust democratic systems, feel represented within them, participate in shaping them, and experience democracy as something they genuinely own.

The European Centre for Democratic Resilience offers a historic opportunity to deepen European democracy from the inside, rather than just defend it from the outside.

By embedding participation directly into the architecture of democratic resilience, the European Union can help ensure that democracy remains alive, trusted, and practised across Europe.

About

Democracy International is a European civil society organisation working to strengthen democracy and citizen participation at the local, national, and European, and global levels. Based in Germany and active worldwide, Democracy International advocates for more transparent, participatory, and resilient democratic systems through policy work, research, campaigns, and democratic innovation.

The organisation works extensively on EU participatory democracy instruments, including the European Citizens' Initiative and citizens' participation processes. Democracy International collaborates with EU institutions, decision-makers, civil society organisations, academics, and grassroots actors to help ensure that citizens actively shape democracy.

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