**Comparative Analysis of Participatory Democracy: Citizen Engagement in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Region and Best Practices from the European Union**

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*March, 2024*

**Abstract**

This comparative case study delves into citizen participation in decision-making processes at the local level in both European Union (EU) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The study aims to analyse various forms of citizen participation, comprehend the factors influencing citizens' levels of engagement, and identify successful participation mechanisms at the local level. The research reveals a diverse range of governance mechanisms and participation across the EaP region, highlighting persisting challenges such as low citizen engagement and outdated legal frameworks. In some EaP countries, centralised control further hampers participatory practices, while a lack of political will restricts the autonomy and resources of local authorities for citizen involvement. By drawing on successful approaches within the EU, the study identifies key strategies for enhancing citizen participation. These strategies include proactive awareness campaigns, improved communication channels, and efforts to ensure inclusivity. Participatory budgeting emerges as a notable best practice, fostering transparency and accountability while empowering citizens in decision-making processes. The study emphasises the importance of continuous innovation, collaboration, and adaptation as crucial elements for encouraging citizen participation in local governance across diverse contexts.

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# Introduction

Participation, collaboration, public engagement, active citizenship, and inclusion are terms that emphasise the need and significance of seeking citizens' input regarding the definition and management of public policies. These terms emerged and gained traction in public discourse over two decades ago, emphasising the idea of amplifying citizen voices across various levels.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Participatory interpretations of democracy highlight the pivotal role of citizen engagement, suggesting that democratic frameworks centred on this principle can foster governance that is both more credible and efficient. Differing from the conventional perspective that predominantly ties democratic participation to electoral processes, especially within Western liberal democracies, a wide range of different forms of participation is included in such accounts. Participatory democrats prioritise citizen engagement in both formal activities such as consultations, committee hearings and participatory budgeting sessions, as well as less obviously ‘political’ action such as spontaneous protests, volunteering or involvement in decision-making in the workplace.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By empowering citizens, promoting transparency, and aligning decisions with the collective will, participatory democracy exemplifies the core principles of democratic governance. It is enshrined in the legal provisions of the European Union (EU) that “every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This foundational article recognises citizens’ right to engage in EU affairs, empowering people and civil society organisations to actively participate in policy processes. It ensures that decisions are not made in isolation but with their active involvement at both EU and national levels, underscoring the EU’s commitment to inclusive governance.

European Union (EU) legislation issued in the 2000s has placed a particular emphasis on the importance of public consultation in fostering effective governance, which should ideally be both efficient and transparent. One concept that emerged in several early documents is E-democracy, a multifaceted concept encompassing social inclusion, access to the information society, participation in the public sphere (including involvement in opinion formation and engaging in open dialogue among social, political, and institutional actors), electoral participation, involvement in the formation of candidate lists, citizen direct initiatives facilitated by designated legal institutions (such as referenda or popular initiatives), and spontaneous forms of engagement through petitions, pleas, and the establishment of informal groups and associations. The primary objective is to reduce citizens' distrust towards EU institutions and to increase voter turnout in European elections.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To address democratic deficits, the EU has established various mechanisms aimed at amplifying citizen voices and fostering active participation. For instance, the *European Citizens’ Initiative* (ECI) enables citizens to propose legislation by securing one million signatures from at least seven member states within a year. The European Commission conducts *public consultations* on a range of policy proposals from citizens and stakeholders. Through *direct elections*, citizens of EU member states elect representatives to the European Parliament, granting them a voice in EU legislative processes. The EU organises *citizen dialogues and debates*, providing platforms for citizens to engage with policymakers, share concerns, and discuss EU initiatives. Additionally, the EU maintains *online platforms and forums*, facilitating citizen access to information, fostering discussions, and enabling feedback on EU policies and initiatives. These mechanisms are designed to promote transparency, accountability, and robust citizen engagement throughout the decision-making processes of the European Union.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In recent years, there has been a significant spread of citizen assemblies, juries, panels, and other forms of citizen participation across Europe, including both EU and EaP countries. These initiatives primarily operate at the local or subnational level, with a few extending to the national or transnational level.[[6]](#footnote-6) They are typically initiated by public authorities, although some originate from grassroots civic groups. Despite the positive aspects of increased participation, there is a widespread sentiment that these practices have not yet deeply enough integrated into mainstream politics to substantially enhance the overall quality of democracy.

This study aims to examine the nature of citizen participation in decision-making processes at the local level in both EU and EaP countries. It explores the reasons behind citizens' passive and active involvement and the factors contributing to the lesser attractiveness of certain forms of participation at the local level. Furthermore, it seeks to identify best practices from the EU context that could be adapted and implemented in various EaP contexts to enhance democratic engagement.

Some of the countries analysed in this study experience a profound impact due to the trajectory of their democratic development. Ukraine, for instance, confronts ongoing aggression from the Russian Federation, while Belarus encounters restrictions on democratic opportunities and political representation. In addition, Azerbaijan also struggles with limitations on civic engagement.

# Methodology

This comparative case study employs a thorough methodology that integrates comprehensive primary and secondary desk research to provide a detailed analysis. The primary research involves careful examination of various legal provisions pertinent to the subject matter. This includes analysing recent studies, reports, and official documents provided by local authorities within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region and European Union (EU) countries.

In addition to desk research, the study incorporates a qualitative approach through interviews conducted with subject matter experts and representatives from local authorities. These interviews were deliberately conducted across a diverse spectrum of stakeholders spanning the EaP region and select EU countries, namely Germany, Poland, Italy, Belgium, France, and Spain.

It is also based on the vast experience of ALDA, the European Association for Local Democracy, and its members in both the EaP countries and the EU.

# Forms of Citizen Participation in the EaP region

The European Union’s Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, comprising six countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine - has been instrumental in democratic engagement and cooperation since the launch of this initiative in 2009.[[7]](#footnote-7) As the EU seeks to strengthen its ties with these neighbouring states, promoting citizen participation in decision-making processes emerges as a critical pillar. In this context, the EaP region faces both opportunities and challenges in promoting democratic practices, enhancing civil society involvement, and fostering transparent governance. The degree of participatory democracy and its operational mechanisms display divergences across each of the EaP countries. While civil society involvement and transparent mechanisms are observed to some extent in certain countries, others encounter challenges in fostering participation and ensuring accountability.

## Georgia

Citizen participation in decision-making processes is crucial for upholding democratic governance. Georgia's journey towards democratisation and Europeanisation has intensified calls for increased public inclusion in policymaking. In July 2015, the Parliament of Georgia approved a package of amendments, defining various forms of citizen participation in the implementation of local self-government. These includea)General Assembly of the settlement („General Assembly“), b) Petition, c) Civil Advisory Council, d) Participation in the meetings of the Municipal Council and the Municipal Council Commission, and e) Listening to the reports on the work done by the Mayor and a member of the Municipal Council. Moreover, municipal high-ranking officials are mandated to conduct open meetings regularly to engage with the public (Organic Law of Georgia No 4087 of 22 July 2015). It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive, and municipalities have the authority to identify additional forms of citizen participation in local self-government that align with Georgia's legislation. This flexibility extends beyond the defined forms in the Code of Citizen Participation in Local Self-Government.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The current law requires officials to establish organisational and material-technical conditions for citizen reception, meetings, and the operations of municipal bodies. This includes fostering citizen participation and ensuring transparency in the decision-making process, even during meetings of collegial public institutions. Although the emphasis on these participatory measures reflects the country's commitment to transparency, accountability, and civic engagement in local governance, the low level of citizen engagement in political decision-making poses a significant challenge to the country’s decentralisation agenda. Furthermore, among these, only one stands as a deliberative tool: the General Assembly of a Settlement (GAofS). In contrast, the remaining mechanisms operate in a consultative capacity. Deliberative engagement empowers citizens to directly influence decisions, diverging from consultative approaches where the government finalises decisions after seeking public input.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Lack of political will from the central government and lack of accountability from local authorities are mentioned as key contributors to why citizen engagement remains low in decision-making processes at the local level in Georgia. “Local authorities do not feel obliged to exercise the existing forms of citizen participation on a regular basis. They do not feel responsible, in most cases, for organising meetings with their fellow citizens," notes one expert in local government in Georgia.[[10]](#footnote-10) Furthermore, due to the consultative nature of the existing forms of citizen participation, decision-makers often do not implement the recommendations and ideas of citizens in practice, thus discouraging citizen engagement. Additionally, certain budgetary considerations required for organising citizen participation add to the reasons why the municipalities refrain from exercising them in practice.

For instance, out of the 8 municipalities in the Imereti region of Georgia from which official information was requested between 2022 and 2023, no petitions were registered in 5 municipalities, no general assemblies (GA) were documented in any municipality, and only a few Civil Advisory Council meetings were noted in 7 municipalities (Vani, Baghdadi, Tkibuli, Terjola, Tskaltubo, Kharagauli, Khoni). Participatory budgeting initiatives are considered for 2024 in only 2 municipalities (Khoni, Tskaltubo). Furthermore, in 2 municipalities, additional forms of citizen participation emerged. These include the ***Citizen Feedback online platform*** in Tskaltubo, and in Khoni, four additional initiatives were introduced: ***the Council of Persons with Disabilities, Gender Equality Council, Development of Priority Document, and E-petition.***

In 2019, the Parliament of Georgia approved an additional protocol known as the "Citizens' Right to Participate in Local Government Activities" (commonly referred to as the Utrecht Protocol) of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. This ratification aimed to enhance the legal assurances of citizens' participation in local self-government. It is important to highlight that, despite the ratification, there was no subsequent reassessment of Georgian legislative acts to improve mechanisms for citizen participation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Moreover, in that same year, the Georgian government introduced a new 2020-2025 Decentralisation Strategy, marking the beginning of a self-government reform phase. The strategy focused on three key areas: enhancing the self-governing unit's role in public affairs, providing adequate material and financial resources for local self-government, and establishing reliable, transparent, and result-oriented local self-government. During the implementation of the 2020-2025 strategy and the 2020-2021 action plan, several steps were taken, including the alignment of current legislation with the "Local Self-Government Code," granting self-governments additional competences (such as overseeing the prohibition of supplying certain products to children), and initiating an analysis of self-government finances and citizen participation.[[12]](#footnote-12)

However, the strategy's limitation lies in its failure to cover all decentralisation aspects, requiring political will from the government and society. Despite successful cases in specific areas, the prevailing negative attitude towards decentralisation impedes the establishment of a modern self-government type in Georgia. Society generally views self-government as a lower-priority issue compared to unemployment, income, or geopolitical concerns. Awareness about the role of self-government is low, especially among the political and intellectual elite. Legislative mechanisms aimed at increasing citizen involvement are deemed less effective, not due to inherent flaws but because achieving tangible results is perceived as unlikely.

