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| | |
|--|-----------|
| TABLE OF CONTENTS | 3 |
| HUNGARY'S ILLIBERAL PROJECT AND THE SPECTRE OF EUROPEAN (DIS)INTEGRATION | 4 |
| - James W. Scott, University of Eastern Finland | |
| FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY: HOW TO IMPROVE THE PRECONDITIONS FOR INCLUSIVE, ACCESSIBLE AND HORIZONTAL PARTICIPATORY AND DELIBERATIVE PRACTICES | 20 |
| DEMOCRACY NOW, DEMOCRACY IN THE FUTURE | 21 |
| - Hayley Trowbridge, People's Voice Media | |
| MAKING PARTICIPATORY AND DELIBERATIVE WORK | 22 |
| - Matti Fritsch & Trang Nguyen, University of Eastern Finland | |
| - Wojciech Ufel, SPWS University | |

A black and white photograph of a busy pedestrian street in a European city, likely Budapest. The street is wide and paved with cobblestones, featuring large circular and rectangular patterns. Numerous people are walking, some in groups, some alone. In the foreground, a person with a backpack is walking towards the camera. To the left, a person is pushing a stroller. The street is lined with multi-story historic buildings with ornate facades, arched windows, and balconies. In the background, a large, prominent building with a dome and a spire is visible. The overall atmosphere is one of a vibrant, historic urban environment.

HUNGARY'S ILLIBERAL PROJECT AND THE SPECTRE OF EUROPEAN (DIS)INTEGRATION

Hungary's Illiberal Project and the Spectre of European (Dis)integration

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Introduction

While narratives of European Union decline have existed almost as long the ambitious goals of integration, contemporary debate regarding the EU's potential (dis)integration has acquired a heightened sense of urgency, reflecting numerous crises and the more recent impacts of the Covid pandemic. Much of the debate focuses on the 'economic centrality' of the EU's problems (see Hadjimichalis 2021) which is evidenced by the consequences of neo-liberal policies aimed at competitiveness that have unravelled solidarity, increased socio-economic disparities and weakened social protections. Other recent work has highlighted the socio-spatial quandary of regional divisions within the EU, partly as a result of long-term path dependencies but also as a product of policy decisions that have privileged major economic centres at the expense of less dynamic areas. These factors have contributed to generating 'geographies of discontent' (Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez-Pose 2020) and the perception that many places and their inhabitants within the EU 'don't count' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Moreover, de Vries (2022) suggests that Europe's dilemma is essentially cultural as identification with and adherence to its defining values such as human rights, human dignity and the rule of law have been called into question.¹ Furthermore, as Kaunert, Pereira and Edwards (2020) document, despite the relative stability of the EU, 'core fears' of Europeans have shifted towards migration and refugees since the mid-2010s, generating a self-identity and legitimacy crisis within the EU and political opportunities for right-wing extremism. Within this backdrop of EU crisis, the burgeoning of neo-nationalism, populism and illiberal political ideas has raised alarm that the EU's decline and lack of unity might be difficult to reverse. The spectre of 'de-europeanization' (Delanty 2021, Nivet 2016) suggests that national interests could ultimately fragment the EU.

Particularly with the advent of Hungary's self-proclaimed 'illiberalism', the EU's identity as a political community held together by shared democratic values has been openly questioned. Although right-wing populism and illiberalism have strengthened within the EU as a whole, it is in Central European member states, Hungary and Poland in particular, where these EU-sceptical sentiments have taken the form of concerted and sustained political projects. Reasons for this situation have been expounded by numerous scholars (Havlík 2018, Kazharski 2018). Unquestionably, post-1989 transformation was disruptive to the societies of central and eastern European states in many senses; despite new freedoms the construction of democratic institutions enjoying wide popular legitimacy proceeded fitfully (Ágh 2010, Hankiss 2003, Sztompka 2004). At the same time, disappointment with the benefits of EU accession and membership was exacerbated both by the financial and economic crisis of 2008/9 and the 2015 influx of refugees fleeing regional conflict (Cichocki 2017). As Krastev and Holmes (2020) argue, disillusionment with the 'liberal light that failed' as well as a sense of humiliation have fed to illiberal and neo-nationalist contestations of the EU mainstream in new member states. Indeed, discontent with the EU has opened up opportunities for political forces that derive influence and power through an affirmation of national identity and sovereignty as well as 'traditional values'.

¹ Europe must reimagine its cultural policies, Gijs de Vries, <https://socialeurope.eu/europe-must-reimagine-its-cultural-policies>.

The burgeoning debate indicates that the roots and rationalities of illiberal politics within the EU are complex. Questions also remain regarding illiberalism's significance as a reflection of the EU's present disarray (Mos 2020). What is evident is that economic, political, cultural and psychological processes work together in producing a sense of insecurity and anxiety within the EU upon which illiberalism is dependent. Following on research perspectives developed by Mitzen (2018), Rumelili (2018), Steele and Homolar (2019) and others, I will argue that the concept of ontological (in)security allows for highly insightful analysis of the mechanisms through which illiberalism both contests and, perhaps counter-intuitively, affirms the European Union. In other words, ontological insecurities related to national, cultural and social identities are manipulated in ways that target a disintegration of the EU in its present form and its 'reintegration' as a community of sovereign nations and 'traditional' values. It is common knowledge that the illiberal need for internal and external enemies as well as a sense of national struggle can only be sustained within a permanent process of demonizing political and cultural 'others'. Here, the ontological security approach will be employed in order to illustrate how illiberal manipulations of multi-layered identity concerns and anxieties simultaneously reflect contestations and affirmations of the European Union. In the case of Hungary, Viktor Orbán and his national-conservative coalition government have sought to create narrative hegemony of a Christian Europe while imposing nativist understandings of national identity that are unambiguous and clearly demarcated according to levels of adherence to Orbán's visions of a 'united' country. This drive for hegemony also entails a stark social bordering or 'boundary-making' strategy (see Pirró and Stanley 2021) with the aim of mobilizing popular fears and marginalizing the political and social others that Orbán's government exploits in order to maintain its 'revolutionary' image. However, while the European Commission, many international NGOs and key politicians, for example from the European Green Party fraction, are understood as 'Schmittian enemies', the EU itself is alternatively narrated as a potential space of national self-realization.

