# D4.4:
# Report with Policy Recommendations

WP4 – Causal, policy and futures analysis
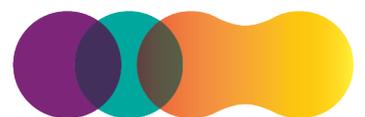
**Populism and Civic Engagement**

# About this document

**Work Package 4 Lead**: The Centre for Liberal Strategies Foundation (CLS)

**Task Leads**: Ruzha Smilova and Daniel Smilov

# Document history

| Version | Date | Description | Reason for change | Distribution | Authors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V 1 | April 2022 | Draft of Project Policy Recommendations from the PaCE deliverables | | | Reinhard Heinisch (PLUS), Ruzha Smilova (CLS), Daniel Smilov (CLS), Sven Engesser, Takis Pappas (HU) |
| V 2 | April 2022 | Update and editing of policy recommendations | due to discussion in project meeting in Sofia | | Reinhard Heinisch (PLUS), Ruzha Smilova (CLS), Daniel Smilov (CLS), Sven Engesser, Bruce Edmonds (MMU), Ruth Meyer (MMU), Matthew Hall (TRI) |
| V 3 | April 2022 | Editing of Scenario material | To use consistent language with recommendations | | Bruce Edmonds (MMU), Matthew Hall (TRI) |

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|---|---|
| Due date | April 30, 2022 |
| Delivery date | Submitted April 2022. |
| Type | Research Results |
| Dissemination level | Report, Public |

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# Contents

# Introduction

Populism, as a style of politics, is not necessarily negative per se – for example, such politicians tend to be quicker to recognise and highlight grievances which is a democratic tendency. However, populist political parties and leaders are often associated with negative effects – other kinds of politics can also be involved in producing these effects, but tend to be more constrained by liberal norms and values. The key problems are (a) that minorities can be discriminated against and (b) populist parties have the tendency to change the rules to entrench their power, making it harder to vote them out again – both tendencies that reduce rather than increase the democratic options of those concerned. These effects can be mitigated against, protected against and planned for.

This document contains three sections: the *first* is our key recommendations, the *second* is how the PaCE scenarios might help contextualise policy consideration and the *third* is a set of ideas and reactions coming from EU citizens in the process of the Democracy Labs that PaCE conducted.

# Recommendations based on key PaCE findings

This section lists the principal policy recommendations of the PaCE project, namely those that have come out, or been supported, by its findings. Of course, these are fairly generic, so that any actions or policies taken should be formulated with the specific situation in mind. That is, these should inform, and not replace, local and specific domain knowledge.

Each PaCE recommendation is introduced with a little of the rationale to provide context. The actual recommendations are shown in the boxes below.

## Recommendation 1: Populism and Nativism

Understanding modern-day politics in liberal Europe requires a sharp conceptual distinction between the notions of liberalism, populism, and nativism. This is because the political parties that represent each of the three sets of (political and policy) ideas are quite distinct: Liberal parties are those defending the principles of post-war liberal democracy and tend to aim firmly at EU integration; populist parties, in contrast, promote an illiberal version of democratic politics and have an opportunistic stance towards the EU; and nativist parties dilute democratic liberalism by opposing multiculturalism, immigration and, indeed, further EU integration while promoting a "liberalism for the natives."

> *Policy making should take on board the difference between different types of populist parties, especially as between populist and nativist parties.*

## Recommendation 2: exaggeration of impact of populism

Populism is much less conspicuous in Europe than it is often imagined or feared. Nor is it on a continuous ascendancy as is often claimed. In recent decades, populism came to power single-handedly in only four European countries: Greece, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Greece was the first country in Europe to experience a populist government since 1981. Populism then contaminated the country's other major party, New Democracy, this way creating the preconditions for the great financial, economic, and political crisis that afflicted Greece in the 2010s. Italy experienced since the 1990s a series of populist-led governments under Silvio Berlusconi and later featured other parties (e.g., the Five Star Movement and the League) that experimented with populist ideas but without fully converting to populism.