## Armenia

The establishment of the Local Self-Government (LSG) system in Armenia began in 1995 with the adoption of the country’s first Constitution in which the administrative-territorial units were defined as marzes (regions) and communities/municipalities, and categorised as rural and urban municipalities (RA Constitution, 1995, articles 104-105). The Law on Administrative-Territorial Division of the Republic of Armenia (1995, article 2) was enacted in the same year, dividing Armenia into ten marzes and 915 communities/municipalities.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Armenia embarked on a path towards political decentralisation with the enactment of the Law on Local Self-Government in 1996, which empowered local authorities to tackle municipal issues, underlining the democratic essence of the state through municipalities. Subsequently, Armenia ratified the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 2002, signalling its commitment to local democracy and citizen participation, aligned with standards set forth by the Council of Europe.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Meanwhile, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CoE, 2014) highlighted challenges in the state of local democracy in Armenia, including limited participation, insufficient capacities and resources of local authorities, and the presence of small and fragile municipalities.[[15]](#footnote-15) In response, the Armenian government initiated the Territorial and Administrative Reform of Armenia (TARA) in 2014, led by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI). The reform aimed to establish functional and responsive local structures, enabling local governments to serve their communities effectively. The initial focus was on the enlargement and restructuring of municipalities, laying the foundation for further decentralisation efforts.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The amalgamation process began in 2015, with three pilot municipalities consolidating 22 previously existing communities through local referendums. However, following the 2015 constitutional amendments, later local governance reforms and amalgamations did not use referendums. The second phase took place in 2016, merging 118 former municipalities into 15, and the third phase - in 2017, resulted in 34 new communities, absorbing 325 former ones. The enlargement process experienced a temporary pause in 2018 but resumed in 2020, continuing through subsequent phases in 2021 and 2022. The final round of enlargement occurred from September 2022 to March 2023, bringing the total number of municipalities in Armenia to 71, with 64 being enlarged municipalities. The remaining 7 communities are Yerevan and Gyumri, the two largest cities, and five smaller municipalities populated by ethnic minorities, which were not included in the reform process.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The legal framework governing citizens' participation processes in Armenia is set in the Constitution of RA and the Law on Local Self-Government, subject to continual amendments to align with amalgamation and territorial division processes. Article 48, part 3 of the RA Constitution grants citizens aged 18 and above the right to elect and be elected during Local Self-Government (LSG) elections and local referendums. Notably, non-citizens of RA are also granted voting rights during LSG elections and local referendums, as per law.

Article 183 mandates that community citizens directly engage in managing community issues through local referendums to address public problems. The specific forms of referendums and other modes of direct participation are outlined by law. Article 8 of the Law on Local Self-Government, encompassing 14 principles, addresses LSG transparency, accountability, publicity, and citizens' participation. Notably, citizen participation and engagement in drafting and discussing the 5-year development plan and budget are deemed crucial.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Furthermore, Article 11 of the Law on Local Self-Government is entirely dedicated to citizens' participation in local self-government. It defines community participation as a process through which citizens, without discrimination, are informed about LSG functionality and have a direct or indirect impact on LSG body decisions. Additionally, citizens aged 16 and above have the right to vote in the community, and participation can occur both individually and through public units and civic initiatives. Communities with populations of 3000 or more are mandated to have an official website managed by the community leader.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In the communities of Armenia, although various forms of citizen participation have evolved, elections remain the primary mode of engagement for citizens. Following the amalgamation, nearly all communities now have more than 4,000 voters, requiring the adoption of a proportional voting system for the election of members to the council. However, legislative regulations governing elections through proportional representation fail to ensure the non-discriminatory exercise of voting rights, as they do not afford the right to candidacy through civil initiatives. Consequently, the ability to stand for election hinges on affiliation with a political party.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Forms of citizen participation include:[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Community Development Plans and Budgeting Processes** - Long-term strategic planning for community development within Armenia's local government system is not legally mandated nor widely practiced. However, five-year community development plans (FYCDPs) are obligatory for all municipalities according to the law. From 2021 to 2023, there were no significant legislative changes regarding municipal FYCDPs and budgeting processes. Although there have been improvements in the implementation and quality of FYCDPs and budgets, particularly in newly formed multi-settlement communities, these improvements remain insufficient for the overall development of such communities and have generated new challenges, especially in small, border, suburban, and other special settlements.

**Public Hearings and Meetings with Citizens** - Public hearings on five-year development plans and annual budgets, primarily in urban communities, are conducted according to legally defined procedures, with varying levels of citizen participation. In cities like Gyumri, Yerevan, and Vanadzor, public hearings encompass broader community issues and actively involve civil society organisations. Meetings with citizens, organised by community leaders, occur either weekly or monthly.

As stipulated by law, after the local elections, the community leader must draft and implement public hearings on the main document of the community within 5 months: the five-year development plan. After incorporating all recommendations and proposals from the hearings, the leader should present it to the council meeting for approval. However, very frequently, the plans are sent to the city council meeting and approved without the preliminary hearings. There are still no specific mechanisms to oversee the process, taking into consideration the new amendments in the law on local self-government regarding the electoral system and amalgamation process.

Additionally, although according to the articles in the LSG law, there is a requirement to carry out comprehensive information dissemination through possible means of communication, the sharing of information and raising awareness of the public on the upcoming hearings and meetings are not well executed by the communities.

Budget drafting for each year is mandated by the law on LSG, with permanent committees being responsible for the draft and elaboration. Nevertheless, the committees' responsibilities sometimes have a formal character. The budgets will only be confirmed by the city council after public hearings.

Sometimes, the draft budget discussions and public hearings do not take place and are approved via extraordinary council meetings.

**Decision-making in Communities** - From 2021 to 2023, local referendums were not conducted in any communities in Armenia. However, a law adopted on November 17, 2021, permits remote meetings of community councils during states of emergency. Closed sessions or discussions cannot be conducted remotely. Furthermore, in 2021, the Government of Armenia issued Decree N 1297-N regarding the management of electronic registers and petitions. A petition submitted to the head of the Abovyan community proposed implementing preschool admission queues exclusively online.

Currently, the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures is drafting a new edition of the Law on Local Self-Government, which will include amendments to articles concerning citizens' participation forms, reflecting the ongoing amalgamation of communities.

The latest assessment of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) action plan for 2023-2024[[22]](#footnote-22) indicates that the government has successfully introduced new channels for gathering feedback from citizens and fostering participation. Furthermore, existing platforms for citizen feedback have been enhanced, and there have been notable improvements in government capabilities aimed at enhancing citizen engagement and decision-making processes. This has resulted in a significant impact. The municipality's efforts to disseminate information through various channels, engage citizens in discussions and public hearings, and involve civil society organisations (CSOs) have led to a notable shift towards more open, transparent, and accountable governance mechanisms. While the number of participants in meetings may have been modest, these gatherings have initiated a culture of active dialogue between civil society, the public, and the municipality. The rapid development of mechanisms for citizen and CSO participation has been seen as encouraging progress.

For instance, although the attendance numbers may not have been high, there were numerous meetings and discussions where citizens and CSOs had the opportunity to participate, including online sessions. Additionally, the launch of Instagram and Facebook pages by the municipality has facilitated the rapid dissemination of information to the public, making the approach more citizen-centric and interactive.

However, there are pessimistic views among some CSOs and experts who feel that while these commitments represent steps towards promoting open governance, they do not immediately lead to radical transparency, accountability, and participation. Despite progress in terms of participation, there are concerns about accountability and transparency needing further improvement according to expert opinions.

## Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's legal framework for local governance, established mainly by the 1995 Constitution and subsequent laws, emphasises decentralisation of state authority and promotion of local self-governance. The Constitution sets standards for local self-governance, while laws like the Law on Municipalities regulate the organisation and operation of local government bodies. The Law on Municipal Elections and the Law on the Status of Municipalities, adopted on July 2, 1999, were the first laws concerning local government. They address municipal bodies and officials, citizen participation, economic aspects, municipal property, and local budgets.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The country’s governance operates on a two-tiered system with the executive power at the top, led by the President. The President appoints the Cabinet of Ministers and other high-ranking officials. Local Executive Authorities, an extension of executive power, operate under the legal framework established by the Provision of Local Executive Authority (LEA) adopted in 1999. In 2012, a new regulation granted additional powers to these authorities, strengthening their position in local affairs. The President establishes territorial branches of state administration and appoints heads to manage them. These heads, in turn, appoint local administrations in villages and settlements within their jurisdiction. The primary responsibilities of local state administration include executing duties, ensuring citizen rights, promoting territorial development, and coordinating activities with municipalities and territorial divisions of state administration. However, despite their designation as a local tier of government, LEAs lack independence and merely implement decisions from the central government.

Additionally, Azerbaijan, having ratified the European Charter on Local Self-Government in 2002, is obliged to ensure the autonomy and exclusive powers of municipalities.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, this requirement is not reflected in the Law on Municipalities. Furthermore, according to Article 124 of the Constitution, the head of the LEA is responsible for implementing decisions and policies of the central government, with the President having the authority to determine the scope of LEAs' competences. Consequently, the delineation of municipal powers is subject to the discretion of the President.