In this paper I will specifically focus on discursive arguments and political practices that serve to consolidate an (illiberal) sense of national and European 'self' while, at the same time, forging a conservative and autocratic political environment that also extends into the organization of civil society and everyday life (Kóvér et al. 2021). The central narratives I will investigate are: 1) a messianic understanding of national rebirth through 'liberation' from liberalism and 2) the construction of an alternative European project centred around national interests and cultures. In addition, the paper will link these narratives to political practices of boundary-making as reflected in social norming and exclusion cement divisions between 'national' and 'opposition' ways of thinking. The research that informs this essay is based both on primary sources, which include political speeches and official Hungarian government documents, and secondary sources including academic research, media reports and commentary. The main focus is on the period starting 2014. With regard to European (dis)integration, the evidence supports the argument that Orbán's illiberalism reflects both the fragmented nature of the European Union as well as the interdependencies that sustain the EU as a political community. Delanty (2021) has indicated that, because of its propensity to polarize society and lack of a clear project of social development, populist nationalism is ultimately a dangerous but unsustainable political movement. Ironically perhaps, recent polls suggest that the EU remains highly popular in Hungary (see Europhobe government, eurofriendly population). *Nepszava felmeres ...* Without downplaying real threats to democratic societies, I argue that illiberalism does not signify 'de-europeanization' or an unravelling of the EU but it does reflect the complexity of a more heterogeneous and fractious 27-member Union.

European (Dis)integration, Ontological Security and the Challenge of Illiberal Politics

Europeanization is a powerful geopolitical imaginary according to which economic integration, socio-political interaction and socialization are creating a common space based on a recognition of mutual interdependence. However, Europeanization understood as a convergence of values and governance practices, now competes with counter-narratives of disintegration fed by numerous insecurities, such as economic anxieties, fears of undocumented migration, and a perceived loss of control over everyday affairs (Kaunert, Pereira and Edwards 2021). Scenarios of European (Union) decline have greatly increased in number since the beginning of the new Millennium, fed by a series of crises or crisis-like situations that challenge the ability of the EU to evoke a sense of coherent political community. Costis Hadjimachalis (2021) identifies the year 2009, and the global economic crisis that emerged, as a watershed of sorts, marking the end of a long period of relative stability and intelligibility of EU economic and political integration. At one level, narratives of disintegration confirm the realisation that the Europe of 1960 no longer represents the present reality of European multiplicity (Kaunert, Pereira and Edwards 2021) and that the EU has always walked a thin line between affirmation and contestation (Bürkner 2020). Nevertheless, the potential influence and consequences of such narratives leave little room for complacency. Populism and illiberalism have been identified as indicators of socio-political and cultural disintegration and Europe's crisis is part of a larger narrative of global disorder that has been bolstered by threats posed to the rule of law by President Donald Trump and other leaders (Cooley and Nexon 2021). Furthermore, as Lamour (2022: 8) argues: "Right-wing populist stakeholders position themselves in [a] multiscale European power struggle, in which Euroscepticism and a rejection of neoliberalism and globalization have been growing since the 2000s."

There is no universal or simple explanation for this state of affairs. Concrete material concerns as well as subjective feelings of insecurity and alienation feed political contestations of the status quo and support for populism. According to Andres Velasco (2020: 21), the populist understanding of politics is intrinsically one based on conflict and "rests on a triad: denial of complexity, anti-pluralism, and a personalist approach to political representation." This idea is echoed in Jan-Werner Mueller's (2016: 19-20) assertion that "[p]opulism is not about taxation (nor about jobs, or income inequality), but about "who gets to represent the people and how." In other words, "populism is a kind of identity politics. It is always us against them." Indeed, the condition of European Union (dis)integration becomes somewhat clearer when populism and illiberal politics are linked to questions of national identity and European belonging. In one sense, illiberal challenges to the EU mainstream are manifestations of contested interpretations of national identity and purpose as well as conflicting political claims of legitimacy in representing the 'nation' within Europe.

Catarina Kinnvall (2018), among others, has demonstrated how a focus on ontological security reveals ways in which subjective feelings of wellbeing and/or a lack thereof, as well as emotional reactions to perceived threats are major shapers of policy discourse and practice. Both material and highly subjective factors are constitutive of ontological security, a state of being which entails the pursuit of a stable sense of identity in order to interpret a complex world and act within it. Ontological security involves, among other things, a constant process of creating and recreating narratives of a national sense of Self, often through the emphasis of behaviours, values, and historical memories that stabilise the identity of a given country (Rumelili 2018). Beyond this, however, ontological security involves the stability of ideas, values and points of common reference that create a sense of group belonging (Mitzen 2006). Narratives of national identity are instrumental in interpreting the social world as well as maintaining the biographical continuity of political communities. Such narratives can also involve a break with uncomfortable pasts (Della Sala 2016)

and as well reinterpretations of history that serve to consolidate a sense of national identity.

Similarly, ontological security offers a framework through which to interpret challenges of creating a European political and security community (Della Sala 2016; Mitzen 2006; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017). For example, Bahar Rumelili (2018) argues that temporal othering with regard to historical memory – i.e. moments of national re-birth with regard to overcoming traumatic events and legacies of fascism, communism, war, etc. – was central to the constitution of the EU's identity as a political community. As Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen (2018), Rumelili (2018) and others suggest, challenges to the EU's self-identity are reflected in disruptions of narratives of European progress as well as in 'Eurosceptic' sentiment that challenges the EU's legitimacy. This is exacerbated by narratives of East-West 'Europeanness' which suggest that deep socio-political and cultural divisions are weakening EU unity. According to Maria Mälksoo (2019), the trope of Central and Eastern European 'in-betweenness' is a reflection of EU identity anxieties but is also a platform for the development of counter-narratives through which illiberal political forces resituate the nation within the European context (McMahon and Kaiser 2021). Studying the cases of Russia and India respectively, Curanović (2021) and Kinnvall (2019) have indicated that populism and illiberalism are often bolstered by the creation of exceptionalities in terms of a religious resurgence, cultural renaissance or a unique national destiny that give political leaders a mandate to 'rebuild' the nation.

