



CITIES AS ARENAS OF POLITICAL INNOVATION IN THE STRENGTHENING OF DELIBERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

INSIGHT BRIEFING 1

Future challenges and opportunities for democracy
across Europe: An initial exploration of indicative signals
and drivers of change

JANUARY 2022

EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.



For more information:

euarenas.eu

Grant Agreement	959420
Duration	January 2021 – June 2024 (42 months)
Coordinator	University of Eastern Finland
Contact	Professor James Scott (james.scott@uef.fi)

About the document:

Name: **Insight Briefing 1, v1.0**
Authors: Georgia Davenport | People's Voice Media
Publication date: January 2022



EUARENAS has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement N° 959420.

Table of contents	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	4
Society Now: What is the media talking about?	4
COVID-19: Impact & Recovery	4
Globalisation, Climate Change & Industrialisation	5
Political & Democratic Engagement of Citizens	6
Signals of Change: What is driving change across Europe?	7
Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy	8
What does this mean for the future of deliberative and participatory democracies?	8
Method	9
References	10

Executive Summary

The media is both a window into, and a shaper of the ideologies and behaviours of society. Through it, we can catch glimpses of societies' future trajectories. As part of the **EUARENAS** project, with actors from the social, political and research spheres we have conducted a snapshot analysis of contemporary media discourses from across Europe. These insights have provided us with an understanding of current issues within society and we have used these to begin hypothesising about the future of our democracies.

From this initial work, we would like to pose three core questions that we feel are relevant to policy makers, researchers and civil society actors working in the domain of deliberative and participatory democracies:

- How do we mobilise people to be a part of creating the change they want to see, and move from talk to action?
- How do inequalities and structural issues impact on how our democracies work and who is included in them?
- How do we work with differing priorities between different people, organisations and countries in ways that make useful progress on issues?

Introduction

The media is both a window into, and a shaper of the ideologies and behaviours of society. Through looking at the discourses within the media, we can catch glimpses of societies' future trajectories. Media discourses can be understood as a way of viewing the world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), or as language used as a recreation of social, political, and cultural meaning (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014). Understanding discourses - like those represented in the media - enables us to decipher how such meanings come to be and potentially, how they can be changed (Hardy and Phillips, 2004). As such, media discourses are rich source material for future-thinking activities and are useful for identifying signals about our future and to explore the drivers of change in society.

As part of the **EUARENAS** project, snapshots of current affairs media content ranging from national newspapers to television broadcasts to online magazines from the UK, Poland, Italy, Finland, Germany and pan-European sources were gathered and analysed in order to scan the horizon for changes in society. This briefing explores the key elements of the discourse that emerged from these activities, including topics such as COVID-19, climate change, grassroots politics and activism. It also provides an overview of potential drivers of social change ranging from developments in technology to the polarisation of people's political views. This learning is pertinent to the study and realisation of deliberative and participatory democracy as it identifies the context, challenges and opportunities present in current discourses on society and democracy. The briefing concludes by recommending that actors with the social sphere, political institutions and knowledge hubs address three core questions in order to support the future of democracy across European societies at conceptual, structural and pragmatic levels.

Society Now: What is the media talking about?

COVID-19: Impact & Recovery

The global COVID-19 pandemic was a frequent topic of conversation in the media sources analysed. Of

particular reference was the impact that COVID-19 has had on specific demographics as a result of ineffective responses from government and leadership bodies.

"The elderly live isolated lives. They are socially, culturally and psychologically excluded from society and most significantly, they are excluded from the health care system."

An article published in Polityka paper titled "Starość przyszłością narodu" [The elderly - the future of the nation] exploring the issues associated with the aging population in Poland.

Elsewhere in the media, social exclusion was also discussed. One article highlighted how elderly people in Poland have become more isolated and excluded from society because of ill-thought-out strategies implemented by senior decision makers in response to the rising number of cases.

Globalisation, Climate Change & Industrialisation

The connection between globalisation, climate change and industrialisation was another theme which emerged from the analysis of the media content. In Italy, a lack of economic, environmental, and social sustainability has led to the breakdown of communities. The importation of resources from overseas has contributed to the breakdown of local industries and job losses. This has been amplified by the lack of consultation with communities and failure to organise retraining programmes, support systems and redevelopment plans.