> *Political rhetoric concerning the "rise of populism" as a potential end to liberal democracy exaggerates its impact and becomes itself an element of populist propaganda. The problem should be raised but not over dramatized.*

## Recommendation 3: Dangers are present in many countries

Today, the most prominent examples of governing populism in Europe are Hungary and Poland, both of which are effectively being turned into "illiberal democracies". Greece, Italy, and Spain feature significant populist parties and other political forces only in opposition. Illiberal populism is very weak, if not altogether non-existent, in most of Western Europe. In contrast, Hungary and Poland apart, populism is rampant but dispersed (and hence unable to present itself in stable and strong political party form) in most of Central and Eastern Europe.

Although populist tendencies are similar in most of the countries of Europe, it is in CEE where populism has been particularly successful in the sense of becoming an entrenched and institutionalised force. It may be the case that the institutions of liberal democracy are less established in the CEE regions, which allows populist players to take the centre-stage. But this should not be an argument for complacency in the western part of the continent, since the CEE countries may just exhibit tendencies that will take over the western part of the continent after a longer period of time.

> *Western European countries should not be complacent, assuming populism is only a danger in CEE countries, guarding against erosion of liberal institutions.*

## Recommendation 4: leadership and constitution

When populist parties govern single-handedly, they tend to reshape and redesign the constitutional and legal systems in their respective countries into an illiberal direction. In addition, they always quash the moderate centre in the politics of their respective countries and create tense polarisation by dividing their societies into two opposing camps. In all cases, moreover, populist rule depends on a charismatic leader, meaning one person who fully controls the government party and directs its radically illiberal program. Not surprisingly, then, ruling populism tends to divide the opposition and enjoy office for long periods of time.

Populism thrives in environments where the public senses a lack of leadership by the mainstream parties and the constitutional rules are fuzzy and open to easy contestation.

> *Populism could be impeded by two factors: political leadership (defining goals, building support, being consistent etc.) of the liberal-democratic parties and a robust, hard to amend constitutional framework.*

## Recommendation 5: focus on strategic voters

Populism is both an ideological and strategic phenomenon from the point of view of the voters. It is true that people with populist attitudes tend to vote for populist parties, which suggests that populism may be understood as a minimalist ideology. But populist parties attract also many people, who are practically indistinguishable from the voters of the political mainstream in terms of sharing Manichean views of the good people as opposed to the corrupt elite (or other elements of the "ideational core" of populism such as people-centredness and the homogeneity of the people). The ability of populist parties to mobilise such strategic voters is a key factor for their electoral success not as niche political players, but as forces capable of forming governing majorities.

Thus populist parties could be usefully divided into radical and centrist according to the degree they challenge the fundamental ideological and institutional order of liberal democracy. The radical populists, who are committed to visions of illiberal democracy, may mobilise more ideological voters; whilst centrist populists, who have a more moderate message from an ideological point of view, tend to attract more protest voters by offering technocratic solutions. In many political systems populist parties come in pairs – centrist and radical.

Liberal-democratic, mainstream parties should seriously consider the possibility that "their" voters could defect to populists not for ideological, but strategic reasons. For instance, centrist voters demanding lower taxes, might vote for a populist party, which has this issue on its agenda, without sharing other more radical populist views on immigration, homophobia, etc. The reason for such a defection could be that these voters to send a clear message of protest, maybe hoping that the populist party will break the existing "party cartel" and thus could more realistically achieve policies such as lowering of the taxes.

Liberal democratic and mainstream parties should not assume that populism comes only as a package of radical illiberal policies. The interplay between radicalism and centrism is a key for the electoral success of the populists. When populist parties moderate their message, they can become more attractive for strategic voters, which might allow them to win large sections of the vote.

> *Whilst radical populist parties should not generally be engaged with, their less radical supporters (e.g. protest voters) should be actively engaged with. In particular, liberal-democratic parties should design strategies, which prevent defection of voters due to strategic reasons.*

## Recommendation 6: defending constitutional safeguards

Judging by cases such as Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, the radicalization of centrist populists seems to be beneficial for the institutionalisation and the political dominance of the populist political parties. Thus, in order for the populist parties to come to power it is crucial to have more moderate messages in order to attract as many strategic voters as possible. But once in power, the populist parties need to radicalise their position in order to entrench themselves and to fend off potential newcomers.

The in-built tendency of populism to radicalise itself while in office (in order to entrench itself and preserve a dominant position) is a significant policy challenge. It also suggests that although populists have not been able to  govern single-handedly in most of the European states, the phenomenon is not going to simply disappear. In this context the link between longevity and radicalism is particularly troubling.