According to the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic “On the Status of Municipalities,” municipalities have decision-making powers, including through referenda. However, their authority in public matters is limited, with most services falling under the direct responsibility of state bodies. Despite 24 years of independence, substantial public administration reforms have not occurred. Both municipalities and LEAs lack decision-making independence. Due to financial, political, and administrative constraints, municipalities cannot effectively address local issues, while LEAs must consult the central government before making decisions.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on "Public Participation" and related legal acts establish the framework for citizen and civil society involvement in decision-making processes. The law outlines various forms of public participation, including **public councils**, **discussions**, **hearings**, **opinion studies**, and **consultations on draft legal acts**. Additionally, the law does not restrict public participation to these specific forms, allowing for other methods as well.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Public participation encompasses citizens' and civil society institutions' involvement in policymaking, decision adoption at national and local levels, and organising public oversight over executive authorities' activities. Civil society actors involved in public councils include NGOs, media, trade unions, citizen initiative groups, and municipal block associations. Continuous public councils serve as advisory bodies under central and local executive authorities, while other forms of participation occur as needed, such as public discussions, hearings, opinion studies, and written consultations with civil society institutions. However, many central and local executive authorities show little interest in involving civil society in decision-making processes and fail to utilise public participation mechanisms outlined in the legislation. Some state bodies superficially apply public participation processes, inviting civil society representatives only ceremonially, without genuine engagement in decision-making. While some state bodies genuinely implement public participation mechanisms, it requires both legal foundations and political will to ensure effective participation, which is often lacking at lower levels of government.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Significant concerns persist regarding factors hindering the development of self-government in Azerbaijan, including insufficient authority granted to municipalities, their ambiguous status as state institutions, and limited financial resources. Municipal administrations often operate under the influence of locally appointed executive chiefs, who derive their authority from the President of Azerbaijan, impeding decentralisation efforts and fostering environments susceptible to corruption and bribery. This struggle with inadequate funding and limited authority leaves many municipalities unable to undertake public projects or settle debts owed to the State Social Defense Fund and employees' compensation. Monitoring reports from the Council of Europe’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities underscore municipalities' challenges in fulfilling even basic legislative mandates, restricting their roles to basic functions such as maintaining roads, cemeteries, and certain aspects of social care provision.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Meaningful citizen participation in decision-making remains challenging due to local governments' reluctance to involve significant societal stakeholders, including civil society organisations, trade unions, and business entities, in policy formulation and implementation. Moreover, municipalities occasionally participate in illicit land transactions with business interests, further undermining transparent governance practices noted Freedom House report 2023.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In 2023, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Steering Committee took a decisive measure in response to the deteriorating civic space situation in Azerbaijan, permanently suspending the Republic of Azerbaijan from the OGP. This decision highlights the global alliance's commitment to advancing open, inclusive, and accountable governance. Consequently, Azerbaijan will no longer be recognised as an OGP participating nation.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Thus, despite these mechanisms, challenges such as limited participation, centralisation of power, and resource constraints persist, requiring continued efforts of Azerbaijan to promote inclusive and responsive local governance.

## Moldova

Transparency, accountability, citizen involvement, and trust in the Moldovan Government remain pivotal concerns. Effective communication, transparency in activities, and bolstering public confidence are key to encouraging community engagement. However, current participatory mechanisms lack the influence needed in decision-making processes.

According to the "Rule of Law Index 2023"[[31]](#footnote-31) by the World Justice Project, Moldova ranks 68th out of 142 countries in Governance openness, scoring 0.53. It ranks 56th for the Right to information and 55th for Civic participation. Monitoring of local public authorities focuses on transparency in regulatory processes and citizen involvement. A report on the transparency of local administrations reveals sporadic public consultations and significant gaps. In 2019, 41% of districts and 58% of cities and villages did not conduct any public consultations, and results were often not communicated. Regarding participatory budgeting, most local authorities complied with consultation obligations, with only a fifth of districts and 40% of towns and villages failing to do so. Notably, around 80% of districts and 60% of towns and villages published their budgets online.

The legal framework in the Republic of Moldova allows for citizens' access to public information and their involvement in decision-making processes, yet implementation failures at the local level remain a significant issue. Laws and government decisions regulate the principles, methods, and stages of organising transparency in decision-making. Key legislative instruments include the [Constitution](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=111918&lang=ro), Government Decisions, and various [laws](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=108552&lang=ro) ensuring access to information and mechanisms for civic participation. The Law on transparency in decision-making mandates public authorities to involve citizens, associations, and interested parties in the decision-making process. However, it lacks specifics regarding information format and accessibility, crucial for effective public participation. Government directives, such as Decision No. 188 of April 3, 2012, aim to increase transparency through official websites of public authorities. Similarly, Decision No. 967 of 9.08. 2016 requires entities to publish draft decisions and related materials on official websites and platforms like [www.particip.gov.md](http://www.particip.gov.md). Regulations also mandate annual reports on decision-making transparency, detailing decisions, recommendations received, consultative meetings, and sanctions for non-compliance.

Additionally, a permanent platform for civil society dialogue in legislative processes was established in 2023. This platform aims to enhance civil society participation in policy development. The recent Law on Access to Information of Public Interest, passed in June 2023, aligns national legislation with Council of Europe standards and EU accession requirements. It mandates quicker information provision and proactive publication of various data by public institutions.

Authorities are increasingly using social media platforms for citizen engagement and information dissemination. Many districts and towns now have official Facebook pages, providing notices and useful updates.[[32]](#footnote-32) IT infrastructure development, supported by development partners, allows for video recording and live broadcasting of public hearings, thereby enhancing transparency and citizen access to information.

The mechanism for public consultations with civil society sets clear stages, deadlines, and conditions for engagement in policy-making, beginning with the EU accession process. Key participatory mechanisms in Moldova include ***disseminating public information, convening working groups,*** and ***soliciting opinions from experts and civil society organisations***.

The [www.particip.gov.md](http://www.particip.gov.md) platform was developed to enhance the efficiency of participants in drafting and consulting on normative acts, offering real-time monitoring and administration of consultation processes. However, despite efforts, annual reports indicate low citizen participation rates. For instance, in 2020, only 379 out of 2112 recommendations on the portal came from citizens, with the remainder from various stakeholders.

Other forms of citizen participation, such as public petitions and local referenda, are constitutionally provided.[[33]](#footnote-33) In recent years, online petitioning initiatives, notably on platforms like www.change.org and https://www.petitieonline.com, have gained popularity, but lack legal binding for decision-makers.

Participatory Budgeting is established in ten cities and various localities, notably successful in Chisinau since 2017[[34]](#footnote-34), yet to be universally applied. Since 2018, the Eastern European Foundation has piloted a novel citizen participation mechanism across six districts (rayons). Known as the "Participatory District Councils," these initiatives leverage existing regional NGO networks to facilitate discussions on specific topics. They serve as a platform for drafting proposals and decisions to be considered for inclusion on the public authority agenda, while also allowing for the submission of recommendations aimed at enhancing governmental decisions.

Aligned with the 2023-2030 Public Administration Reform Strategy, a new digital tool, the e-Democracy platform, was approved in 2023 to enhance civic participation.[[35]](#footnote-35) It comprises e-Petiție for civic initiatives, e-Feedback for citizen and company feedback on public services, and e-Survey for consultations in decision-making processes.

Despite these, citizen involvement in public decision-making and the impact of collective petitions/civic initiatives are notably low. The Social Cohesion Index for 2019[[36]](#footnote-36), 2020[[37]](#footnote-37), and 2021[[38]](#footnote-38) highlights law citizen participation rates in actions to influence decision-making, with authorities showing reluctance to engage citizens. The index reveals a low level of participation in political activities and pressure initiatives, scoring 0.04 and 0.01 respectively out of a maximum 1.0. While about 7 out of 10 citizens are aware of the functions and decision-making powers of Local Public Authorities (LPAs), only 1 out of 10 have engaged in public consultation activities. Despite a slight increase in political interest from 2020 to 2021, rising from 0.47 to 0.55 points, the participation rate remained stagnant, with a negligible rise from 0.04 to 0.07.

The effectiveness of citizen engagement is closely tied to the quality of public administration and civil servants' ability to communicate constructively. However, not all civil society organisations are politically active, vocal, or influential. Moreover, public authorities lack an effective feedback mechanism, leaving politically active citizens uninformed about the outcomes of their participation, resulting in disillusionment.

While Moldova is supported by a solid legislative framework for civic participation, there's a lack of a well-defined mechanism to monitor compliance with rules regarding public consultation and decision-making transparency. Some public authorities fail to adhere to standards for public information access, primarily due to limited capacity at central and local government levels and a lack of online tools to facilitate participatory processes, especially in regional areas.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In public hearings and legislative creation, civil society input is often not recorded or reported, hampering efforts to monitor and assess its impact on decision-making. Around 90% of authorities neglect to prepare summaries of recommendations from public consultations, discouraging citizen participation. To address these issues, all recommendations received during consultations must be reviewed and summarised, demonstrating how stakeholder opinions have influenced decision-making. Post-consultation summaries play a vital role in enhancing confidence in the participation process and public administration, despite being currently overlooked.[[40]](#footnote-40)

## Ukraine

In Ukraine, citizen participation in decision-making processes is facilitated through various mechanisms, including ***public consultations, hearings, and participatory budgeting initiatives***, as outlined in the Constitution of Ukraine, particularly in Articles 38 and 40, which guarantee the right to participate in public affairs and freedom of speech.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Institutional mechanisms of civil society involvement also include the adoption of laws directly by citizens through referendums and the development and adoption of laws with the participation of citizens (through the submission and adoption of petitions).

In addition, alternative ways of engaging citizens have also gained popularity in recent years: the creation of citizen self-organisation bodies, the formation of public councils at government agencies, public hearings, and public discussions of draft regulations. This has contributed to a new wave of civic initiatives in Ukraine.