"As a result of globalisation, widespread industrialisation has undergone drastic change, in recent years 80% of wood arrives as semi-finished products from other countries."

An article from OFFICINA investigating the relationship between new economies, territories and local development in the Friulian foothills of Italy.

Elsewhere, one source explored technology's impact on the agricultural industry in Africa. This article highlighted that the current demand for food is set to double due to population increases in Africa, when paired with the negative effects of climate change on the farming industry, food shortages are imminent. It positioned technology as a tool for positive change and emphasised how it can be implemented in a way that mutually benefits the environment, the farming industry and the communities involved.

"Managing both agriculture and the environment with sustainable and precision practices will help avoid exacerbating the factors that drive climate change"

An excerpt from an online article published on wired.it exploring the impact emerging technologies are having on countries in Africa.

It even referenced an anecdote of how technology had previously been utilised as a tool for 'female empowerment', helping women secure employment.

The importance of involving all citizens in plans to combat climate change was another topic explored in the sources. One piece argued that awareness and behavioural changes must exist on a national and personal scale to create real change.

"Most scientists agree that a "paradigm shift" is needed and that we must learn to move in a European and global context, actively participating in major international decarbonization projects and focusing on the most effective, promising and environmentally friendly options."

A segment of an article from Econopoly exploring climate neutrality challenges. It proposes strategies to lead an energetic transition, circular economy and verifies the suggestions' feasibility in Italy.

The message here was when people relate to issues on a personal level and can see how adapting their own actions and understandings will benefit themselves – that is when change is most likely to happen.

Political & Democratic Engagement of Citizens

The relationship between grassroots activism and governmental institutions, and how decision making and power is dispersed between the two was another key focus area in the media sources. There was debate around whether change should be led by institutions such as the EU or by grassroots organisations. Some sources argued that participatory democracy is possible in Europe, but only under the control of the EU, whereas others criticized the institution and raised concern over the need for reform.

“The Conference on the Future of Europe is now in full swing - and it may seem like another frivolous political EU process to some – another shop talk about the EU's future that talks a lot but changes little. But in reality it could be different. If all goes well, the conference could become a milestone in the history of the EU, leading towards a more participatory, more capable and more forward-looking Union.”

A quote from an article in EUOBSERVER that explores if the ‘Future Europe’ Conference could help fix climate change.

The chances of failure are high. But they don't have to be. If enough European citizens get involved and demand change, it will be hard for national leaders and the European authorities to ignore their voices.

A quote from an article on Politico.eu discussing the potential successes and failures of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the potential level of influence ‘ordinary citizens’ could achieve through mobilisation.

There were also conversations which explored the efficiency of a bottom-up approach to decision making processes. Some sources doubted the long-term capabilities of grassroots organisations, favouring the long-standing Commission-Council-Parliament model currently used by the EU.

At a more local level, in Gdańsk Poland, participatory budgeting was reported as a form of civic engagement in which residents of the community could put forward suggestions and ask questions to those in power. There was a mixed approach to reporting with some presenting it in a positive light, with case studies of successful implementation in which people representing different political views were brought together.

“If you have an idea, if you feel that something should be changed, please submit your proposal, call, ask questions. The city clerks are ready to help all the citizens willing to submit their proposals.”

An extract from an article published on the City of Gdańsk website inviting citizens to submit their participatory budgeting projects

One source however contradicted these successes and suggested public consultation had been prohibited by the city council and it's bureaucratic structure.

“Activists want public consultations regarding the forest at the pier in Brzeźno. The city replies that the legislation does not allow such consultations. The Green Wave calls the Gdańsk magistrate's decision a "scandal", and the authorities' action "lawlessness".”

A segment from a newspaper article in the Gazeta Wyborcza exploring an activists group's response to the proposed conversion of a local green space into a park with restaurant and hotel facilities.

Another topic which stood out was political engagement, particularly in reference to young people. In the

UK media, increasing disillusionment within young people of colour for the traditional political parties was explored. In particular, Labour’s failure to actively acknowledge and engage with current social movements and action meaningful change to counteract racism in the UK has caused many young voters to rethink which party to support.