> *We suggest strategic alliances between other parties to prevent present or future weakening of the constitutional foundation of the state.*

## Recommendation 7: responsible and responsive leadership

Populism is hard to beat in elections. If the liberal polity institutions cannot withstand the illiberal assault, society remains polarised, and the leader's charisma remains untainted. But populism can be defeated when, on one hand, is led by a leader with no (or lost) charismatic qualities which faces the opposition of a liberal party that credibly promises to unite society on the basis of a realistic liberal policy agenda.

Liberal democracy, as arguably the most advanced and developed political regime should not become complacent and should not underestimate the importance of positive leadership. Populism is partly a result of this neglect.

> *Focus on liberal-democratic leadership that presents a positive vision, is responsible and is responsive to the concerns of all groupings of citizens.*

## Recommendation 8: when nativism combines elements of populism

Nativist parties emerged in cartelized party systems in Europe. They aimed to penetrate them by claiming ownership to a number of policy positions: anti-immigration, public order, welfare chauvinism, and Euroscepticism. Nativist parties have never governed single-handedly and have been invited to participate in coalition governments only a handful of times. As coalition partners, they are often entrusted with ministerial positions that, in principle, are advantageous to their own policy preferences. However, during portfolio bargaining negotiations, they are typically forced to make significant concessions to their major coalition partners. These, in turn, moderate their nativist party character and, in fact, undermine their capacity to fully pursue their programmatic positions.

Nativism – if it comes in a pure form – can be less dangerous for liberal democracy and can remain as a niche element of politics (especially in the western part of Europe). Yet, nativism could be combined with populism and become a more serious challenge to liberal democracy, as is often the case in Eastern Europe. Therefore, there should be a very precise contextual analysis on the interlink between populism and nativism in each case, in order to spot when there is clear and present danger in the respective country for nativism to evolve into populism and thus pose a threat to liberal democratic institutions and values there.

> *Watch out for when nativism combines elements of populism, it is more dangerous then.*

## Recommendation 9: avoid coalitions with Nativists

Nativist parties are not particularly successful in implementing their policy agenda, even when they are entrusted with highly important ministerial positions, such as those related to immigration, public order, social welfare, and EU affairs. While in office, nativist party performance has most of the times been hampered by inefficacy, scandals, the relinquishment of former "hardline nativist" positions, or excessive focus on a single (or few) policy issue(s) at the expense of promoting a really comprehensive nativist policy program.

While populist parties tend to radicalise in office (in order to stay dominant and successful), nativist parties tend to moderate their message. This tentative rule should not be taken for granted, however, and the tendencies to radicalisation of nativists should be also monitored closely. Nativists may have been poor performers in office, but this is usually thanks to, not only bad leadership, but also a clear separation of powers that has occasionally halted the materialisation of "hardline nativist" agendas.

> *Mainstream political parties should avoid coalitions with nativists. Nativists have rarely demonstrated the intention or ability to mature politically and evolve organizationally, which makes them unreliable government partners and entering in coalition with them can validate their agenda. On the occasion that nativists are invited to participate in a coalition government, mainstream political parties should always ensure that sound institutional checks and balances are in place.*

## Recommendation 10: use of experts

Policies associated with elites or promoted by experts are rejected or viewed with great scepticism (e.g., anti-Corona policies, climate change policies, etc.) by likely populist voters. This pertains above all to broad policies, finely calibrated to deal with complex matters, as these are especially difficult to communicate (immigration policy, European integration, social policy, climate policy, etc.). The issues in question are less a matter of left or right but rather one of people seemingly being determined by others, especially by those perceived as cultural elites.

> *Expert discourses should be open but kept separate from policy communication. Once policy is decided, the policy messages should enlist persons from the targeted community to make communication more effective (i.e. advice and communication clearly separated).*

## Recommendation 11: inconstancy of populist policies

The recent anti-Covid demonstrations are another indicator that the ideological boundaries between the far right and the far left are increasingly blurred. We have also seen a frequent reversal of political positions by populists that used to be their professed "core beliefs" – e.g. the Austrian Freedom Party and the Italian Lega to Donald Trump. This ideological flexibility and the blurring of ideological boundaries has increased the cross-appeal of populist actors.