According to Rix (2021) challenges of radical uncertainty such as those generated by liberalization and globalization, have been met by the creation of narratives that re-establish, or aim at re-establishing, a sense of 'self-identity' and thus a sense of certainty about national place in the world. Following this line of argumentation, ontological security issues are reflected in the EU's self-identity and legitimacy crisis and its struggles to achieve "epistemic coherence in times of uncertainty" (Natorski 2016 4) as well as in right-wing nationalist contestations of the EU's liberal self-image. In real terms Europeanization is not teleological. It is a process that is conditioned by integration but also by socio-spatial imbalances, centre-periphery tensions (Bulhari-Gulmaz and Rumford 2015, Celata and Coletti 2019) as well as multifarious national experiences and narratives that link national pasts with European futures (Della Sala 2018). Central Europe's process of accession to and membership in the EU has involved finding a place within an already established political community. Moreover, central and eastern European member states have very different histories from the founding core group and, as Mälksoo (2010) states, they have also challenged the imposition of EU-European identities based on western interpretations of post-World War II experience. Common to all post-socialist states, at least in general terms, is the experience of societal transformation and the socially polarizing effects of economic reform, particularly of neo-liberal reforms necessitated by European integration. Another issue is certainly the narration of an 'East-West divide' within Europe and the European Union.

This divide has been conceptualised in rather different ways: as a reflection of structural and socio-economic asymmetries, as historical and cultural difference and as an expression of core-periphery relations between old and new member states (Ágh 2010, Kuus 2007, Müller 2014, Zarycki 2014). 'Illiberal Eastness' is itself a geopolitical imaginary based on normative notions of Europeanization and a specific self-image of the EU. Maria Mälksoo (2015, 2018) considers that 'Eastern Europe' itself represents an imaginary of ontological threat to the European Union's sense of self-identity, a threat that is framed in terms of cultural contestation, anachronistic nationalist impulses and a fundamental questioning of the EU's core values. It is a narrative of East-West division and encounters with a European 'Other' that serves to heighten anxieties related to the future trajectory of European integration and the legitimacy of the EU itself. However, the inverse of this Eastern spectre of threat is that of ontological insecurities experienced

by the new (post-socialist) member states themselves as latecomers to the European 'family' and a need to find a stable sense of political self within a new geopolitical and geoeconomics environment.

The confluence of various insecurities have provided a backdrop for illiberalism as evidenced in the political construction of crisis and manipulation of the plight of refugees in 2015. Moreover, illiberalism and right-wing populism are at heart drivers of as well as exploiters of socio-economic and political fragmentation; they require conflict and a struggle against 'Schmittian enemies' (Bunikowski 2018) while rejecting everyday realities of cultural change, migration and multiculturalism. In appropriating an ontological security approach to understanding the EU's 'illiberal turn', I would like to empathize two interrelated points that will be elaborated in more detail below with specific reference to the Orbán government's twin project of nation-building and illiberal democracy. The first of these concerns narratives of national exceptionalism that have been mobilized in order to secure the ideational hegemony of conservative notions of nation and Europe. The second point relates to the marginalization of ideas, groups and individuals that do not conform to illiberal visions of society. As Steele and Homolar (2019: 214) have commented: "Boundary-making practices, especially those relating to emotionally charged processes of exclusion based on racism, xenophobia and nationalism, are inevitably implicated in populist politics."

Hungarian Illiberalism as a Domestic and European Project

Nagy and Nagy (2013), Pisciotta (2016), Varró (2008) and others have observed that the quest for national consolidation in response to profound political, social and economic change has deeply affected the politics of Central European member states. As the EU-integration experience has shown, attitudes towards the EU in these states have varied widely and oscillated between enthusiasm and ambivalence, reflecting tensions between liberalism, conservatism and populism. At heart has been the question of national purpose in a new Europe and how best to guide complex and often painful processes of societal transformation. In the case of Hungary, the shift from liberalism, broadly understood, to neo-national illiberalism has been facilitated by the perceived failures of pro-EU governments to address socio-economic inequalities and provide a credible vision of national development within the EU (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). As will be elaborated below, the sources of Orbán's illiberal power involve a weaving together of various narratives of historical memory, national identity and belonging, as well as national purpose and Europeanness within the wider context of political community, epitomized by the declaration, in popular and social media, of Hungary as a "proud and strong European country".² As will be demonstrated, these different narratives reflect the salience of ontological (in)security concerns that are addressed in the creation a new sense of direction and clarity, the overcoming of perceived national weakness and elimination of ambiguities regarding Hungary's European heritage and place in Europe.

Political Messianism and Narratives of National Rebirth

The illiberal project of Viktor Orbán's government has sought to fill the 'spiritual vacuum' left by the political mistakes of post-1989 governments and economic austerity and has sought to unite the country behind a pathos-filled metanarrative of national re-birth. At one level, Orban's strategy has involved the exploitation

² See, for example, this 12 December 2020 post on the Fidesz' facebook page that declares Hungary "a strong and proud European country that stands by its opinions and interests." <https://www.facebook.com/FideszHU/posts/10160393682979307/>. Access 25 June 2022.

of material insecurities and deep-seated frustrations, consolidating domestic political power by appropriating critical debates on security and creating a hegemonic narrative of 'national interest', centred around patriotism, Christianity, family, work and national identity (Scott 2017). At another level, however, the Hungarian political scientist János Dobszay (2022) has argued that Fidesz's political power has been based on a 'political religion' that offers pathos and commemorative spectacle, exploiting historical memory, emotions and pent-up frustrations. Orbán's messianic and charismatic message has served to fill a perceived spiritual void in the political landscape, offering emotional and popular messages that the EU and more mainstream parties cannot offer.

In the case of Hungary, nation-building as defined by the present government is premised on a specific set of beliefs with regard to historical memory and the political consequences that can be drawn from historical experience. Beyond the definition of Hungary as a Christian nation based on traditional family values, the conservative canon holds that: 1) the 'Trianon trauma', i.e. a sense of injustice resulting from territorial losses after World War I, is a defining element of Hungarian identity, 2) that Hungary as a nation is not limited by the formal borders of the state and 3) that complete sovereignty to regulate and control national borders is essential to national survival. Indeed, Hungary has understood itself as a defender of Europe's borders, a 'bastion' of the West against attacks from the East and a fortress (*védőbástya*) of European Christianity (Glied and Pap 2016). The self-understanding of Hungary as a civilizational border guard that in turn has never been treated properly by the West is still a living concept in the thinking of many Hungarians (Száráz 2012). Moreover, the historical narrative of Hungary as a bastion against invasion from the East has been recast within the context of migration and refugee 'crises' and Hungary's border closures since 2015 (see, for example, Rév 2018).

In a widely circulated book written during his tenure as opposition leader, Orbán (2007) outlined many of the central principles which would later guide his policies as Prime Minister. In this book Orbán appeals to popular pride and sentiment, extolling the organic traditions of Hungarians as an agrarian people who cultivated and developed the Carpathian Basin and thrived despite all historical adversities. He also expands on the strength of a culturalist vision of national identity which, in the sense of Vertovec (2011), involves a conception of nation as reified, static, and largely homogeneous.