“According to Salome, a failure to confront anti-Black racism and a lack of an active pitch to Black voters is taking its toll. “It’s this thing of taking us for granted,” she says. “Eventually, the party will lose young [Black] voters — I’ve already got older relatives and friends who have been voting Conservatives for the past couple of elections.”

An excerpt from a gal-dem magazine online article “Young people of colour are leaving the Labour party. How could Keir Starmer win them back?”

The article explored how the leaders of political parties significantly impact voters’ decision to back a party. From the sources examined, ineffective and unclear leadership is seen as what leads voters seeking alternative parties, even those on different ends of the political spectrum.

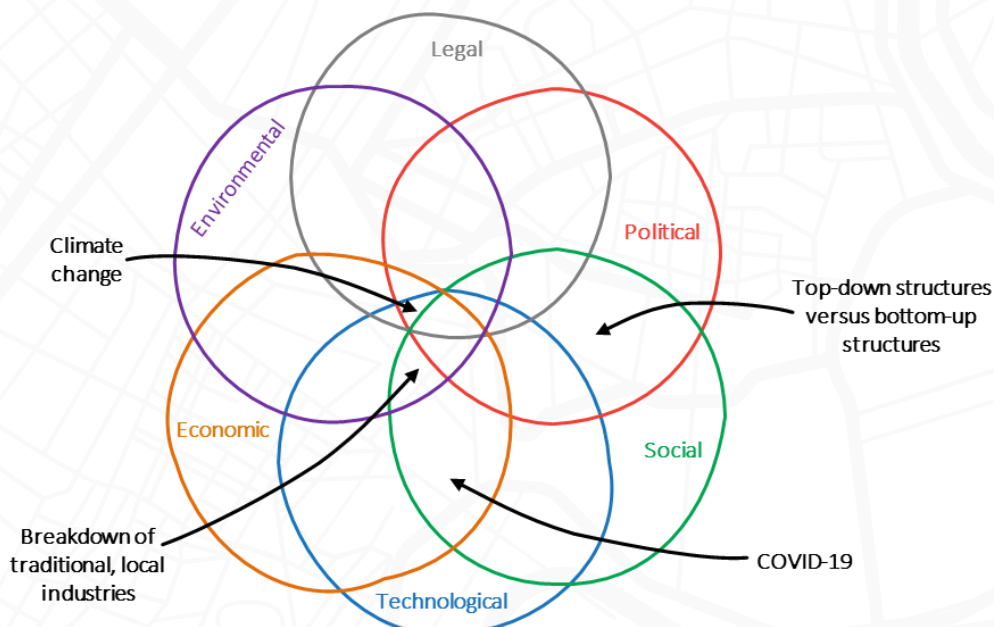
“Others are turning to local community activism. For Felix it is “direct action” that is most rewarding and changes the world. “As trans issues gain more conversation, it is important we meet that with the correct education,” he tells gal-dem. Some of the young people who spoke to gal-dem said they’re investing their energy in different areas, such as campaigning for workers’ rights and community safety.”

An excerpt from a gal-dem magazine online article “Young people of colour are leaving the Labour party. How could Keir Starmer win them back?”

It was indicated that whilst young people may be disillusioned from traditional power structures, the discourse did suggest that they are still engaged in social issues, protest and activism. This might not necessarily be displayed through formal voting practices but in grassroots activities.

Signals of Change: What is driving change across Europe?

From across the media sources examined in this snapshot analysis, several prominent drivers of change emerged that could be key to future deliberations about the world we live in. We’ve grouped these below, using the PESTLE framework and as the diagram depicts, these key drivers of change impact on many domains



Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy

Based on the analysis of the media sources and the discussions around the drivers of change with actors from the social, knowledge and political spheres, three core challenges to and opportunities for our democracies were identified.

Challenges

Polarisation of political views: Traditional and new media both play a role in cultivating the polarisation of people's thoughts and beliefs in their materials. This contributes to division and can limit the potential for the sharing of ideas and collaboration between different communities in a democratic context.