> *Remind potential supporters of populist policy positions of the ideological orientation of their fellow policy travellers and that their messages often change opportunistically over time.*

## Recommendation 12: challenging populist parties

The considerable loyalty of populist voters to their leaders and parties despite frequent policy reversals and considerable ideological flexibility suggest that the attachment is primarily affective and emotional and less instrumental-rational. This can encompass the relationship between the populist leader and the sympathisers as a group. The bond consists of a shared cultural identity, a language, and behavioural codes. The populist sympathiser identifies with the populist leader through this common bond so that the relationship is one of descriptive and/or symbolic representation rather than one of substantive representation.

Thus, it is less a matter of voters rationally matching politicians with their most preferred policy preference, but one of selecting a political leader or group that is seen as authentic representatives of one's own grievance-based identity. Once the connection is made, the supporter follows the leader through framing and reframing. The relationship can be calle populist in nature if the common identity between leader and sympathiser is based on the idea that politics is binary and consists of a "corrupt elite and good people" dialectic.

A second aspect is a credible change agency, as the populist leader or group must be able to credibly promise a change in the status quo. Thus, the populist must be able to convert economic, social, and communication capital into political capital. The promise of populists is to act in the present to make the future more like an idealised past ("Make America great again"). The appeal is emotional and entails a change toward something familiar toward the restoration of control over one's lives.

> *Since populists effectively use communication to achieve their goals, the counter-strategy is also communicative. It must target the two central premises of the relationship between populist leader and his followers:*
> ***Challenging the symbolic appeal of the populist leader**. To this end, the true nature of the bond must be properly identified and so critique can be in terms that their followers care about (not what you care about).*
> ***Challenging the promise of retur**n. The appeal of populism often rests on the credible promise of change, particularly back to a 'golden age'. Rather than fighting the direction of change that a populist promises, it might be more effective to point out the populist's inability to bring about that change.*

## Recommendation 13: importance of positive narratives

Populist parties benefit from a vacuum of political narratives. Political narratives should not be relinquished to populist parties. Liberal-democratic parties should develop positive narratives (in particular of a vision of the future, of heroism, and of empowerment) and communicate them.

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## Recommendation 14: promotion of the relevance of liberal checks and balances

Populist narratives should not be left unanswered. Illiberal narratives should be publicly countered with narratives of liberal democracy promoting the relevance and desirability of checks and balances, rule of law, and of minority rights.

> *Illiberal narratives should be publicly countered with narratives of liberal democracy promoting the relevance and desirability of checks and balances, rule of law, and of minority rights and by suggesting alternatives.*

## Recommendation 15: respecting emotions, identities and grievances

Mainstream argue competence etc. populist tend to be emotion, tribal and grievance-based. The resilience of populists to criticism, as exemplified by the endurance of Trump and others, shows that the bond between voters and populists is based less on expectations of competence and political performance, but more on emotional or "tribal" ties, the expression of grievance, and the acknowledgement of identity. This is also born out by PaCE research (Deliverable 2.4).

> *Policy makers have to also engage voters at an emotional level, respecting their identity and addressing grievances.*

## Recommendation 15: flexibility of policy

Since populists are less constrained by liberal norms and often dominated by single leaders (rather than be a complex coalition of interests or based on an underlying ideology), they can be flexible as to their declared policies This allows such parties to move quickly in order to gain electoral or other support. This gives them an advantage (at least in the short-term).

> *An ability to rapidly adapt policy or messages can give short term advantage to a party. Attend to the needs of those that support them.*

## Other recommendations

Other policy recommendations are already well-established in the literature. Some of these are included in the above if PaCE research has provided further evidence for them. However, one existing recommendations is beyond the scope of PaCE, but is still a good suggestion, namely:

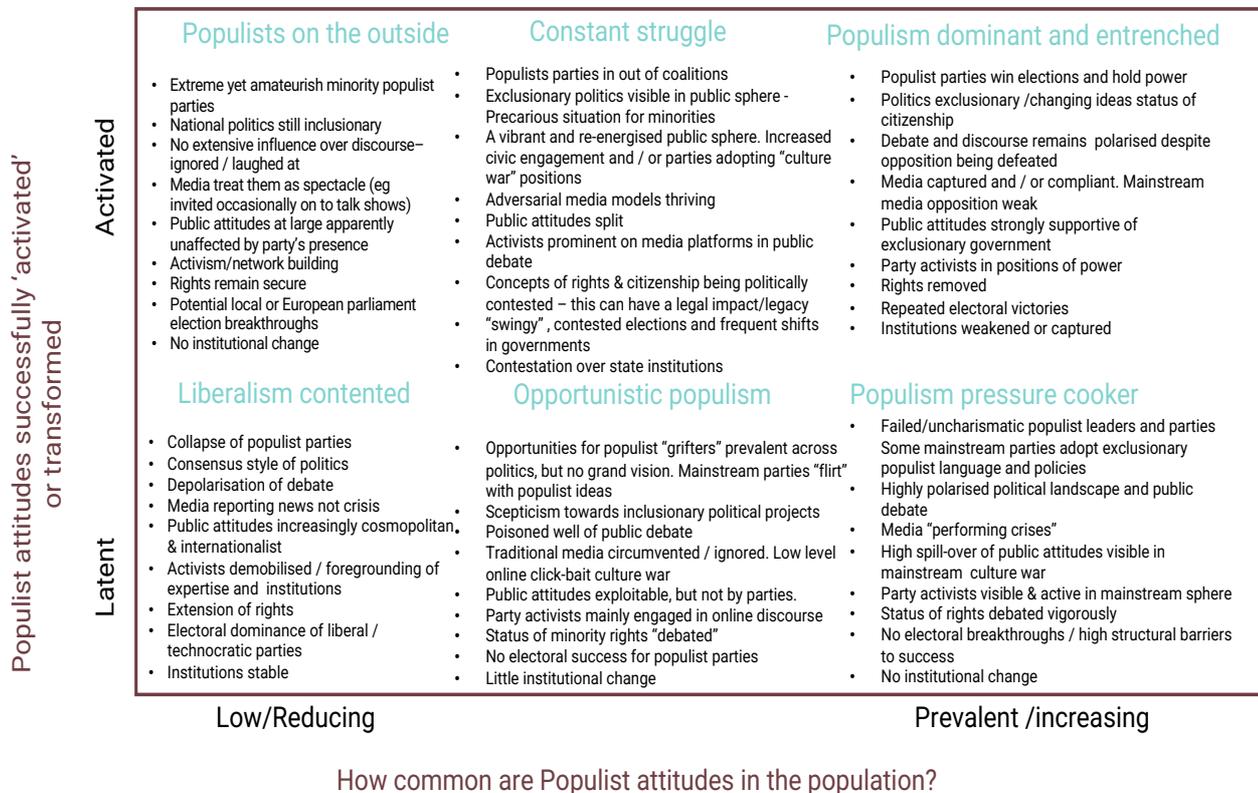> *Increase investment in more civic education for resilient democracies*.

# Recommendations and risks in context
# – 6 foresight scenarios

Populism has different manifestations in different environments (different cultures, circumstances and histories), and this is important for the availability and efficacy of policy options. PaCE developed six foresight scenarios which envisage different ways that populism could develop. These scenarios vary in two ways: (a) the conditions that exist in terms of the levels of populist attitudes in the population that could be mobilised on one axis, and (b) the activation of those attitudes by populists (due to their narratives, parties etc.).

In scenario planning for policy making, policy actors are often looking for options that are robust across a range of scenarios. Ideas and policy options that come out of foresight scenarios differ from other policy recommendations inasmuch as they are surfaced by reflecting discussion through the scenarios themselves. This provides an aid for strategic planning and helps develop insight to choose which policy options may be most appropriate across a range of contexts and issues. We used these scenarios as the basis for discussing consequences and unintended consequences of various political, societal and policy options that are available in D4.5.