A conspicuous feature of Orbán's treatise is the insistence on the need for a national rebirth, a genuinely new system that redefines Hungary's role and status in Europe. Alongside his visions of a "New Politics" made possible by a "New Majority,"³ Orbán (2007, p..) also vowed to deliver Hungary from its both externally and self-imposed weakness: "Our country is today a weak country. Within four years we have gone from being first to last." Orbán thus signalled the need for the political right to retake the country and end the false ideological system to which 'there is no alternative' - create a 'strong' country and transcend the shame imposed on the nation by intellectuals who ridicule traditional values: family, work, national pride, Christian faith and who have created a culture of self-hate. Orban (2007: 93) writes:

"Self-contempt, contempt for family, society, nation, religion. Denigrating duty and work. We Hungarians live in a world of systemic hatreds. We feel on our skins the intellectual violence with which we are forced to hate, we need to liberate ourselves from the trap of self-contempt."

This narrative of a 'strong and proud European nation' expresses a desire for a more positive understanding of national pasts as well as present and future roles within the European Union. This is reflected in the

³ Orbán: új többség van (Orbán: there is a new majority). 27 January 2007. 24.Hu. https://24.hu/belfold/2007/01/27/orban_uj_tobbseg_van/. Access 21 June 2022.

Fundamental Law of Hungary (2016 amended version) which proclaims that:

“We are proud that our nation has over the centuries defended Europe in a series of struggles and enriched Europe’s common values with its talent and diligence. We recognize the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood. We value the various religious traditions of our country. We promise to preserve our nation’s intellectual and spiritual unity, torn apart in the storms of the last century”.

As part of this, the narrative of national re-birth involves a ‘temporal othering’ of post-1989 transformation in which the re-establishment of true and legitimate national sovereignty has only been possible with the 2010 victory of Fidesz. According to Orbán in his 2018 speech “...I echo the words of a young Hungarian political analyst, who has said that we have been mandated to build a new era. I interpret the two-thirds victory we won in 2010 as our being mandated to bring to an end to two chaotic decades of transition and to build a new system.” The government has thus proclaimed that Hungary is finally able to realize its role as a “great culture-building and state-organizing nation” in Europe, following its own political destiny but within the context of European cooperation (Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister 2020).

In other words, a historical moment of fundamental transformation was declared in which full national sovereignty post-1989 was finally delivered by a truly national government (Pataki 2013). Sentiments of discrimination, the demonization of ‘unhungarian’ transition phase governments, as well as domestic malaise due to economic crisis were successfully mobilized in order to recode the post-socialist experience as an incomplete process of national becoming. Since 2010, the Fidesz has sought, both as a means to power and in an effort to subsequently consolidate its hold on society, to infuse its political identity with a sense of epochal change driven by popular will, finally putting an end to indecisive government pandering to external interests (Palonen 2018). Directly after Fidesz’s spectacular electoral victory in April 2010, the proclamation of a so-called National Cooperation System (NER), indicated that an epochal political as well as cultural shift was underway (Kovács and Trencsényi 2019, van Til 2021). With the NER Fidesz has sought to create a post-political but ultimately clientelist nation-building framework that effectively sidelines ‘uncooperative’ opposition parties and channels resources into the hands of Fidesz elites, conservative foundations and other allies. Justification for NER can be found in the official English language version of the text (Office of the National Assembly 2010), where we read that:

“They have authorized more than mere adjustment or change; they have authorized us, through the strength of national cooperation, to establish a new political, economic, and social system built on new rules in every area of life.”

Moreover, these proclamations of national rebirth and an epochal shift in Hungary’s system of parliamentary democracy have provided an ideational anchor and justification of Fidesz’s challenges to the liberal EU mainstream. On the occasion of the 2014 Băile Tuşnad/Tusnádfürdő Summer Festival (the venue is a Romanian municipality with a Hungarian ethnic majority), Orbán declared that: “There is such a thing as illiberal democracy, and we are going to create it” (Nolan 2014). Gergely Karácsony, who would be elected Budapest mayor in 2019, wrote an apocryphal observation of Orbán’s message (quoted by Nolan 2014): “Something has broken with the prime minister’s latest speech. This was the first time the premier openly spoke about destroying Hungarian democracy and installing an oligarchic system in its stead.” In his analysis of Orbán’s uses of the term ‘sovereignty’, Paris (2022) has identified alongside ‘Westphalian’, ‘popular’, and ‘national’ interpretations, an ‘extralegal’ understanding that transcends traditional constitutionality, legitimising attempts to monopolize political power. This observation resonates with Palonen’s (2018: 313) comment that Orbán’s claims to legitimacy reveals an “idea of exclusive ownership of the nation.”

Boundary-making as Socio-Cultural Norming and Political Division

In their account of right-wing populist politics of division Steele and Homolar (2019, p. 214) refer to boundary-making refers as a form of social bordering that is driven by “emotionally charged processes of exclusion based on racism, xenophobia and nationalism” and that “are inevitably implicated in populist politics.” It is part of a radicalization process involving instrumental uses of physical and socio-cultural borders that aims to make hegemonic specific national conservative ideologies and understandings of Europe. Illiberal radicalization and the Hungarian government’s boundary-making extend deep within society. Moreover, such boundary-making practices also target dissenting or non-conforming groups and ideas and involve attempts to fragment and marginalize the liberal opposition (see Pirro and Stanley 2021). These practices play with popular insecurities through a sustained culture war in which ‘Schmittian’ enemies of a political and socio-cultural kind are constantly evoked. Targets of these practices are: Roma communities, liberal political thinkers, civil society activists, gays, same-sex parents, non-heteronormative persons, feminists, undocumented non-Christian migrants, social scientists and, in general, groups that through their ideas, physical appearance and/or lack of sympathy for the government can be identified as undesirable.

This is partly a question of social policies .. According to Pivarnykv (2018): “Viktor Orbán's cabinet has a very precise idea of the exact families whom Hungary shall protect and encourage their commitment to have children, namely, middle-class families with an average or above-average income where preferably both parents are employed.” Socio-political agendas. among others, to the financing of cultural institutions according to a ‘national cultural strategy’ and has resulted in attempts, some of them retracted, to drastically reduce the autonomy of theatres (Pálos 2019).