Transparency in government actions is crucial for meaningful citizen participation. Ukraine has made considerable progress in recent years, driven by civil society pressure. Access to information, ensured by the Law "On Access to Public Information," promotes transparency and accountability. Public entities must proactively disclose information, respond to citizens' requests, and provide access to official documents, empowering citizens to engage in public discourse and hold the government accountable, thus bolstering democratic governance.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, challenges remain. The EU Commission's 2023 report highlighted the impact of the Russian invasion and martial law on parliamentary transparency in Ukraine, including restrictions on live streaming, limited journalist access, and unavailable parliamentary documents online. Reinstating public consultations and scrutiny post-martial law is vital for restoring transparency and accountability in parliamentary activities.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are pivotal in fostering citizen participation in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Constitution guarantees freedoms of association (Article 36) and thought and speech (Article 34), with limitations applicable only in cases threatening Ukraine's independence, constitutional order, sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, or human rights.[[44]](#footnote-44) Despite challenges from Russia's aggression and martial law, Ukraine has enacted strategic documents to promote civil society engagement, such as the 2021-2026 national strategy for civil society development, the national barrier-free strategy, and the national human rights strategy.[[45]](#footnote-45) In addition, the European Commission has advised Ukraine to intensify efforts in addressing and investigating pressure and threats against civic activists, spanning both pre and post-invasion periods. This recommendation underscores the necessity of ensuring activists' safety and protection, vital for fostering civic engagement. Furthermore, the Commission emphasises enhancing consultation mechanisms with civil society stakeholders, including ongoing discussions on the draft law on Public Consultation in the Ukrainian Parliament.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Complaint mechanisms in Ukraine are vital for empowering citizens, a right enshrined in Article 40 of the Constitution.[[47]](#footnote-47) The 1996 Law[[48]](#footnote-48) "On Citizens' Appeals", amended over time, provides the infrastructure for citizens to have their complaints and appeals heard by public authorities at various levels. This law classifies complaint mechanisms into three types: Proposal (remarks), Application (petition), and Complaint. Proposal (remarks) encompass citizens' appeals offering advice and recommendations on various governmental activities, while Application (petition) allows citizens to seek assistance in realising their rights and interests as per the Constitution and current legislation. Complaints, on the other hand, are appeals demanding the renewal of rights and protection of legitimate interests of citizens violated by actions or decisions of state bodies, local self-government bodies, and other entities.

Regulated by Articles 14-19 of the Law "On Citizens' Appeal," these mechanisms mandate both national and local authorities to objectively consider complaints, redress breaches of rights, and provide justifications for their decisions. They serve as vital tools for accountability, enabling civil servants and elected officials to evaluate service standards, identify inefficiencies, and foster trust among the public. Amendments in July 2015 allowed for electronic submissions, prompting local authorities to establish e-platforms. This streamlined the process, leading to increased citizen engagement and more efficient grievance resolution.[[49]](#footnote-49) The Ministry of Digital Transformation, established in 2019, manages e-instruments to promote open policymaking and improve interaction between local authorities and the public.[[50]](#footnote-50) Despite the progress, there remains scepticism towards these mechanisms. The Council of Europe recommended that Ukrainian local authorities enhance public awareness and offer training on local policymaking involvement.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Since the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine has embraced open policymaking as part of its governance, leading to the establishment of civic councils by both local governments and public authorities.[[52]](#footnote-52) Several laws in Ukraine, including the 2011 Law No. 2862-VI “On Social Dialogue”, the 2004 Law No. 1160 “On Principles of Public Regulatory Policy of Economic Activity”, and the 2010 Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 996 “On Ensuring Public Participation in the Formulation and Implementation of Public Policy”, contain provisions on open policymaking. These laws have undergone multiple amendments in recent years to enhance public participation, with ongoing efforts to develop a draft law specifically focused on public consultations.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Resolution No. 996 outlines general procedures for conducting public consultations, emphasising stakeholder involvement in advisory bodies. Though not mandatory for local governments, this resolution offers a framework for public engagement that can be voluntarily adopted. Key aspects addressed include regulatory impact assessment, urban development, and environmental expertise, ensuring informed and inclusive discussions. To further promote public participation, local executive bodies must publish draft acts on their websites, facilitating public access to information. Additionally, they are required to formulate annual plans for public consultations, incorporating input from civil society organisations.[[54]](#footnote-54)

In May 2019, the Cabinet of Ministers amended Resolution No. 996 to modernise the formation of civic councils, allowing for the election of council members through online voting. This amendment represents a significant advancement in enhancing transparency and fostering greater citizen participation.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Two notable practices highlight effective youth engagement and public participation at the local level in Ukraine. The NGO Youth Platform's initiative stands out for its efforts to involve young people in policymaking. By launching a project aimed at establishing advisory youth councils in local governments, the platform provides comprehensive guidance for implementation. Initially piloted in the communities of Volyn Oblast, the project has since expanded to numerous cities across Ukraine.[[56]](#footnote-56)

In Lviv municipality, various local matters under the jurisdiction of local self-government may undergo public hearings. The procedures for conducting these hearings are detailed in the Regulations governing the Process for Holding Public Hearings in Lviv City, an annex of the Charter of the Territorial Community of Lviv City. The Lviv City Council secretariat, in collaboration with the initiator, sets the date for the public hearing, and relevant announcements are promptly posted on the official website of the Lviv City Council within five working days of receiving the request.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Participatory budgeting provides another avenue for citizen engagement at the local level. Article 9 of Law No. 280/97-VR "On Local Self-Government" allows individuals to submit their initiatives to the local council. During the implementation of the 2017–2020 Strategy for Reforming the Public Financial Management System, the Ministry of Finance issued "Guidelines on mechanisms for public participation in the budget process at the local level", offering recommendations to local governments on developing their regulations on participatory budgeting.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The Open Budget Index assessment described the Ukrainian national budgeting system as limited and recommended expanding mechanisms during budget formulation to include any civil society organisation or member of the public wishing to participate. It also urged active engagement with vulnerable and underrepresented communities, either directly or through representing civil society organisations.[[59]](#footnote-59) The European Commission noted a decrease in transparency and participation during martial law and advised gradually restoring transparency and participation where possible. It also stressed the importance of enhancing the capacity of Parliament and the Accounting Chamber to oversee the budget process as a priority.

An exemplary case, Poltava Oblast, stands out for implementing participatory budgeting at the regional level, a departure from the typical municipal focus in Ukraine. Since 2010, the Poltava Region Council has conducted various project calls to solicit citizen input and engagement in the budgetary process. These calls encompass territorial development, environmental initiatives, and public education. Through open public voting, residents directly influence which projects receive funding, fostering collaboration between local communities and government bodies. The establishment of the "SMART REGION of the Poltava region" information and communication system further enhances accessibility and participation opportunities for residents. Despite challenges, such as redirected budgetary priorities during times of war, innovative solutions like the development of a crowdfunding platform in 2020 have continued to support community-driven initiatives, showcasing resilience and adaptability in adversity.[[60]](#footnote-60)

## Belarus

Belarus operates under a largely centralised system of local governance, wherein local autonomy and citizen participation mechanisms are notably limited compared to many Western democracies. The structure of local government in Belarus consists of regions known as oblasts, districts, cities, towns, and villages, each administered locally. The legal framework, primarily established by the Constitution and the Law on Local Government and Self-Government, outlines the structure and functions of local government bodies, maintaining centralised control rather than fostering decentralisation or citizen participation.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The Constitution and legislation of the Republic of Belarus outline more than ten forms of direct citizen participation in local self-government. As stipulated in Article 117 of the Constitution, citizens engage in local administration and self-governance through various channels, including local Councils of Deputies, executive and administrative bodies, territorial public self-government bodies, local referendums, assemblies, and other means of direct involvement in state and public affairs. These forms of direct participation are further detailed in the legal provisions of the Law "On Local Administration and Self-Government," which includes mechanisms such as local assemblies, local referendums, citizens' initiatives regarding decisions made by the Council, and citizen involvement in financing and/or reimbursing budget expenditures for purposes determined by them. Additionally, other laws and legislative acts also encompass several methods of direct citizen participation.[[62]](#footnote-62)

In the classification provided below, the forms of direct citizen participation in the implementation of local self-government are conditionally divided into three groups, considering their potential influence on specific decisions:

**1. Forms of Direct Implementation of Local Self-Government by Citizens:**

- Participation of citizens in local elections and recall of elected deputies of local Councils;

- Local referendum;

**2. Forms of Citizen Participation in the Implementation of Local Self-Government:**

- Citizen participation in financing and/or reimbursement of budget expenditures for purposes determined by them (voluntary citizen taxation);

- Territorial public self-government;

- Local assembly;

- Initiative to convene a session of the local Council of Deputies;

- Citizen initiative to organise a meeting with a deputy of the local Council and the right to demand a report from the deputy on their activities;

- Citizen initiative in the decision-making of the Council of Deputies (legislative initiative);

**3. Forms of Citizen Opinion Identification:**

- Citizen appeals;

 - Public discussions (hearings);

- Citizen surveys.

Among the listed forms, the most commonly used, which can be initiated by citizens themselves, are citizen appeals, citizen participation in financing and/or reimbursing budget expenditures for purposes determined by them (citizen self-taxation), and territorial public self-government.

Citizen appeals represent the simplest and most accessible form of direct participation, allowing citizens to engage with organisations and officials through various channels. These appeals, whether written, electronic, or oral, take the form of suggestions, statements, or complaints. They are normatively and procedurally regulated by the Law of the Republic of Belarus "On Citizen and Legal Entity Appeals," dated July 18, 2011, No. 300-3. However, concerns arise regarding anonymous appeals and the accountability of officials in addressing them.

Furthermore, citizen self-taxation, outlined in Belarusian law, permits residents to participate in financing local expenditures, particularly benefiting smaller settlements. While empowering citizens, this form of participation faces criticisms regarding fund allocation and voluntariness.

Public discussions, mandated by law on specific issues, aim to engage citizens in environmental and urban planning matters. Yet, limitations exist on who can initiate these discussions, hindering broader participation.

Territorial public self-government bodies (TPSBs), established by citizens, serve as intermediaries between citizens and authorities. However, their efficiency could be enhanced through better financing mechanisms and increased citizen involvement.

Local assemblies, another form of citizen participation, allow discussions and decision-making on significant matters. Nevertheless, organising these assemblies is complex and often falls to local authorities.

Despite regulated forms of citizen participation, such as local elections, other mechanisms like referendums and deputy recalls remain underutilised due to procedural complexities and financial burdens on citizens.

In addition, Miroslav Kobasa, an expert on local governments in Belarus, emphasises the frequent use of citizen proposals, particularly in larger cities such as Minsk. In a city like Minsk with a population of around 2 million, as many as 10,000 proposals may be submitted annually. This significant volume of proposals reflects citizens' keen interest in actively participating in the decision-making process. However, despite this engagement, the outcomes of such proposals may not always align with citizens' expectations due to the discretionary powers held by authorities.[[63]](#footnote-63)

International observers criticise[[64]](#footnote-64) Belarus for its lack of democratic processes and restrictions on fundamental freedoms like freedom of speech and association. The centralised governance model limits local authorities' autonomy and hampers citizen participation. Civil society organisations face repression, limiting their ability to influence decision-making. Despite occasional protests and online activism, avenues for meaningful citizen participation are limited. Moreover, Belarus's failure to ratify the European Charter of Local Self-Government highlights challenges related to transparency, accountability, and local autonomy.