Impact of COVID-19 and climate change on existing inequalities in society: The impact of COVID-19 and climate change has and will disproportionately affect marginalised communities. Our democracies must acknowledge this impact on people's civic and political engagement, and seek to address this in order to create a more equal world and equitable participation of marginalised voices.

A shift between old, hierarchical power structures towards new, more horizontal power structures: The relationship between citizens and institutions is in flux, and now there are signs of a power struggle being played out between traditional forms of governance and grassroots or civic activism. This contestation is around issues such as how changes and decisions are made, how power and influence is shared etc.

Opportunities

Increasing media literacy of the public: This could be achieved through implementing education and training on how people can critically engage with media sources and develop a keener sense of information literacy (i.e., analysis, independent research, critical questioning of content etc.)

Utilising technology as a tool for positive social change: Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis has brought to the forefront the role of technology in people's lives across the world. We have seen that whilst technology has some negative consequences, in recent years societies have embraced it as a means to connect people and communicate ideas, provide working and educational opportunities and more. Improving access to and knowledge of technology, as well as providing training around how it can be used to create positive social change, provide opportunities for people - specifically communities who are underrepresented in current political arenas - to engage in the political and civic spheres.

The emergence of, and appetite for citizen change-making processes that can influence and inform traditional decision-making processes: The effective implementation of and/or growing knowledge and awareness of methods such as participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies are increasing both institutional and citizen understanding of how these types of approaches can improve existing democratic practices and citizen engagement in decision-making spaces. This is something that can be expanded further.

What does this mean for the future of deliberative and participatory democracies?

For policy makers, researchers and civil society actors working in the domain of deliberative and participatory democracies, some of the key issues that we need to get to grips with at conceptual, structural and pragmatic levels are:

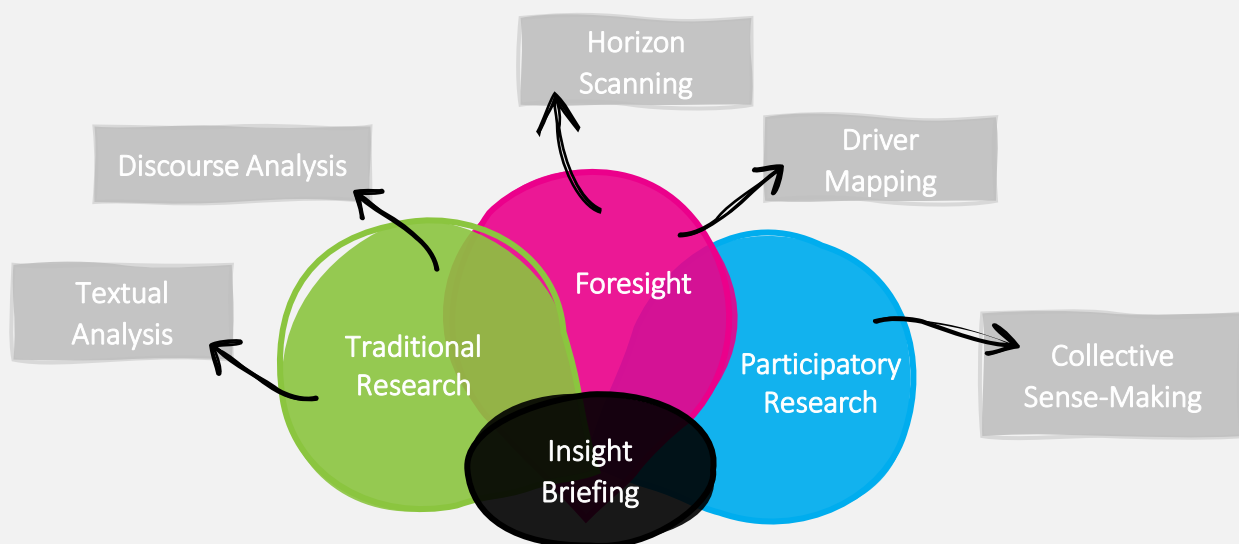
- How do we mobilise people to be a part of creating the change they want to see, and move from talk to action?
- How do inequalities and structural issues impact on how our democracies work and who is included in them?
- How do we work with differing priorities between different people, organisations and countries in ways that make useful progress on issues?