Ontological (in)security is observable in concrete situations such as in the self-referential nature of securitization and threat perception (Palonen 2018 Rumelili 2014). This is, for example, clearly evident in the ‘Hungarikum’ of the moral panic button through which government-controlled media in Hungary instil popular fear of the migrant Other, conflating existential threats with cultural anxieties about Hungary’s future within the EU (Barlai and Sik 2017). Politically and ideologically, Hungary’s ‘social bordering’ is an open challenge to liberal-cosmopolitan understandings of EU-Europe and Europeaness. The demonization, for example, of Muslim asylum seekers - In Orbán's own words, ‘all terrorists are migrants’ (Kaminski, 2015). At another level it has involved the imposition of a new political reality in which liberalism and its advocates are either ignored or treated as pariahs. Domestic political views that conflict with the government’s interpretations of what constitutes “Hungarianness” (political legacies, historical memory) have been marginalized in the public sphere and in some cases have faced ostracism (public shaming of ‘non-national’ liberals and NGOs receiving funding from foreign sources).

Legislation targeted at reducing the influence of international NGOs and domestic NGOs that are thematically networked with civil society organizations that deal with ‘undesirable’ social issues such as discrimination, sexism, humanitarian aid to migrants ,etc. (foreign agents style characterizations). Within this context, George Soros and NGOs who receive support from his Open Society Foundation have been accused of plotting to undermine Hungarian sovereignty and democracy by facilitating the entry of large numbers of would-be migrants.⁴ The 2017 national campaign against the ‘Soros-Plan’ not only played with latent anti-Semitic tropes but more generally mobilized xenophobia and fear in anticipation of the

⁴ According to a October 7, 2017 entry on the Hungarian Prime Minister’s website, ‘Brussels is implementing the Soros Plan’. The full entry can be accessed at <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/brussels-is-implementing-the-soros-plan/>.

April 2018 parliamentary elections.

Greskovits (2020) has analysed the reconfiguration of civil society through the organization, mobilization and instrumentalization of conservative-patriotic civil society movements that include the Polgári Körök (Citizens' Circles), the Civil Összefogás Közhasznú Alapítvány (Civic Alliance Public Benefit Foundation) and numerous local associations. At the same time, humanitarian associations, climate change advocates and Europeanist civil society movements have, among others, been branded as 'parallel societies' and excluded from the NER framework due to their foreign ties⁵. As the present mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, has observed⁶:

"The Hungarian state is not every Hungarian's state anymore: it excludes those who still believe in democracy. Furthermore, it excludes those NGO workers who are trying to protect the remnants of democracy in this country from Viktor Orbán (quoted by Nolan 2014)."

Simon (2019) The Hungarian government's lack of attention to climate change and even tacit support of denialism (social media blogs that satirize and trivialize global warming) has ideological roots. According to Political Capital, the Hungarian government follows an agenda that demonises Greta Thunberg according to Russian disinformation trends, as coal, gas and atomic energy are in Russia's economic interests. Despite formalised commitments to environment protection, the government has systematically run down [disempowered] its agencies responsible for the environment. Concern for the national landscape and natural treasures is stylised but the degradation of air quality and natural areas continues apace. Above and beyond economic interests there are clear ideological motivations behind the marginalisation of EnvPolitics (the antagonisms towards Green parties at the national and European levels – Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Judith Sargentini, Rui Tavares as major critics of Orbán's regime).

It is common knowledge but also revealing that Hungary's government refuses to align with the EU's position on humanitarian aid. On the contrary, the official Hungarian standpoint is that the prevention of human trafficking is the true humanitarian issue at stake. In this way, the present Hungarian government focuses single-mindedly on border protection and shielding society from direct contact with asylum seekers. This message is accompanied by increasing hostility towards civil society organizations that promote humanitarian solutions, for example those associated with George Soros and his Open Society Foundations⁷. Referring to the migrant crisis, Orbán (Hungarian Government, 2016a) has decried:

(...) an absurd coalition which had emerged between people smugglers, dictators pursuing flawed policies in their own countries and Western European civil human rights organizations and NGOs (...) Hungarians, working against our own national interests, also play a prominent role in enabling the operation of such networks in this region.

An Illiberal European Alternative

Viktor Orbán is known for demonizing liberal Europe, sometimes in quite outrageous manner as was

⁵ https://pestisracok.hu/kik-a-civilek-kik-az-alcivilek-es-mi-a-kulonbseg-koztuk-interju-szalay-bobrovniczky-vince-civilugyi-helyettes-allamtitkarral/?fbclid=IwAR3rTgOCQXj6nFZH26MGU5coOqM0Xcv4nbgOirKbmA0YRbR_9rcy8FjhTF0

⁶ <https://budapestbeacon.com/viktor-orban-at-tusnadfurdo-anything-can-happen/>

⁷ George Soros has been accused of undermining national and European border security. Both international and domestic media have noticed the use of anti-Semitic stereotypes in attacks on George Soros. See for example: 'Hungary's Jews do feel fear and they have good reason', Jewish Chronicle, 22 November 2018, <<https://www.thejc.com/comment/comment/hungary-s-jews-do-feel-fear-under-viktor-orban-and-they-have-good-reason-1.472938>> accessed 23 October 2019.

reflected in political statements during the 23 October 2021 commemorations of the 1956 uprising against Soviet occupation⁸:

The high European dignitaries want to bludgeon us to be 'European', 'sensitised' (towards sexual diversity), 'liberal'," he said. But when it comes to "defending homeland, family, culture, the freedom of everyday life," everyone has to do their bit. "When the time comes, stand in front of your houses and defend them!"

Here again Orbán evokes a struggle with the EU liberal elite, calling on his fellow Hungarians to barricade themselves in their houses due to an imminent invasion from Brussels. Orbán suggests the EU union wants to rob Hungarians of their homeland and culture and "threaten freedom, the family and the nation". An incendiary speech delivered on the anniversary of the 1956 revolution. The message is that Brussels is the new Moscow, the new occupying empire.

Hostility towards liberal social values already tangible during Orbán's first government (1998-2002), have evolved into a pointed contestation of core principles that govern EU membership, including the rule of law and freedom of the press (Financial Times, 2017). Orbán has thus portrayed Hungary as a centre of new European ideas that more closely adhere to public sentiment. This de-centred interpretation of Europe, has been developed in the media via depictions of Hungary as an innovator and an active, rather than passive, member of the EU, supporting a nationally defined Christian Europe and unmasking Brussels' 'political correctness' (Szarka 2017). Accordingly, the present Hungarian government has warned constantly of the dangers of 'unnatural migration' and the emergence of parallel (i.e. Islamic) societies that will threaten Europe's welfare, security and identity. In mobilising support for restrictive asylum policies and unilateral border closures, Hungary's prime minister has proclaimed that 'illiberal' values are needed in order to protect national societies and guard against 'naïve' understandings of openness and tolerance.

