**DEMOS HELSINKI /**

# Revitalising and Protecting European Democracies

Demos Helsinki's Recommendations for the European Democracy Shield

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Demos Helsinki welcomes the inclusion of the *European Democracy Shield in the European Commission's 2025 work programme*. Its focus on countering the most severe threats to democracy across the EU and building core European capabilities is also welcomed. We argue a transformative approach should complement this: the European Democracy Shield should be an indispensable instrument for reimagining and revitalising European democracy.

Based on our multidisciplinary research on underlined embedding democratic innovations, fair digitalisation, democratic governance and the renewal of European social contracts, we make the following recommendations in response to the Working document of the European Parliament's Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield:[1]

> **1. Consider the critical  role of meaningful citizen engagement for European democratic resilience**
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> **2. Strengthen a coordinated response to FIMI**
>
> **3. Highlight the prerequisites for a safer digital space**
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> **4. Enhance the empowerment of civil society**
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> **5. Improve the democratic legitimacy of institutions within Justice and Home Affairs**
>
> **6. Centre a devolved approach to democracy support in external action.**
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> **7. Take a human-centred approach to preparedness**

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[1] "Protecting European democracy and our values - Findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield".

## 1. The European Democracy Shield should consider the critical role of meaningful citizen engagement for European democratic resilience

The resilience of European democracy depends on nurturing trust: the trust citizens have in governing institutions, the levels of trust these institutions have in their citizens, and the trust citizens have in the societies they live in. Participatory and deliberative democratic innovations can [increase the levels of trust](#) in these relationships. [Recent studies](#) show that they can lead to greater political participation, decreased susceptibility to external influence, and decreased polarisation. Because these innovations increase and deepen meaningful citizen participation, there is also [evidence](#) that they can enable more inclusive, robust, and ultimately effective policies and people-centred policy delivery.

To strengthen democratic resilience, the European Democracy Shield must prioritise citizen participation at all levels of governance. **We propose that at least the following be included in its own section entitled Institutions of Government and Public Participation, or added to section 4 on Civil Society** in the Working Document:

- Embed participatory and deliberative capacity across European Union institutions: (a) empower through greater financial and institutional resources, the Competence Centre on participatory and deliberative democracy to: act increasingly as a critical friend to the Commission, Parliament, and the Council on participatory matters; to enable work on setting standards for and impact of democratic innovations; (b) appoint participation officers in EU Directorates-General to complement and enable co-ordination work being done in DG Comm; (c) codify internal standards for EU civil servants to consider citizens' perspectives; (d) develop internal capacity to deliver deliberative and participatory processes without consultative procurement; (e) establish independent and transparent monitoring, evaluation, and learning mechanisms for all EU deliberative and participatory processes.

- Follow-up on [EC Recommendation 2023/2836 (12.12.2023)](#): (a) adopt and apply obligations and standards for European Union institutions as well as Member States; (b) introduce a public participation and democratic rights check – with set standards – on any EU legislative proposal; (c) provide clearer avenues of support for Member States to meet the recommendations in EC Rec. 2023/2836.

- Set and implement EU-wide participation standards: (a) ensure the standardisation of robust best-practice participation standards, following

best practices established by the Competence Centre, DG COMM and the OECD; (b) these standards should be given the weight of administrative or legal obligations; (b) ensure gaps in the implementation of these standards are closed, especially at Member State and local government levels.

- Diversify and connect participatory methods: (a) expand opportunities and spaces for deliberation beyond the format of the European Citizens Panels at EU level and in Member States; (b) explore the use of participatory budgeting at EU level; (c) increase opportunities for community-led policy design (e.g. on housing).

- Increase visibility of and accountability for participatory processes: (a) identify transparent processes for determining the governance and policy impacts of participatory and deliberative processes; (b) ensure that new participatory mechanisms have clear avenues of institutional accountability, e.g. Strategic Dialogues; (c) increase public awareness and discussion of the Union's use of participatory and deliberative mechanisms.

- Correct imbalances of representation in EU participation mechanisms: (a) ensure equal representation of not-for-profit stakeholders acting in the common interest and those systemically excluded from public life, alongside corporate interests, especially in non-citizen led participation mechanisms, e.g. Strategic Dialogues; (b) dedicate public funds to ensure this equal representation through e.g. greater financial muscle for climate action in the successor LIFE programme or effective appropriation of CERV funds.

- Meet existing public participation obligations: (a) urgently, ensure the Commission and Member States meet their existing public participation obligations regarding National Energy and Climate Plans under the Aarhus Convention.

- Build societal competences for public participation in societies and communities: (a) Strengthen, enable, and embed inclusive community-based learning for citizenship education; (b) ensure that transversal skills are centred in citizenship education for active citizenship building, as well as in key initiatives such as the Union of Skills.