While citizens in Belarus demonstrate a willingness to participate in decision-making through proposals and discussions, significant barriers persist, including limited democratic space and political constraints. Despite the existence of legal frameworks for local government theoretically enabling citizen involvement, tightly controlled elections often face allegations of fraud. Though occasional public hearings and town hall meetings gather citizen input on specific issues, their impact on decision-making remains uncertain. With a preference for centralized authority over decentralisation and citizen engagement, challenges persist regarding political freedoms, civil society repression, and transparency. Overcoming these challenges would require meaningful reforms to enhance transparency, accountability, and respect for citizens' rights, fostering a more inclusive and participatory governance framework.

# Forms of Citizen Participation in the EU

Citizen participation stands as a cornerstone of European democracy, enabling individuals to actively shape policies, laws, and institutional frameworks, fostering a more inclusive and responsive governance model. While forms of citizen participation at national and regional levels vary across the EU countries, the thread that unites them all is the fundamental belief in democratic principles. Through active engagement in decision-making processes, citizen involvement serves to bridge societal divides, empower marginalised groups, and combat discrimination.

The European Charter of Local Self-Government contains some references to the importance of direct citizen participation. Its Preamble states that the text of the Charter itself is based on “the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs”, which “is one of the democratic principles that are shared by all member States of the Council of Europe”. Article 3, Section (2) of the Charter refers to assemblies of citizens, referendums or any other form of direct citizen participation, stating that the Charter’s concept of local government shall in no way affect recourse to these procedures. Another principle, in Article 5, states that “changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local communities concerned, possibly by means of a referendum where this is permitted by statute”. Nevertheless, the Charter does not include any more specific principles or rules on the forms and requirements of direct citizen participation at the local or regional level, although they are used in one way or another in every member state.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Considering the significant differences in how forms of citizen participation are used in different EU member states, the same objectives and goals − namely, the development of citizens’ involvement in local democracy and the provision of effective tools for them − can be achieved by various instruments and methods. Good examples of citizen participation in EU member states are very varied and include local elections, referendums, participatory budgeting, public consultation meetings, citizen assemblies, panels and forums, town hall meetings, foreign residents' councils, citizen initiatives, neighbourhood and youth councils in addition to various online platforms for fostering participation.

## Germany

**Germany**’s legal framework for local self-government is primarily guided by the Grundgesetz, or Basic Law, which outlines the principles of local autonomy and self-governance. Established in 1949, the Basic Law grants significant autonomy to municipalities, allowing them to govern independently within the confines of federal and state laws. One of the key legislative instruments governing local governments in Germany is the Kommunalverfassung, or municipal constitution. This framework sets out the organisational structure of local authorities, their competencies, and the procedures for citizen participation. It defines the roles and responsibilities of local councils, mayors, and administrative bodies, laying the groundwork for democratic decision-making processes at the local level. Key aspects of local self-government law in Germany include:[[66]](#footnote-66)

* Municipal Autonomy: Municipalities have the right to manage their own affairs independently within the limits of federal and state laws. They have the authority to make decisions regarding local issues such as urban planning, local infrastructure, public services, and cultural affairs.
* Constitutional Protection: The Basic Law protects the autonomy of local authorities and guarantees them certain rights and responsibilities. Article 28 of the Basic Law outlines the principles of local self-government and ensures that municipalities have the necessary resources to fulfil their tasks.
* Legal Framework: The legal framework for local self-government is primarily governed by federal legislation, such as the Municipal Code (Gemeindeordnung) and state laws. Each state (Bundesland) in Germany has its own regulations regarding local government structure, powers, and responsibilities.

The legal basis in Germany has been crucial in fostering decentralised governance, facilitating extensive local decision-making, and fostering citizen participation in municipal affairs. Through various forms of engagement, citizens can actively contribute to decision-making processes at the local level. For instance, compared to other well-tested citizen participation instruments, the concept of ***participatory budgeting*** is relatively recent and not yet implemented in all municipalities of Germany, where residents have the opportunity to directly influence the allocation of public funds by proposing and voting on local projects and initiatives, thereby influencing the decision-making process. Another important mechanism for citizen participation in Germany is the institution of ***local advisory councils.*** These councils represent different segments of society, such as youth, seniors, and ethnic minorities, and provide input on policies and projects that affect their respective communities. Advisory councils foster dialogue between citizens and decision-makers, empowering residents to take ownership of their communities and contribute to local governance. These bodies play a consultative role in the decision-making process and help ensure that diverse perspectives are considered. In Glienicke, a small municipality in the Oberhavel district of Brandenburg, Germany, these advisory councils (including youth and senior advisory councils) have proven to be more frequently utilised by citizens compared to other tools, such as petitions, as they have been in place for a long time and well-tested.[[67]](#footnote-67)While any citizen has the right to submit petitions to address specific concerns or propose changes, they are not very common due to the high rate of rejections. Petitions are consultative, and authorities have no obligation to accept them. Many petitions are rejected due to local, federal, and EU laws that restrict their feasibility or implementation. As noted by the Mayor of Glienicke, citizens may propose ideas that are viable elsewhere but fail due to legal constraints they were not aware of. Similarly, a small municipality official in Oberhausen, Germany, commenting on the use of petitions, stated that since there is no obligation to act on petitions, it often leads to citizens feeling discouraged if their concerns are repeatedly rejected. [[68]](#footnote-68)

In addition to other forms of citizen participation guaranteed by law in Germany, Oberhausen has implemented a voluntary citizen participation tool known as ***Dialogue Tours***, demonstrating efforts to engage citizens directly. These initiatives provide platforms for citizens to voice their concerns, suggestions, or complaints directly to local authorities, and they have proven successful. Dialogue Tours are initiated by the Mayor to visit specific districts, where citizens can meet with officials to discuss local concerns and suggest improvements and solutions. Initiated before the Covid pandemic, this initiative has been successful thus far, evidenced by the high level of citizen interest and the solutions produced by officials, as commented by a municipality official on citizen participation.[[69]](#footnote-69)

To encourage increased citizen participation in decision-making processes in Oberhausen, municipal officials prioritise transparency by regularly disseminating information about projects and opportunities for citizen involvement. This transparency extends beyond traditional methods, such as newspapers, to include communication via social networks, ensuring citizens are informed and engaged in local affairs. However, challenges persist, notably the lack of a requirement for authorities to act on petitions or other participatory mechanisms, resulting in some citizen suggestions being overlooked, which may diminish overall participation. Despite these challenges, initiatives like Dialogue Tours exemplify best practices, showcasing the positive outcomes of direct engagement between citizens and local authorities in Oberhausen.

Thus, principles of local autonomy and self-governance, deeply rooted in the German legal system, reflect the country's commitment to democratic governance ensuring decentralised decision-making and citizen participation. The decentralisation of authority guarantees that choices impacting local communities are made as close as possible to the citizens they affect, fostering transparency and accountability within governance.

## Poland

Transitioning from Germany's strong legal framework for local governance, Poland's approach to citizen participation similarly reflects a commitment to decentralisation and community involvement. Local governments in **Poland** are typically structured into three tiers: municipalities (gminas), counties (powiats), and voivodeships (provinces). Each tier has its own set of responsibilities and decision-making powers, with municipalities being the smallest administrative units and having the most direct interaction with citizens.

The legal basis for local governance in Poland is established in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which recognises the importance of self-government at the local level. The legislation governing local governments, including municipalities, is outlined in the Act on Local Government in Poland, which was enacted in 1990 following the country's transition to a democratic system. Since then, Poland has made significant strides in promoting citizen participation through mechanisms such as public consultations, citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, advisory councils, and direct citizen initiatives. These mechanisms aim to enhance transparency, accountability, and civic engagement among residents in the decision-making processes that impact their everyday lives.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Taking the example of the city of Kraków, one of Poland's most prominent municipalities, citizen participation plays a significant role in shaping local policies and initiatives. Kraków's local government regularly organises ***public consultations*** on key issues such as urban development, transportation planning, environmental protection, and cultural initiatives. These consultations provide residents with opportunities to voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions regarding proposed projects and policies. Moreover, Kraków has implemented ***participatory budgeting***, allowing citizens to directly influence how a portion of the city's budget is allocated to specific projects and initiatives. Through participatory budgeting, residents can submit project proposals, vote on their preferred projects, and engage in the decision-making process to determine funding priorities.

Additionally, Kraków's local government encourages citizen engagement through various advisory councils and committees focused on specific areas such as education, healthcare, tourism, and community development. These advisory bodies enable citizens to collaborate with local officials, provide expertise, and contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes that reflect the needs and priorities of the community.

According to an expert in local government in Poland, the most popular forms of citizen participation in Krakow, and Poland in general, are those that have binding power over local governments. These include Participatory Budgeting (PB) and civic panels. Civic panels have been organised a few times in Krakow and have proven successful, with a high turnout of residents, reaching about 50% in the concerned districts. However, due to methodological issues (such as the need for a lengthy process and ensuring good representation), organising these panels is less favourable for local governments.

On the other hand, PB has spread across Poland since its emergence in 2011, with almost 44% of municipalities now implementing it. This popularity led the government to make it compulsory for all big cities in 2018, and the central government introduced a rule requiring big cities to allocate a minimum of 0.5% of their budget to PB initiatives. Local governments also found PB useful as a way to promote themselves by encouraging citizen participation. As for another more institutionalised and basic form of citizen engagement, public consultations are only referred to by citizens when the topics being discussed directly concern them. In other cases, public consultations are not frequently used.[[71]](#footnote-71)

## Italy

Building on Poland's strides in participatory governance, Italy's legal framework emphasizes the importance of local autonomy and citizen engagement, thus fostering an environment favourable for collaborative governance initiatives. **Italy'**s legal framework for local governance is anchored in the Constitution of 1948, recognising local autonomy and self-government. Law 142/1990 defines the division of powers among central government, regions, provinces, and municipalities, aiming to enhance local democracy and citizen participation. Post-World War II reforms and subsequent legislative amendments strengthened local autonomy, decentralising powers to address community needs effectively. These legal reforms underscore transparency, accountability, and democratic participation at the local level.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Over the last 20 years, participative practices and normative tools fostering collaborative governance of the commons have taken place in Italy and spread out in various urban contexts, such as Bologna, Milan, Turin and Naples. This process is rooted in the fostering of participatory practices starting with the recommendations of UN Agenda 21 of the early 1990s and implemented by the URBAN EU projects that allowed too many participative practices to be trialled in all the major European cities.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Citizens in Italy can engage in decision-making processes at the local municipality level through various mechanisms, including ***participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, public consultations, and advisory councils***.