The political and ideological ideas of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party have signalled a dramatic shift in framing Hungary's role within Europe; they reflect a national-conservative agenda of nation-building in which Hungary will finally realize its role as a 'strong and proud European nation', following its own political destiny but within the context of European cooperation. To this end, Orbán has successfully tapped into broader conservative scepticism of multiculturalism and open borders, thus endowing his illiberal project with a civilizational European mission. To put it succinctly, there is a dual message in evidence: one is the provocative statement that Hungary is loath to subject itself to the dictates of another multinational 'empire' that denigrates national sovereignty (Szabolcs 2020). At the same time, the present Hungarian government argues that a new European Union is needed, one that builds on strong sovereign nation-states and the defends Europe's historical traditions and intrinsic values (...). This dual message suggests the prospect of an epochal shift in the fortunes of Hungary and Europe through a 'revanchist nationalism' that reclaims traditional values. As mentioned above, this was famously declared in Orbán's July 2014 speech signalling the 'end' of the liberal epoch and its replacement by a concerted effort of illiberal state-building⁹. The political strategy of the Fidesz government involves an exploitation of European tensions and contradictions by appealing to populist sensibilities and contestations of liberal values. Fidesz's position contrasts starkly with many aspects of more traditional Euroscepticism as it involves a process of

⁸ Durach, F. (2021) Brandrede in Budapest. Orban warnt zum Wahlkampf-Auftakt vor EU - „stellt euch vor eure Häuser und verteidigt sie“ FR 24.10.2021 <https://www.fr.de/politik/orban-ungarn-praesident-wahlkampf-brandrede-eu-kritik-warnung-zr-91071032.html>; <https://hirklikk.hu/kozelet/ha-eljon-az-ido-alljatosok-ki-a-hazatosok-ele-es-vedjetekek-meg/388821>

⁹ <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>

re-appropriation of the EU as a political community – giving new meaning to the EU and at the same time redefining national conservatism / European as a Union of sovereign nation-states.

Thus, in legitimising the border closures and fence-building of 2015 onward, and with a dismissive attitude to the EU's attempts to accommodate asylum seekers and refugees, the present Hungarian leadership has stylized itself again as a guardian of Europe's historical legacy and Christian culture.

EU legal process against Hungary due to violation of rule of law: Hungarian government categorized the actions of the Commission as a witch hunt, as Varga Judit, Hungarian Minister of Justice openly declared the process to be motivated by the thirst for revenge of 'pro-migration parties (Halmai 2019).

The European Parliament is a 'dead end street', a new European renaissance is needed [Orbán Viktor: az Európai Parlament zsákutca, új európai reneszánsz kell (Szábó, D. 2021)]. The May 2018 Future of Europe Conference organized in Budapest during Hungary's presidency of the Visegrad Group was another performative backdrop for Orbán's alternative Europeanist vision¹⁰:

Is the war for Europe's body and soul a winnable one? Can we defeat censorship, the shaming of those who think differently, the increasing cultural self-hatred in Europe? (...) Will Europe become the new melting pot? Shall we, out of cultural guilt or simple calculation, sacrifice Christianity, freedom and our way of life? Or should we retreat to our fortress, defend ourselves and strengthen our values and cohesion within? Is the creation of the New European Man realistic through migration?

In that same year Orbán (2018) elaborated similarly radical contestations at the July 2018 Summer Open University, again at Băile Tuşnad/ Tusnádfürdő:

"[Europe] has rejected its roots, and instead of a Europe resting on Christian foundations, it is building a Europe of 'the open society' (...) in Christian Europe there was honour in work, man had dignity, men and women were equal, the family was the basis of the nation, the nation was the basis of Europe, and states guaranteed security. In today's open-society Europe there are no borders; European people can be readily replaced with immigrants; the family has been transformed into an optional, fluid form of cohabitation; the nation, national identity and national pride are seen as negative and obsolete notions; and the state no longer guarantees security in Europe (...) In Liberal Europe being European means nothing at all: it has no direction, and it is simply form devoid of content."

Discussion: Illiberalism and (Dis)Integration

Returning to the central questions elaborated in the special issue, what has this discussion revealed regarding Hungarian illiberalism as an agent of European(dis)integration? The results are ambiguous as Hungary is locked into EU structures and needs mutual recognition from European partners in order to legitimize Orbán's regime of illiberal democracy. Right-wing populisms, and by association illiberalism, are characterized by a need for recognition that, in the view of Hirvonen and Pennanen (2019), can be socially pathological in nature: despite the motivations of populists to achieve what they lack, namely voice and respect, "populism leads to the lack of mutual recognition between those who struggle to get their

¹⁰ The text is taken from the following conference website: "The Future of Europe"/„Európa Jövője”, <http://europajovojev4.eu/en/#koszonto>, accessed 10 January 2020.

identities affirmed.” In other words, illiberal solidarity across borders is complicated by a mutual thirst for recognition, and thus a lack of genuine mutual recognition between autocratic right-wing populists. Moreover, Ejodus (2020) suggests that ontological security helps explain the puzzling insistence on identity politics even to the detriment of ‘objective’ national interests.

There is also the symbolic relationship between Europeanization and illiberal neo-nationalist projects – as important as the construction of Schmittian enemies is the reflection of domestic (nation-building) goals as a wider European project, thus requiring interaction with Euroconservative elites but also the European Commission and Parliament. The anti-politics of European integration only has meaning as a project of engagement and contestation. Structurally locked into EU institutions and policy networks and dependent on EU Cohesion Funds and other forms of support, the Fidesz government has attempted to create a politically influential niche within the EU. By focusing on majority democracy, national sovereignty and ‘traditional values’ Orbán has attempted to make illiberalism a viable European alternative to the *acquis communautaire*. Much of the content of Orbán’s messianic rhetoric is ironic in retrospect: the call for an end to corruption and for a politics centred on people’s everyday concerns seems rather distant from the reality of an elitist and an autocratic regime that is itself highly corrupt and complicit with crony capitalism. The Ukraine crisis and Orbán’s openness to Putin have served to further isolate Hungary from the foreign policy debate.

