

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Research Study on Participatory Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Democratic Resilience across Europe

“Reports on the effectiveness of participatory democracy and civic engagement approaches across Europe : towards a better definition of an impact assessment of participatory process ”

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The European Association for Local Democracy - [ALDA](#) is dedicated to promoting good governance and citizen participation at the local level across Europe and its neighbourhood. Established in 1999 at the initiative of the Council of Europe, ALDA has developed a strong network of local authorities, civil society organisations, and Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), working to strengthen participatory democracy and civic engagement.

This Terms of Reference is developed under the framework of the CERV Operating Grant and contributes directly to Task 2.1: “To provide evidence-based recommendations on EU policy priorities and strengthen ALDA’s advocacy role.”

It is also co-funded and strategically aligned with the [BOOST project](#) (“Balkan Optimizing Opportunities for Sustainable Transformation”), a regional programme that strengthens civil society in the Western Balkans through capacity building, funding, and partnerships to support democratic, economic, and social development in the context of EU enlargement.

This research study is developed and coordinated within **ALDA's Centre of Expertise on Participatory Democracy**. The Centre of Expertise serves as ALDA's knowledge hub, bringing together evidence, field experience, policy analysis, and innovative practices from across its network of members, Local Democracy Agencies (LDAs), local authorities, civil society organisations, and institutional partners.

2. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Across Europe, democratic systems are undergoing significant transformation. While democratic governance remains a cornerstone of the European project, it is increasingly challenged by declining trust in institutions, political polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and the growing appeal of anti-democratic narratives. These dynamics are particularly visible at the local level, where the interaction between citizens and public authorities is most direct and where democratic legitimacy is most immediately tested.

In response, there is a growing recognition at European and national levels that participatory democracy and civic engagement are essential to strengthening democratic resilience. A wide range of mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, deliberative processes, and community-led initiatives have been developed and implemented across different governance contexts. These approaches aim to enhance citizen involvement in

decision-making, rebuild trust in public institutions, and foster more inclusive and responsive governance.

Despite this increasing emphasis, there remains a significant gap in comparative, evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of such approaches. Existing knowledge is often fragmented, limited to specific national or local experiences, and insufficiently connected to broader policy frameworks. As a result, there is a lack of consolidated understanding of how participatory practices contribute to democratic resilience, under which conditions they are most effective, and how they can be adapted or scaled across different contexts.

At the same time, diverse governance environments across Europe characterised by varying levels of institutional capacity, civic space, and socio-economic conditions offer a wide range of experiences in citizen participation. In some contexts, participatory approaches are well-established and institutionalised, while in others they remain emerging or operate under more constrained conditions. This diversity provides a valuable opportunity to examine how participatory democracy functions in practice and how it can contribute to strengthening democratic systems in both stable and more challenging environments.

In parallel, the rapid evolution of digital tools and civic technologies, including emerging applications of artificial intelligence, is reshaping the ways in which citizens engage with public life. These developments create new opportunities to broaden participation, improve transparency, and enhance policy responsiveness, while also raising important questions related to inclusiveness, ethical use, and the quality of democratic processes.

In this evolving landscape, there is a clear need for a comprehensive, comparative, and practice-oriented research effort that:

- Bridges local experiences with European-level policy discussions
- Builds on concrete practices implemented by local authorities and civil society
- Identifies what works, under which conditions, and why
- Provides actionable insights to support more resilient, inclusive, and participatory democratic governance

Drawing on extensive field experience and a broad network of local stakeholders, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper and more structured understanding of the role of participatory democracy in reinforcing democratic resilience across Europe.

3. OVERALL OBJECTIVE

To assess the **effectiveness of participatory democracy and civic engagement approaches** in strengthening democratic resilience across Europe, and to generate **actionable policy recommendations** for EU institutions, local authorities, and civil society.

4. SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The research will:

- Analyse the current landscape of participatory democracy at the local level across Europe
 - o legislative context and main practices
 - o overview analysis over 6 countries (4 EU and 2 from Balkans)
- Evaluate the **impact of participatory practices on democratic resilience**, including resistance to anti-democratic narratives
 - o ALDA will provide the main scheme of indicators related to democratic resilience at the start of the research and the expert will enhance the proposal it and analyse 4 cases per country observed by bringing
- Identify and document **case studies** from ALDA's network (including LDAs and members)
 - o 10 cases by engaging with the Centre of Expertise's coordinator)
- Examine inclusion dimensions:
 - o Youth participation
 - o Gender equality
 - o Engagement of marginalised communities
- Explore **innovative approaches**, including:
 - o Civic tech and digital participation
 - o AI-supported civic engagement tools
- Produce **evidence-based policy recommendations** aligned with EU priorities

5. SCOPE OF WORK

The research will cover:

Geographical scope

- EU Member States (selected case studies)
- Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia)

Thematic scope

- Participatory democracy mechanisms (formal and informal)
- Civic engagement practices and tools
- Democratic resilience and resistance to extremism
- Role of local authorities and civil society cooperation
- Inclusion (youth, gender, vulnerable groups)
- Emerging practices (digital tools, AI, civic tech)

Analytical focus

- Comparative analysis across countries
- Identification of enabling and limiting factors
- Replicable and scalable models

6. KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How effective are participatory democracy approaches in strengthening democratic resilience?