Studies[[74]](#footnote-74) in Italy have identified several successful citizen participation mechanisms that have enhanced local governance and community engagement. Bologna has established itself as the most developed example of collaborative governance of the commons in Italy. In May 2014, Bologna's City Council adopted the "Regulation on collaboration between citizens and administration for the care and regeneration of urban commons." This regulation promotes collaboration between citizens and municipal authorities, emphasising the principle of "horizontal subsidiarity" to encourage citizen-led initiatives for the common good. To facilitate the Regulation's application, Bologna developed the "***Collaboration Agreement***," regulating the responsibilities and commitments of both citizens and the administration for specific urban commons. By defining "urban commons" as goods recognised by citizens and the administration for collective well-being, the Agreement aims to improve their collective enjoyment through shared responsibility.

The first Collaboration Agreement was signed in Bologna in September 2014, and in December 2015 there were nearly 200 (personal email by the Head of the Institutional Affairs and Districts Area). The Bologna Regulation has become a reference point for all the experiences subsequently developed at the national level. This is not only due to the fact that it was the first to be adopted, but because its practical application has evolved significantly, a quite unique case in Italy. Following Bologna's lead, 68 additional Italian municipalities have adopted regulations on collaborative governance, with another 82 in the process of adoption.[[75]](#footnote-75)

It can be stated that Bologna's exploration of collaborative governance highlights a citizen engagement process that broadens the scope of civic participation in local governance. This is achieved by amplifying citizen voices and fostering civic practices centered around the notion of the common good. Arguably, the concreteness of civic collaboration projects, their proximity to the everyday lives of participating citizens, and the ability of collaboration agreements to generate visible and immediate effects on their surrounding social environments are elements that can enhance citizens’ trust in municipal administration, thus mitigating the “efficacy problem.”

Another good example of strengthening citizen participation at the local level can be observed in Vicenza, a relatively small municipality in Italy, where ***Neighborhood Councils*** have been redefined. These councils aim to encourage active citizen participation in the decision-making process, with a focus on addressing specific neighbourhood issues and finding solutions to local needs.

In January 2024, Mayor Giacomo Possamai and Councilor Matteo Tosetto presented the project, which was developed in collaboration with a working group from the council majority. The objective is to create neighbourhood participation bodies that accurately represent the local area, drawing inspiration from experiences in similar cities like Padua and Brescia. There will be a total of 10 Neighborhood Councils in Vicenza, each representing a specific area of the city. They will have advisory and propositional roles in matters concerning their respective neighbourhoods, such as public works, events, and the management of green spaces. Each council will consist of 12 members, with 9 elected by the city council and 3 chosen from representatives of various neighbourhood entities. Each Neighborhood Council will be led by a president and vice president, and they may establish thematic committees to focus on specific areas of work. Council members will serve on a voluntary and unpaid basis. Additionally, a "Neighborhood Network Table" will be established to include all relevant local entities and a Neighborhood Consultative Committee will be formed to coordinate activities at the municipal level, bringing together the presidents of the various councils.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Innovative approaches, such as the redefined Neighborhood Councils in Vicenza, are important because they promote active citizen engagement, address specific neighbourhood issues, and ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and effective local governance.

## Belgium

Continuing the concept of collaborative governance, Belgium's decentralised structure aligns with Italy's emphasis on local autonomy, fostering mechanisms for citizen participation and inclusive decision-making. **Belgium's** journey from a unitary state to a complex federal structure reflects the intricate interplay of linguistic, cultural, and regional differences. Tensions between the Flemish and French communities have driven a series of state reforms since the 1970s, resulting in a federal system with overlapping competences. The Flemish, French, and German-speaking communities, along with the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels regions, each have their own parliaments and governments. This asymmetrical federalism allows for varying degrees of autonomy across different regions and communities, shaping Belgium's political landscape.[[77]](#footnote-77)

At the regional level, Belgium is divided into three distinct entities: Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. Each region has its own parliament and government, responsible for regional policies and administration. Notably, the Flemish Region and Community have merged competences into a single entity, unlike the other regions. Provinces, primarily acting as decentralised political communities, implement decisions from higher levels while pursuing their own policies within their spheres of interest. Municipalities, numbering 581 across the country, serve as the frontline administrative units, further diversifying Belgium's governance structure.[[78]](#footnote-78)

In Belgium, the legislation surrounding local governments is deeply rooted in the principle of decentralisation, granting significant autonomy to municipalities and regions. The country operates within a federal system where power is distributed between the federal government, three language-based regions (Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels-Capital), and communities (Flemish, French, and German-speaking). Local governments in Belgium, particularly municipalities, enjoy substantial authority over various aspects of governance, including urban planning, public services, and cultural affairs.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Belgium's local governance is underpinned by constitutional principles emphasising decentralisation and local autonomy. Articles defining local authority within the Belgian Constitution and laws like the Special Act on Institutional Reform of 1980 and the Municipal Act of 1836 establish the structure, functions, and autonomy of local authorities. These legislative frameworks underscore the principle of local self-government, granting municipalities the freedom to manage their affairs. The Special Act on Institutional Reform of 1980 notably strengthened decentralisation efforts, affording local governments more autonomy and decision-making power.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Citizen participation in decision-making processes is encouraged and facilitated through various mechanisms established by Belgian legislation. One common form of citizen participation is through ***local advisory councils or committees***, where residents can voice their opinions, raise concerns, and contribute ideas on matters affecting their communities. These councils often focus on specific issues such as environmental sustainability, youth affairs, or cultural heritage preservation. Some other forms include ***neighbourhood councils, public consultations and hearings, citizen assemblies and forums, and participatory budgeting initiatives***.

In many parts of the world, where participatory democracy is encouraged by local authorities, participatory budgeting is widely regarded as best practice. In Belgium, several municipalities, including Mons and Antwerp, have undertaken initiatives to implement participatory budgeting. Inspired by the model originating in Brazil, Mons established participatory budgeting in select districts in 2002, albeit encountering challenges such as transparency issues, administrative complexities, and unclear decision-making structures. Despite these obstacles, the initiative served as a model, prompting the Walloon government to legislate for the possibility of participatory budgeting across all municipalities in 2012, granting significant autonomy in implementation and design. Similarly, Antwerp initiated a participatory budgeting process in 2014, allowing citizens to allocate a portion of the district's budget across various policy themes.[[81]](#footnote-81)Additionally, participatory budgeting initiatives in cities like Ghent and Antwerp have empowered residents to allocate funds to projects aligning with community needs.

In the Etterbeek district of Brussels, citizen participation takes various forms. Among these are Councils for Specific Groups, which address the needs of diverse populations. Notably, councils dedicated to the elderly and people with disabilities highlight the district's commitment to inclusivity. Petitions and Consultations serve as channels for citizens to voice their opinions on community matters. While petitions are infrequent, with only three registered in 2023, consultations occur regularly. It’s worth noting that an initiative of Participatory Budgeting (PB), implemented in September 2022, has attracted significant engagement. An Etterbeek Municipality officer on citizen engagement noted the reception of 66 proposals, of which 8 were selected for implementation. In addition, the establishment of a Council for Foreign Residents further exemplifies efforts to foster inclusivity and integration by engaging foreign residents in community activities and cultural events (50 % of Etterbeek's population are of foreign nationality).[[82]](#footnote-82)

Speaking on the challenges in citizen participation, the Municipal Councilor on Citizen Participation and Urban Renewal in Brussels highlights several issues to citizen participation in the city concerning ***Understanding and Expectations***. Some residents may lack a comprehensive understanding of the purpose or process of participation, leading to misconceptions and frustrations when consensus isn't reached. Therefore, it's important to clarify the goals and nature of participation, emphasising its role as deliberation rather than merely consensus-building. [[83]](#footnote-83)

To further encourage citizen participation, it is crucial to emphasise efforts to engage diverse groups, including the elderly and people with disabilities. This demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and accessibility. Additionally, the willingness of authorities to listen to citizen feedback and implement selected proposals fosters trust and encourages continued participation. Educating citizens about the significance of participation and providing channels for involvement, such as [walking diagnostics](https://www.brussels.be/what-good-move), can help overcome barriers and empower citizens to engage in civic matters. A walking diagnostic within the framework of the ***Good Move initiative*** involves assessing the pedestrian infrastructure, safety, and accessibility within specific areas of Brussels. The goal of this diagnostic is to identify areas for improvement that would enhance the walking experience, promote pedestrian safety, and encourage more people to choose walking as a mode of transportation. Citizen engagement plays a crucial role in this process by providing valuable insights, feedback, and observations about their experiences as pedestrians.[[84]](#footnote-84)

## France

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In a similar vein, France's history of citizen participation and legislative reforms resonate with Belgium's journey towards federalism, both emphasising the decentralisation of power and the empowerment of local communities. **France** has a long history of citizen participation in local governance, dating back to the French Revolution. Articles 72 and 72-1 of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic establish the principles of local autonomy and outline the organisation and powers of local authorities. The decentralisation process in France, which began in the 1980s and was further strengthened in the 2000s, aimed to transfer powers from the central government to local authorities to ensure better responsiveness to local needs.[[85]](#footnote-85)