There are ultimately limits to the disintegration impact of illiberalism and questions regarding the sustainability of illiberalism itself (see Delanty 2021). In the meantime, a recent EU Barometer survey indicates that Orbán’s continuous attacks on the liberal EU do not seem to affect public opinion in the long run as Hungarians remain very much pro-EU¹¹ (Fabok 2020, Halmai 2022). This highlights the problem of thinking of EU-Europe in terms of convergence. Hungarian anti-politics indicate that Europeanization is not a one-way street, it is a process that is defined by both consensus and contestation, conflict and frictions.

Of course, the basic tenor of suggesting hard East-West divisions within the EU is that Central and Eastern European states are ‘falling out of step’ with Europe and thus diverging from accepted European norms. However, the journalist Kenan Malik warns that:

“There is a tendency among liberals to see a great divide on immigration between (...) a more liberal western Europe and a more reactionary east. (...) while differences clearly exist, the divisions are not nearly as sharp as often suggested. It is the rhetoric and the policies emerging from the mainstream and from western Europe that have helped legitimise the hostility to immigration expressed by the populists and in eastern Europe”.¹²

¹¹ <https://g7.hu/adat/20201026/a-brusszelezes-ellenere-magyarorszagon-nott-a-legtobbet-az-eu-tamogatottsaga/>

¹² Kenan Malik, Guardian, 10 June 2018

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FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

How to improve the preconditions for inclusive, accessible and horizontal participatory and deliberative practices



Future of Democracy

How to improve the preconditions for inclusive, accessible and horizontal participatory and deliberative practices

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Introduction

This brief working paper is the outcome of joint work between the **EUARENAS** Consortium and the **EUARENAS** Community of Practice (CoP). The **EUARENAS** Community of Practice has been set up as part of the project activities in order to provide a horizontal learning platform on participative and deliberative democracy in urban settings. The aim of the CoP initiative is to bring together people from different professional backgrounds through the co-creation and exchange of expertise, stories and resources on participative and deliberative democracy in Europe and to provide a space for people to connect and engage with like-minded people from a variety of sectors and arenas with a shared interest.

After two online meetings between the **EUARENAS** Consortium and the Community of Practice in the early phases of the project, the first opportunity to meet in person was in May 2022, when the project held its first Knowledge Exchange Workshop in Reggio Emilia (Italy). Run in combination with a project meeting and project conference, the aim was to pool the collective knowledge of the CoP's members and start the dialogue. During the half-day event, the Consortium and CoP members worked jointly in small groups on a questions related to the future of democracy and addressed current challenges in participatory and deliberative practices. This working paper presents the results of this Knowledge Exchange Workshop.

Democracy Now, Democracy in The Future

The first part of the Knowledge Exchange workshop was dedicated to a discussion about the future of democracy. The participants engaged in a future thinking activity led by our partner People's Voice Media. The discussion revolved around the current state of democracy (Democracy Now), the future democracy we would like to see and, finally, how to get to that preferred future.

Democracy Now

When reflecting on what democracy feels like where they live and work, the participants noted points such as:

- Citizens feel removed from the political process - they perhaps don't care or feel powerless to affect change
- There was a sense that 'European identity' is being diminished
- Growing complexity administration and bureaucracy causing blockages and disconnect
- Truth and trust doesn't feel valued

A key question being posed was: **is democracy really working?** Is it supporting the practice or principles of social equality - or unwittingly helping maintain inequalities?

The future we'd like to see

Given that some of the points above point to a 'crisis in democracy', the participants had some interesting ideas about how this could look very different. These ideas included:

- Citizens having more agency and involvement in democracy - moving to 'deep democracy', going beyond just voting and being involved in deliberation and decision-making
- Having a 'value-driven' democracy
- Local government with the competencies to support new ways of working with citizens and involving them in local democracy



Ideas for getting there

Given that the participants would like to see changes from the current situation, some time was spent on thinking about how we might get there. Thinking and suggestions in this area were:

- Scaling-up and mainstreaming of existing practices such as participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, crowdsourced law - so that these become the new 'status quo'
- Adopting test and learn approaches as a way that experimentation can be done and actively learned from
- Find ways of celebrating and connecting up the small changes that are taking place - this will help people see that progress is being made, even when it feels like things are changing too slow

Making Participatory and Deliberative Work

Building on the foregoing discussion overall future of democracy, in the second part of the Knowledge Exchange workshop the World Café approach was adopted to discuss four questions on how to make participatory and deliberative practices more inclusive, accessible and horizontal. The Community of Practice and EUARENAS consortium members joined each table for 20 minutes. At the end, short feedbacks from each topic area were given by the table hosts. In the flowing, The four questions/topic areas were:

- **Systemic Issues:** How do structural/social inequalities impact on how our democracies work and who is included in participatory and deliberative processes?)

- **Power and Hierarchy:** Is it possible to achieve horizontal and equal deliberation – why and how?
- **Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative practices:** How can we engage “decision-makers” effectively in participatory and deliberative practices and how do we move participation and deliberation in democracy from ‘siloes practice/pilots’ to more mainstream, embedded activities?
- **Tools, Techniques and Methods:** What tools, techniques and methods can support inclusiveness and accessibility in participatory and deliberative processes, specifically when involving people who are usually marginalised from these processes?

Systemic Issues

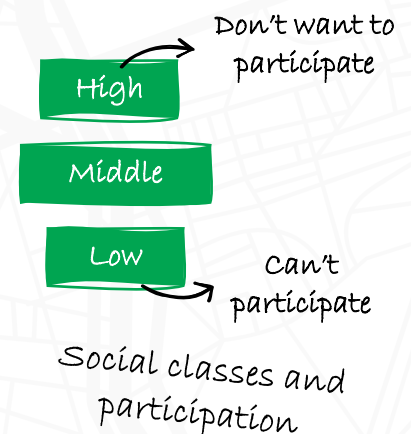
How do structural/social inequalities impact on how our democracies work and who is included in participatory and deliberative processes?

The participants at the table identified a number of systemic and structural inequalities that affect participatory and deliberative processes ranging from broader societal issues to aspects that are more connected to individual experiences and life conditions, which, however, are obviously influenced and conditioned by the former. Being aware of such systemic issues, and applying participatory strategies to remedy them, is valuable for the quality of participatory practices in a variety of ways. Overall, a better understanding of why people won't participate is thus needed, which might result in strategies such as better recruitment techniques, more varied and mixed participatory methods or better leadership.

During the workshop, attention was drawn to white and western biases that exist in many of the process, approaches and tools used to promote participation and deliberation in cities around the world. Power and hierarchical structures in society(ies) also control and condition much of what is possible and likely in terms of such practices. Interestingly, some of the table participants connected the level of participation to social classes existing in society arguing that people from lower social can't participate whereas people from higher social classes do not necessarily want to participate.