Method

This briefing has been compiled through ‘future thinking’ activities that have analysed and used discourses and textual readings from present day media by researchers working in the domain and via collective sense-making activities that involved actors from the social sphere (including citizens), knowledge hubs and political institutions. 24 current-affairs-based media sources were analysed ranging from traditional news outlets, such as print media and television broadcast, to more specialised content in the form of online magazines and social media content. They were a mixture of regional and national media content from the UK, Poland, Italy, Finland, Germany, as well as pan-European sources. The political leanings of the sources were from across the spectrum and all content utilised in this work was dated April - June 2020.

Collective sense-making activities were run in each of the countries and at a European level that utilised textual and discourse analysis, horizon scanning and driver-mapping approaches to engage a diversity of voices in the exploration of the data. In total, 91 participants took part and these included the following demographics:

- Young people aged 18-25 from Greater Manchester Youth Network’s Youth Panel, UK.
- Students from LUISS University’s Law Digital Innovation & Sustainability Network, Italy.
- People from Bulgaria, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Romania and Turkey who are now living in Berlin, Germany.
- Students, people from the LGBTQ+ community, Ukrainian migrants and older people, Poland.
- Volunteers from a not-for-profit organisation, Finland.
- Researchers, civil society actors, public service professionals, policy advisors and community leaders, Pan-European.



References

- Bonato, D., 2021. Neutralità climatica, come liberarci di 200 milioni di tonnellate di CO2. [online] Econopoly. Available at: <https://www.econopoly.ilsole24ore.com/2021/04/27/neutralita-climatica-co2/?refresh_ce=1> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Formella, M., 2021. Rusza Budżet Obywatelski 2022! Gdańszczanki i gdańszczanie mogą już składać projekty. [online] gdansk.pl. Available at: <<https://www.gdansk.pl/wiadomosci/rusza-budzet-obywatelski-2022-gdanzszczanki-i-gdanzszczanie-moga-juz-skladac-projekty,a,193744>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Greckhamer, T., & Cilesiz, S. (2014). Rigor, Transparency, Evidence, and Representation in Discourse Analysis: Challenges and Recommendations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), pp.422-443.
- Grieco, M., 2021. L'intelligenza artificiale può aiutare l'Africa a sconfiggere la malnutrizione. [online] Wired Italia. Available at: <<https://www.wired.it/attualita/tech/2021/05/07/africa-intelligenza-artificiale-malnutrizione/>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Hardy, C., and Phillips, N. (2004). Discourse and power in D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Osrick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, London: Sage.
- Jørgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2002). *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. SAGE.
- Leonardi, M., 2021. Nuove forme di metabolismo territoriale: La transizione socio-ecologica dei sistemi produttivi friulani. *OFFICINA*, [online] (33), pp.18-23. Available at: <https://issuu.com/antefermaedizioni/docs/33officina_web> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Meyer-Ohlendorf, N., 2021. Could 'Future Europe' conference actually help fix climate change?. [online] EUobserver. Available at: <<https://euobserver.com/opinion/151863>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Polityka.pl. 2021. Starość przyszłością narodu. [online] Available at: <<https://www.polityka.pl/opolityce/2119987,1,starosc-przyszloscia-narodu.read>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Saleem, Z., 2021. Young people of colour are leaving the Labour Party. How could Keir Starmer win them back?. [online] gal-dem.com. Available at: <<https://gal-dem.com/young-people-of-colour-leaving-the-labour-party/>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Taylor, P., 2021. Hijack the Conference on the Future of Europe!. [online] POLITICO. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-citizens-ideas-online-participation/>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].
- Wiśniowska, J., 2021. Burza wokół zabudowy w Brzeźnie. Miasto: "Nie będzie konsultacji społecznych". Zielona Fala: "Przestańcie łamać uchwałę Rady Miasta". [online] Trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl. Available at: <<https://trojmiasto.wyborcza.pl/trojmiasto/7,35612,26997219,burza-wokol-zabudowy-w-brzeznie-miastonie-bedzie-konsultacji.html?disableRedirects=true>> [Accessed 9 December 2021].