The most significant legislation in recent times includes the Loi Démocratie de Proximité of 2002 (Decentralisation and Proximity Democracy Act), which aimed to strengthen local democracy by giving citizens a greater role in local decision-making. Laws such as the Loi NOTRe of 2015 further reinforce the powers and responsibilities of local authorities, promoting decentralised decision-making and citizen engagement. These laws provide mechanisms for citizen involvement, including public consultations, participatory budgeting, citizen councils, and neighbourhood/district councils.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Recent studies in France have identified several successful citizen participation mechanisms that have led to increased engagement and empowerment at the local level. One notable example is the case of Nantes, where the city implemented a comprehensive participatory governance model “**Collaborative Governance**”[[87]](#footnote-87) that involved citizens in urban planning, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion initiatives. Through online platforms, public meetings, and workshops, residents were able to contribute their ideas and feedback, ultimately shaping the development of their city.[[88]](#footnote-88) European Commission recognised the open and collaborative governance model of Nantes by awarding the title of European Capital of Innovation in 2019.[[89]](#footnote-89) Additionally, in November 2020, local governments of Nantes, initiated a **Citizens' Convention** involving 80 residents from 24 towns to discuss the impacts of the health crisis. Despite the lockdown, Mayor Johanna Rolland emphasised the importance of maintaining participatory democracy, shifting the convention online. Rolland viewed citizen dialogue as essential for responsive governance, particularly during times of crisis. The convention, spanning four weekends from November to February, aimed to explore the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Rolland highlighted the need to address issues such as changes in social life, economic instability, and unemployment, particularly among young people. The Citizens' Convention in Nantes exemplified a commitment to inclusive governance and citizen empowerment, aiming to address the complex challenges posed by the health crisis.[[90]](#footnote-90)

In the city of Paris, other successful participation models were observed. When running on a platform that included provisions for increased citizen involvement in municipal governance, the Socialist Party’s Anne Hidalgo won the 2014 mayoral race, and her administration quickly began implementing various channels of participation and engagement. Some forms of participation existed before Hidalgo’s term, such as the ***"Conseil des quartiers" (Neighborhood Council), "Conseil Parisien de la Jeunesse" (Youth Council), and "Étudiants de Paris - le Conseil" (Parisian Students Council)***, but more have been established, including:

Deliberative Forums

* "Conseil des Générations Futures” (Future Generation Council): a space for discussion and debate on economic, social, and environmental issues where labor unions, public servants, associations, and randomly selected residents can have their voices heard;
* “Conseil des Citoyens” (Citizen Council): a deliberative space for residents living in low-income neighborhoods (“quartier populaires”) designated by the city;
* “Conférence de citoyens” (Citizen conferences): these are similar to citizen assemblies.
* “Conseil de la nuit” (Nocturne Council): is focused on security, transport, culture, and commerce during the night in Paris.

Participatory Urban Development

Since 2014, Paris has engineered various ways to include citizens in urban development using digital tools called “civic tech”.[[91]](#footnote-91) These digital tools not only facilitate greater transparency and responsiveness but also democratise the decision-making process by including a diverse range of voices in local governance. Examples include:

* “[Jemengage.paris](https://jemengage.paris.fr/annuaire%22%20%5Cl%20%22search-wrapper)” (“I engage”) is an app connecting people with NGOs for short missions based on their location, interests, and availabilities;
* “Dans Ma Rue” (“Fix My Street”) is a citizen-reporting app letting residents alert the city about problems such as potholes, broken playgrounds, missing road signs, etc. Users can send pictures and receive notifications about the progress of their demands;
* “Madame la Maire, j’ai une idée” (“Dear Mayor, I have an idea”) is a digital collaborative space where Parisians can submit ideas on different topics for review by the mayor’s office. As of 2018, the platform serves as more of a directory with links to other forums (e.g. the Participatory Budget, the Citizen Councils) and upcoming events where citizens can participate. However, since 2020, its functions have been integrated into the new platform, [decider.paris](https://decider.paris.fr/), which serves as the primary hub for citizen engagement and idea submission in Paris;
* “[Budget Participatif](https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/)” (Participatory Budget) is an online and offline platform for citizens to submit ideas and share decisions in the allocation of the municipal investment fund.

In the context of an administrative push for increased public participation, Paris's “Budget Participatif” stands as another avenue through which Parisians have been empowered to influence matters of municipal governance. The inaugural cycle of PB was introduced promptly after Mayor Hidalgo took office, operating with a relatively modest budget and permitting citizens solely to vote on project proposals submitted by the City Council. Nonetheless, Parisians displayed a strong enthusiasm for participation, with the total number of voters surpassing 40,000. This pilot initiative proved successful with the budget growing steadily from 100 million EUR to 500 million EUR annually,[[92]](#footnote-92) leading to its expansion into a city-wide institution that now offers multiple avenues for Parisians to engage in the allocation of public funds.[[93]](#footnote-93)

As an expert in citizen participation (and a former advisor to the Mayor of Paris, specialising in digital strategy and open government) notes that PB may have a transformative impact in the long run, as citizens learn about this process and how it truly helps them understand how cities work.[[94]](#footnote-94)

In comparison, other forms of participation, such as neighbourhood councils, have proven less effective in Paris. “The organisational challenges and low participation rates make it a less practical option, particularly given the diverse backgrounds and political viewpoints of Parisians. It doesn’t really represent all communities of the city. Ensuring equal representation across sociological divides remains a significant challenge for the city administration when using this form of participation.”[[95]](#footnote-95)

Additionally, despite efforts to promote innovative digital platforms for citizen participation, Paris has faced challenges with platform sustainability and citizen fatigue. The rapid turnover of platforms has left citizens uncertain about which platforms are currently active, leading to decreased participation, notes the expert. Furthermore, commenting on digital voting, while theoretically convenient, in practice presents significant challenges due to the scrutiny of security systems. As a result, physical voting has proven more successful, as it allows for personal interactions and outreach efforts, particularly in engaging disconnected communities (such as meeting citizens in the streets, raising awareness of certain initiatives, and encouraging them to vote directly).

Moreover, according to the expert, one best practice from Paris that could be adapted in other contexts, called "[Volunteers from Paris](https://www.paris.fr/pages/volontaires-de-paris-engagez-vous-6922)," has seen success in recruiting volunteers from the Parisian community to participate in various civic activities. These volunteers serve as ambassadors for citizen engagement, helping to bridge the gap between the government and the citizens they serve. This platform is fully run by the city administration.

In Strasbourg, in addition to more traditional forms of participation like the citizen’s council, neighbourhood council, youth council, and the foreign residents' council dedicated to engaging foreign residents in community activities and addressing their concerns, the ***Citizen's Jury*** has emerged as a successful mechanism. This process involves selecting a representative group of citizens to deliberate on specific issues, such as evaluating events such as the annual Christmas market, where interest among citizens has been steadily growing. This increased interest serves as evidence of the market's significance in the community. Furthermore, ***Participatory Budgeting*** has become one of the most popular forms of citizen participation in Strasbourg, thanks to its accessibility and straightforward procedures, as emphasised by the Deputy-Mayor of Strasbourg, who noted that people require minimal explanations to engage with it.

The main challenges in Strasbourg for engaging citizens in participation stem from time constraints due to busy work schedules. Additionally, ensuring effective communication of participation opportunities to all residents and making mechanisms accessible to diverse populations can be challenging notes Deputy-Mayor of Strasbourg.[[96]](#footnote-96) Despite these obstacles, participatory initiatives such as Participatory Budgeting (PB) and Citizen's Jury showcase Strasbourg's commitment to promoting citizen engagement and democratic decision-making. Efforts aimed at addressing these challenges and enhancing participation can play a pivotal role in strengthening democracy and fostering a sense of community ownership in Strasbourg.

In Poitiers, a city in western France, citizen participation has been considered as a transversal approach since 2022, when a new municipal council was elected. This approach includes three priorities:

* Developing a culture of participatory design for projects of the Metropolitan area of Grand Poitiers and Poitiers municipality;
* Experimenting democratic innovation, notably through direct participation or more structured methodologies (such as deliberations);
* Developing as much as possible the involvement of citizens in the decision process (through co-construction, and concertation)

One example of this transversal approach was developed within the context of a socio-cultural center and focuses on empowering young migrants that are at the end of the period during which they are supported by social services. This is done through the introduction of a platform called "Pouvoir d'agir" (power to act), which enables young adults to raise issues they encounter during their integration process to policymakers. This process started as a pilot project in cooperation with researchers and social workers and was further developed through a formal contract with the French state. In the context of its local development policies, the State has to agree with the municipality on a two-year contract, in the case of Poitiers it covered five priority areas, including housing and sports/cultural activities. In the latest contract Poitiers managed to include migrant participation as one of the priorities.

In addition, there is citizen participation in urban planning through the establishment of a strategic mission that emphasises consultation projects for the development of Grand Poitiers. This includes experimenting with direct democracy through neighbourhood committees and development councils. There are also initiatives to involve citizens in climate action and mobility plans through assemblies and consultations at both the city and regional levels. Another focus is on youth engagement and education, encouraging co-decision-making through initiatives like the Youth Municipal Council and collaborative projects with high schools and vocational training institutes.

Despite ongoing efforts to increase citizen participation, there are several challenges and limitations identified by the local municipality representative. One of the first challenges is the limitation of the law. There is some vagueness regarding the possibilities of a municipality to involve citizens in the co-decision, this creates a grey zone in which the central government, through the intervention of the “préfet” (head of the deconcentrated unit of the state) can prevent the decision of the citizens to be implemented. Another difficulty is to engage vulnerable populations, despite efforts like door-to-door campaigns. Only half of those approached actually participate. Another challenge is the lack of citizen trust in participation initiatives. Lastly, there are limitations in participatory budgeting, as it tends to prioritise consumer-oriented or immediate individual interests.[[97]](#footnote-97)

## Spain

France's long-standing commitment to promoting citizen participation in local governance is mirrored by Spain's emphasis on empowering its citizens to actively engage in decision-making processes at the local level through centralised digital platforms.

The legal framework for local governance in Spain is mainly defined by the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and the Local Regime Law of 1985 (Ley Reguladora de las Bases del Régimen Local). These fundamental documents establish the structure, responsibilities, and functioning of local administrations, highlighting the significance of citizen participation. Furthermore, Spain's decentralised system, where autonomous communities have their own powers and regulations, enhances citizen involvement through region-specific laws and statutes.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In Spain, particularly in Barcelona, several key forms of citizen participation are employed, each with its own level of success and challenges. ***Neighborhood Councils and Assemblies*** -these provide platforms for citizens to voice their concerns and participate in decision-making processes at the local level. They have a long tradition in Barcelona and are deeply ingrained in the city's political culture; ***Public Consultations and Hearings*** - these involve seeking feedback from citizens on various issues and projects. While classical, they remain important for engaging citizens in decision-making processes. ***Participatory budgeting, and digital participation platforms.*** In addition, deliberative processes like ***citizen juries*** promote informed decision-making on complex issues, fostering consensus and civic engagement. Participatory budgeting initiatives across municipalities have bolstered transparency and resource distribution alignment with community priorities, exemplifying successful citizen-driven governance models.