Quite a bit of attention was drawn to the issue of lacking resources to participate in (urban) participatory practices and the resulting imbalances in terms of the included population in such processes.

These include human resources as well as financial ones. Some residents might find it for example difficult to participate as a result of lacking time (boom years with young children and busy careers). Others might feel that giving their time to participatory activities in times of economic hardship or lack of money, particularly when participatory contributions (time) are expected to be carried out free of charge, is not a sensible approach. Participation might also be hampered by a lack of health, education or necessary digital skills, and language skills. It should be borne in mind that particular strata of the population, particularly in more marginalised areas, might also have a lack of basic motivation to participate simply as a result of a feeling that their contribution will in the end lead to nothing.



Power and Hierarchy

Is it possible to achieve horizontal and equal deliberation - why and how?

At this table, the prospects for horizontal and equal deliberation free from power relations and hierarchies were discussed.

Deliberation was seen as an alternative to the traditional power political processes and as an escape from private “citizenship” and plutocracy. It is a potentially more equal form of decision-making that changes the status of its participants from having certain rights and (untapped) capacities to being responsible and having the power of agency. Moreover, greater equality can be achieved through deliberation, even if the process itself lacks in inclusivity. However, it does have certain limitations. First, a broad inclusion needs encouragement from the top, not only to invite people to deliberative fora, but also to make them realize the relevancy of their actions. A lengthy process of building trust and accountability of the authorities – especially through respecting decisions of participatory bodies – was pointed here as one of the crucial elements for broadening inclusion. The other problem that has been pointed out is the reluctance of engaging in deliberative practices of these stakeholders who have the most to lose – e.g., large developers in cities – as it is against their ‘rational’ interest to share power.

In its most consequential and meaningful form, deliberation would also lead to direct implementation of the results (decisions, solutions, recommendations) of the results, without the involvement of politicians. In turn, this would provide the process (and its participants) with motivation and legitimacy. Direct implementation would obviously require the willingness and readiness of public authorities, who need to initiate the process anyway. Therefore, different tools of decision-making need to be designed and implemented on different levels of the political process, and deliberation should be designed in a way that provides safe and robust framework for political engagement of citizens. Certain ideas for this framework that emerged in the discussion included:

- the provision of a safe discussion and deliberation environment, so for example the use of a trusted external facilitator and mediator
- the provision of enough time to let the deliberative process flourish, for citizens to learn how to use it and for authorities to build organizational competences
- multi-level cooperation of different governance levels to balance ‘plutocracy’
- The use of random selection of the participants, based on representation, but also encouraging the ‘silent’ majority of citizens to engage in community

Mainstreaming participatory and deliberative practices

How can we engage “decision-makers” effectively in participatory and deliberative practices and how do we move participation and deliberation in democracy from ‘siloe practice/pilots’ to more mainstream, embedded activities?

The table working on this question developed an ‘urban participation cycle’ based on the experiences of the City of Gdansk. The depiction of the participation cycle indicates that in order to mainstream such activities and institutionalisation of such a cyclical process has to occur.

The starting point of that cycle was a potentially existing tension between the community/residents and the political decision-making process/structures, or pressure from the former on the latter to bring about

change. If political will exists, participatory practices will enter the ‘black box’ between the two spheres and result in setting the rules of the game, experimentation, storytelling practices. In the best case scenario, these practices lead to a joint learning process, results of which will feed into city strategies if the political and administrative will exist. Further institutionalisation, and thus mainstreaming, of these experiments and practices might then be achieved by integrating them into local administrative law. An important aspect of the cycle is the communication and reporting back to the residents and the community about results and outcomes of their involvement. A clear presentation of the outcomes and benefits of the participatory and deliberative practices increases the legitimacy among both the residents and the decision-makers. Obviously significant resources are necessary to ‘feed’ this cyclical process are needed, including human resources providing their time and effort, financial resources and the availability and ability to use appropriate tools and methods.

Obviously, the participation cycle does not take place in isolation ‘from the rest of the world’ but is influenced by a host of variables within the multi-level system of governance/government in the EU and beyond. The OECD, EU and a variety of other institutions set norms and standards and provide a giant knowledge exchange platform with regard to participatory practices (the H2020 **EUARENAS** project being just one example). National governments also set parameters for participation through their national legislation and soft power instruments.

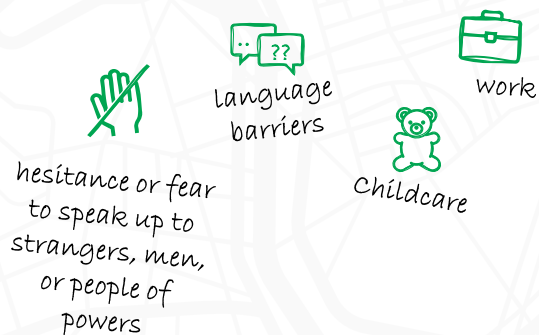
Tools, Techniques and Methods

What tools, techniques and methods can support inclusiveness and accessibility in participatory and deliberative processes, specifically when involving people who are usually marginalised from these processes?

In order to engage marginalised groups, one must first understand these demographics, specifically the barriers and frictions that are preventing them from participation. From there, organisers of participatory and deliberative processes can apply targeted outreach to engage with communities that are hard to reach. Participants may not be able to join due to language barriers and/ or being occupied by childcare and work. These obstacles must be addressed and mitigated through offering financial or practical support, such as having on-site translators and employing inclusive language. Here, technology offers great assistance, such as creation of an online platform where people can participate anonymously, and those with busy schedules can still voice their ideas when they can.

Existing tools and methods for accessibility and inclusion have already been tested in various countries in Europe. For instance, childcare, transportation, and translation are being provided as incentives to participate in the UK. In Switzerland, assistance to the elderly is being offered through the “Time Bank” programme. In Estonia, the

The entry barriers can be:



Participation incentives can be:



Helpful event mapping and communication tools exist to assist communication with the disabled.

The participatory and deliberative discussions themselves should be value-based and reciprocal – aiming for mutual gain and respect. Systemic attention should be paid to the topics of debate between citizens and decision-makers. Here, to ensure diversity in participants, demographic quotas can be set. The facilitators of these discussions should be aware about the diversity of their audiences, and also receive proper training to be able to handle diverse groups. Different roles during the facilitation process should be covered.