How to explicit democratic resilience?

What is the relationship between regular citizen participation and resistance to anti-democratic narratives?

Which models of cooperation between local authorities and civil society are most impactful?

What barriers limit inclusive participation (youth, women, rural communities)?

What innovative tools (including AI) can enhance civic engagement?

Which practices can be scaled at EU level?

7. METHODOLOGY

The consultant/research team will:

- Conduct **desk research and literature review**
- Collect and develop **case studies** (as described above)
- Conduct interviews and/or focus groups with stakeholders (in coordination with the Center of Expertise coordinator)
- Ensure a **comparative and evidence-based approach**
- Integrate **BOOST project findings and regional insights**
- Analyse ALDA's internal resources and project experiences
- Capitalise on the expertise, networks, and knowledge generated through ALDA's Centre of Expertise and its members.

8. DELIVERABLES

Deliverable	Description	Timeline
Inception Report	Methodology, structure, research plan including a development of the indicators on Democratic Resilience	Week 3

Draft Report	Preliminary findings and case studies	Week 12
Final Report	Main analytical report (50-60 pages max) + annexes (case studies, data, etc.)	Week 14
Policy Brief	5–10 pages with key recommendations for EU-level advocacy	Week 16
Presentation	Presentation of the report in Brussels coordinated by ALDA (PPT of presentation) Presentation of the report in Skopje at the BOOST project final conference	At the end of the assignment February 2027

The final report will be produced in English, with summaries available in additional languages if required.

9. EXPECTED RESULTS

- Comprehensive **European-level report**
- Strong evidence base for **ALDA advocacy work**
- Identification of **replicable participatory models**
- Concrete **policy recommendations for EU institutions**
- Enhanced visibility of ALDA's **Centre of Expertise**

10. TIMELINE

Start date: 1 September 2026

Duration: Approximately 3 months

Flexibility possible upon agreement

11. APPLICATION PROCEDURE

Submission Documents

Interested applicants are invited to submit the following documents:

- **CV(s)** of the expert(s), highlighting relevant experience in participatory democracy, civic engagement, and policy research
- A **technical proposal** (max. 3 pages), including:
 - Understanding of the assignment
 - Proposed methodology and approach
 - Work plan and timeline

- A **detailed financial offer** (lump sum, in EUR, all costs included)
- At least **one example of previous similar work** (e.g. publication, report, or study)

ALDA reserves the right to combine the publication of this call with targeted outreach to selected experts and researchers with recognised expertise in participatory democracy and civic engagement.

12. SELECTION CRITERIA

Applicants must be nationals of an EU Member State.

Applications will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Relevance of experience and expertise
- Quality and clarity of the proposed methodology
- Previous work on similar topics
- Cost-effectiveness

13. FINANCIAL CONDITIONS

Lump sum: **€8,000** (indicative, subject to revision depending on scope)

Payments linked to deliverables approval

14. LOCATION

Remote work, with coordination with ALDA offices.

15. USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence (AI), is encouraged where it can enhance the quality, efficiency, and analytical depth of the research. This may include, for example, support in data analysis, literature review, or structuring large datasets.

However, the consultant is expected to ensure that:

- All outputs remain original, critical, and evidence-based, reflecting the expert's own analysis and judgement
- Any use of AI tools is transparent and clearly indicated where relevant
- Information generated or supported by AI is verified, contextualised, and validated through reliable sources
- Ethical standards are respected, including with regard to data protection, bias, and accuracy

AI tools should be used as supporting instruments and not as a substitute for substantive research, expert analysis, or stakeholder engagement.



16. REPORTING AND COORDINATION

The consultant will work under the supervision of ALDA's Secretariat and in coordination with the Centre of Expertise team

17. HOW TO APPLY

Applications should be submitted by email to: katica.janeva@alda-europe.eu and antonella.valmorbida@alda-europe.eu

Subject line: *Application – Research on Participatory Democracy and Democratic Resilience*

Deadline for submission: 20 July 2026

Only shortlisted candidates will be contacted.