According to a representative from the Barcelona City Council, the Participatory Budgeting (PB) initiative, which was introduced for the first time in 2020, has rapidly gained popularity among citizens. They are currently in the process of preparing the second edition of PB for 2024. One of the main reasons for its attractiveness is the active involvement of citizens from the very beginning. In this process, citizens not only propose projects but also defend and improve them, thereby feeling a sense of ownership over the initiatives.[[99]](#footnote-99) However, some critics argue that PB may be more superficial than transformative, primarily due to the constraints of limited budgets. They contend that PB tends to focus on smaller-scale projects that may not have a significant impact nationwide. This viewpoint is supported by the representative of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD).[[100]](#footnote-100) In contrast to PB, other forms of participation mechanisms in Barcelona seem to generate less interest or trust among citizens. This is largely attributed to the institutionalisation of these tools and the perceived disconnect from citizens' actual concerns. Unlike PB, where citizens feel a sense of ownership from the outset, these alternative mechanisms often lack the same level of engagement and empowerment among the public.[[101]](#footnote-101)

***The*** ***Popular Legislative Initiative*** is a collaborative mechanism spanning various levels of governance, including city, regional, and national levels. Under this framework, citizens propose legislation, which is subsequently deliberated upon and decided by the respective legislative bodies. Another available participation form is ***the Municipal Action Plan*** is a strategic blueprint tailored for urban development, fostering community engagement through participation bodies that meet regularly. This plan is formulated every three or four years by incoming administrations following democratic elections, ensuring alignment with the evolving priorities and needs of the city.

Recent studies[[102]](#footnote-102) in Spain have identified several successful participation mechanisms that have effectively empowered citizens and strengthened local governance. For example, the city of Barcelona has implemented innovative ***digital platforms*** such as [Decidim](https://decidim.org/) Barcelona enabling residents to co-create policies, participate in decision-making processes, and engage in dialogue with city officials. Decidim a free open-source participatory democracy platform for cities and organisations, but Decidim is more than a digital platform. It can be used by a public or private organisation with hundreds or thousands of potential participants, such as a city council, a university, a civil society organisation (e.g., a neighbourhood association), a trade union, or a cooperative. Decidim can provide space for participation (initiatives, assemblies, processes, or consultations) and enrich them through the multiple available components (face-to-face meetings, surveys, proposals, voting, follow-up of results, comments and many more).

The Barcelona City Council initiated the project in 2016 to establish a participatory platform for engaging citizens. Decidim, Barcelona’s inaugural digital democracy tool, facilitates citizen involvement in municipal budgeting too. Launched in 2020, the participatory budgeting process is conducted through Decidim's online platform, allowing citizens to allocate up to 75 million euros (5% of the total budget) from 2020 to 2023. This initiative holds particular significance for Barcelona due to its status as a technology hub, underscored by its tenure as the Mobile World Capital and the 2014 European Capital of Innovation. Additionally, Barcelona's Democratic Innovation (DI) strategy, bridging democracy and technology, aligns with its designation as the first European capital of Democracy.

Since Decidim was established as a tool to support the City Council of Barcelona in its efforts to increase citizens’ involvement in decision-making, it has been supporting more than 400 municipalities, institutions, organisations, etc., that today use Decidim as a main platform for consultation. This digital tool has enhanced transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity in local governance, demonstrating the potential of technology to facilitate citizen participation.

The effectiveness of these participation mechanisms relies on several factors, as highlighted by a representative from the Barcelona City Council, including the implementation of feedback practices, transparency in decision-making processes, and the evident impact of citizen input. Witnessing tangible changes resulting from their involvement serves as a strong incentive for citizens to further engage in participatory activities. Similarly, citizens may feel discouraged from participating due to notably negative experiences such as instances of corruption or unfulfilled promises, which can foster disillusionment and diminish citizen engagement. Additionally, concerns may arise regarding the limited representativeness of some mechanisms, such as Citizen Assemblies, which may not fully reflect the diversity of the population. This raises questions about inclusivity. When citizens perceive that their participation fails to produce meaningful change, they may become disengaged from the process altogether.[[103]](#footnote-103)

# Conclusion

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) region presents a diverse landscape of governance mechanisms and citizen participation across its six countries. While significant strides have been made since the initiation of the EaP in 2009, the journey towards strong participatory democracy remains fraught with challenges. Despite some progress achieved in transparency and modernising legislation in local governments, shared challenges such as low levels of citizen engagement in decision-making processes persist in all EaP countries. Moreover, the centralised control maintained in Belarus and Azerbaijan, coupled with stalled public administration reforms, further exacerbates participatory practices of democracy in these countries. Outdated legal frameworks governing citizen participation, with the majority of existing norms introduced into legislation between 1991 and 1995, fail to align with modern approaches and societal needs in Belarus. Additionally, a lack of political will from central governments to grant real power to local authorities, along with the necessary finances to encourage citizen participation in decision-making, remains another shared challenge in the EaP region.

Despite variations in legal frameworks and historical contexts, shared challenges and successful approaches have emerged across the European Union, offering valuable insights into effective strategies for involving citizens in decision-making. However, persistent obstacles exist in terms of fostering active citizen involvement at the local level and building trust, requiring continued efforts.

In Germany, citizens often face difficulties in navigating the complex network of federal, state, and EU laws and regulations (legal constraints), leading to the rejection of their petitions and growing frustration. Addressing this issue requires immediate action, such as implementing robust proactive awareness campaigns to enhance the quality of participation. Similarly, in France, although local authorities are committed to promoting digital participation through various platforms, citizens struggle to keep up with the evolving array of available resources. This lack of awareness can result in reduced motivation among citizens, underscoring the importance of improving communication channels and providing clear guidance on active platforms. Yet another common challenge among EU member states is to ensure inclusivity. This requires making efforts to actively engage diverse groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, and foreign residents, to foster a genuinely inclusive participatory process.

The research has identified several best practices in citizen participation that can be adapted in various Eastern Partnership (EaP) contexts. One such best practice recognised is ***participatory budgeting***, which empowers citizens to directly influence the allocation of public funds and promotes transparency and accountability. By ensuring people feel a sense of ownership from the outset, participatory budgeting guarantees success. As a result, the budget allocated to fund citizens' initiatives is increasing annually in EU countries.

In addition, innovative initiatives like ***Dialogue Tours*** and walking diagnostics under the ***Good Move*** initiative have been implemented to directly engage citizens, gather feedback, and fill the gaps on local issues. These initiatives effectively overcome participation barriers and empower community contributions. Other centralised digital platforms, like the one well practiced in Barcelona, could facilitate and boost citizen engagement in decision-making processes at the local level.

Proactive measures play a crucial role in bridging the divide between citizens and decision-making processes. These measures are essential for promoting awareness, simplifying procedures, and ensuring transparency. It is important to highlight the significance of continuous innovation, collaboration, and adaptation in order to encourage citizen participation in local governance. These efforts are fundamental in strengthening democracy and fostering a sense of ownership and belonging among citizens.

# Recommendations

As we reflect on the state of affairs in the EaP region, it becomes evident that progress alone is not enough. The road to true democratic governance demands unwavering commitment and collaborative efforts. Crucially, addressing the root causes of limited citizen engagement, centralised power structures, and the restriction of fundamental freedoms is paramount. Moving forward, enhancing mechanisms for citizen participation and decentralising governance must be prioritised. By fostering local democracy, transparency, and accountability, the EaP region can pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient democratic future. The true potential lies in the local approach, where local democracy is perceived to be closer to citizens. This allows for better experimentation with innovative forms of cooperation between local authorities and civil society.

Enhancing accountability among local authorities is crucial for fostering citizen engagement at the local level in Georgia. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for sustained efforts to attain authentic decentralisation, as local governments presently lack adequate autonomy from the central government to enact decisions that genuinely reflect the needs of their constituents.

While the legislation in Georgia is coherent and reflects good practices in the field of local governance and citizen participation, its implementation often falls short. As a result, citizens become discouraged and lose trust in the process. Therefore, it is crucial for local authorities to effectively exercise their powers to increase citizens’ engagement at the local level.

To enhance citizen participation, it is essential to prioritise increasing citizen awareness about current and alternative means of engagement at the local level. This objective requires a collaborative effort between local governments and civil society organisations.

Building upon the progress made in exploring alternative forms of citizen participation, as observed in the municipalities of Tskaltubo and Khoni, for instance, through the implementation of digital platforms for citizen feedback and the establishment of a Council of Persons with Disabilities, it is of paramount importance to sustain the search for novel channels of participation. This undertaking is in line with the organic law of Georgia and seeks to tailor participation approaches to better fit local circumstances and address the unique requirements of citizens.

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96. Interview with Carole Zielinski, Deputy- Mayor of Strasbourg on Local Democracy and European citizenship, Strasbourg, France, March 21, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Interview with Emmanuelle Redien and Khalid Rhimon, Poitiers city council officials, France, March 22, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Spain: Division of Powers, European Committee of the Regions, accessible via the following [link](https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Spain-intro.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Interview with Toñi Sánchez Hernández, Director of Democratic Innovation Services, Barcelona City, Spain, March 4, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Interview with Adrià Duarte, The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) coordinator, Spain, March 5, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Interview with Toñi Sánchez Hernández, Director of Democratic Innovation Services, Barcelona City, Spain, March 4, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Eszter Hartay, Emina Nuredinoska, Boglárka Szalma, New Dimensions for Public Participation Models to Enhance Engagment in the European Union, November 2023, European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, accessible via the following [link](https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/ECNL_New%20dimensions%20for%20public%20participation_Nov%202023%201.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Interview with Toñi Sánchez Hernández & Adrià Duarte, March 4-5, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)