- Proactively identify and embed inclusive public participation in key European policy initiatives: (a) effectively implement the [European Citizens Panel recommendations](#) on the EU budget; (b) the Affordable Housing Plan could centre the voices of affected communities, vulnerable groups and people

experiencing poverty to identify and shape policies that consider the root causes of unaffordability, housing poverty, consumer poverty and homelessness; (c) the sustainable success of the Union of Skills could be immeasurably increased through greater citizen, worker, and trade-union co-creation.

## 2. The European Democracy Shield should strengthen a coordinated response to FIMI

While the Working Document emphasises minimum standards and new EU bodies, operational coordination remains weak. This relates to pages 2-3.

**We propose the inclusion of the following into section 1. EU structures to combat FIMI**:

- Establish rapid-response mechanisms: Enable agile coordination across Member States and between MS and EU institutions, exceeding current minimums.

- Mandate cooperation: Include obligations for Member States to participate in shared protocols and intelligence and share structures to combat FIMI.

## 3. The European Democracy Shield should highlight the safer digital space

Our research shows that algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok and YouTube amplify divisive content and create ideological echo chambers. But they also provide access for new political actors in constrained media systems.

**We propose the inclusion of the following into section 2. Digital Resilience:**

- Support national-level DSA enforcement: Strengthen Digital Services Coordinators' capacities to monitor and respond to harmful online content, particularly beyond very large platforms (VLOPs).

- Fund trusted flaggers and awareness campaigns: Ensure that civil society and national regulators can operate effectively and inform the public about online risks.

- Balance regulation with pluralism: Recognise that social media can empower

alternative voices, especially in authoritarian or monopolised media contexts.

## 4. The European Democracy Shield should enhance the empowerment of civil society

Civil society is essential for safeguarding democratic values. The Democracy Shield must move beyond protection and focus on proactive empowerment.

**We propose the inclusion of the following into section 4. Civil Society:**

- Boost civil society resources: Allocate EU-level funding to support civic infrastructure across Member States, primarily where democratic backsliding occurs.

- Institutionalise inclusion: Ensure civil society actors are co-creators of legislation, not just consultees.

## 5. The European Democracy Shield should seek to improve the democratic legitimacy of institutions within Justice and Home Affairs

The current framing of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) in the Working Document focuses on enforcing policies (Europol, Eurojust, Frontex), with little reflection on bettering the democratic legitimacy of these organisations and practices. Both are needed for democratic resilience.

**We propose including the following in section 6. Justice and Home Affairs:**

- Prioritise democratic oversight: (a) ensure the operations of Frontex and Eurojust include strong accountability mechanisms for compliance with fundamental rights and international obligations; (b) empower civil society actors to monitor and ensure accountability of these operations through mandates with EU institutions and Member States.

- Evaluate JHA instruments not only for efficacy but also for their alignment with democratic values.

## 6. The European Democracy Shield should centre a devolved approach to democracy support in external action.

[Empowering local communities](#) is integral to strengthening democratic processes and electoral integrity in partner countries and the Global South. Its stance of firm humility is likely to enhance the EU's standing in these countries.

**We propose the inclusion of the following into section 7. External Action**:

- Put empowered local communities at the heart of external democracy support: (a) strong, participatory, and inclusive local democracy initiatives produce empowered communities and democratic resilience; (b) ensuring democratic governance structures where local communities are centred helps shape durable democratic ecosystems and social infrastructure.

## 7. The European Democracy Shield should take a human-centred approach to preparedness

The current framing centres a whole-of-society approach to preparedness, where public engagement is essential but consultative. We suggest a human-centred yet whole-of-society approach to comprehensive security.

**We propose the inclusion of the following into section 10. Preparedness**:

- Ground security and resilience in a human-centred approach: (a) formalise the role of civil society organisations, trade unions, and associations in enhancing connection with citizens, vulnerable communities, and marginalised groups; (b) ensure that CSOs are incorporated into the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

Europe must defend democracy, but also make it worth defending. By investing in citizen participation, ensuring digital accountability, and empowering civic spaces, the EU can move from reactive protection to proactive transformation.

The Democracy Shield should integrate participatory democracy, digital justice, and civic empowerment as core pillars of the EU democratic strategy. This approach ensures that European democracy is resilient and revitalised for future challenges.

# About
# Demos Helsinki

*Only together can we fight for a fair, sustainable, and joyful next era.*

Demos Helsinki is an independent, non–profit think tank with a mission: to prove that fair, sustainable, and joyful societies are within reach — and to help our partners lead the way.

For 20 years, we have worked across borders, bringing systems expertise and deep sector knowledge to the biggest questions of our time. Our team of 70+ researchers and experts, located in 10+ countries, collaborates with local and national governments, international organisations, key industries, civil society, and academia to create meaningful change.

Partners come to us when old solutions no longer meet current needs, seeking inspiration and support in implementation. Together, tackle complex societal problems and design essential building blocks for the next era. We are an impact–driven partner, ensuring innovation extends beyond individual projects.

In 2024, we launched and managed over 130 projects in close to 30 different countries across the world.

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