The six scenarios are summed up in the following chart (for more details, see PaCE D4.5-Scenarios and desired futures, available at the PaCE website).

| | Populists on the outside | Constant struggle | Populism dominant and entrenched |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Activated** | • Extreme yet amateurish minority populist parties<br>• National politics still inclusionary<br>• No extensive influence over discourse– ignored / laughed at<br>• Media treat them as spectacle (eg invited occasionally on to talk shows)<br>• Public attitudes at large apparently unaffected by party's presence<br>• Activism/network building<br>• Rights remain secure<br>• Potential local or European parliament election breakthroughs<br>• No institutional change | • Populists parties in out of coalitions<br>• Exclusionary politics visible in public sphere - Precarious situation for minorities<br>• A vibrant and re-energised public sphere. Increased civic engagement and / or parties adopting "culture war" positions<br>• Adversarial media models thriving<br>• Public attitudes split<br>• Activists prominent on media platforms in public debate<br>• Concepts of rights & citizenship being politically contested – this can have a legal impact/legacy "swingy" , contested elections and frequent shifts in governments<br>• Contestation over state institutions | • Populist parties win elections and hold power<br>• Politics exclusionary /changing ideas status of citizenship<br>• Debate and discourse remains  polarised despite opposition being defeated<br>• Media captured and / or compliant. Mainstream media opposition weak<br>• Public attitudes strongly supportive of exclusionary government<br>• Party activists in positions of power<br>• Rights removed<br>• Repeated electoral victories<br>• Institutions weakened or captured |
| | Liberalism contented | Opportunistic populism | Populism pressure cooker |
| **Latent** | • Collapse of populist parties<br>• Consensus style of politics<br>• Depolarisation of debate<br>• Media reporting news not crisis<br>• Public attitudes increasingly cosmopolitan, & internationalist<br>• Activists demobilised / foregrounding of expertise and  institutions<br>• Extension of rights<br>• Electoral dominance of liberal / technocratic parties<br>• Institutions stable | • Opportunities for populist "grifters" prevalent across politics, but no grand vision. Mainstream parties "flirt" with populist ideas<br>• Scepticism towards inclusionary political projects Poisoned well of public sphere<br>• Traditional media circumvented / ignored. Low level online click-bait culture war<br>• Public attitudes exploitable, but not by parties.<br>• Party activists mainly engaged in online discourse<br>• Status of minority rights "debated"<br>• No electoral success for populist parties<br>• Little institutional change | • Failed/uncharismatic populist leaders and parties Some mainstream parties adopt exclusionary populist language and policies<br>• Highly polarised political landscape and public debate<br>• Media "performing crises"<br>• High spill-over of public attitudes visible in mainstream  culture war<br>• Party activists visible & active in mainstream sphere<br>• Status of rights debated vigorously<br>• No electoral breakthroughs / high structural barriers to success<br>• No institutional change |

Left axis: Populist attitudes successfully 'activated' or transformed (Activated / Latent)

Bottom axis: Low/Reducing — Prevalent /increasing

How common are Populist attitudes in the population?

# Citizen suggestions from local and European Democracy Labs

The PaCE project is committed to being open to the voices of European citizens, both listening to their suggestions and disseminating them. The following are suggestions from EU citizens, voiced in a series of structured discussions in the format of local Democracy labs and a European Democracy lab, organised by PaCE in 7 European countries. We have organised them here under some headings to make them easier to digest – for more details and to better understand the country and context in which these were raised see the reports on each of the Democracy Labs run by the project.

For more details on the Democracy labs, see the PaCE website, where reports on *each* of the Democracy labs are available, together with a report on the lessons learned (see PaCE deliverable D5.3 "Lessons learned from the Local Democracy Labs" and D5.4 "Recommendations on new forms of public participation").

## Suggestions on public communication: countering disinformation and fake news

The overall recommendation from all Democracy labs advocates was for the development of a more efficient communication strategy built on communication plan and goals, procedures and operation, techniques and instruments. The strategy should include different stages such as implementation, revision, updating, and adaptation, resulting from an ongoing evaluation process built on the dialogue and consultation between authorities and citizens/residents. Moreover, the information distributed to the public should be provided through secure communication channels that are set up based on evaluation of context and particularities of different groups.

With regard to COVID-19 related disinformation, the overall recommendation of the Bulgarian participants in the Democracy lab is for introducing measures of prevention and fight against disinformation, the refinement and adaptation of communication strategy in line with the particularities and profile of the targeted groups and communities. To name a few examples mentioned by citizens: public information campaigns and education programs for raising public awareness on the functionality of social media and the information flow. Also, it is recommended to recognize and support research and expertise as  valuable contributions to public information strategy

## Suggestions on populist narratives and their influence on public discourse

The Italian citizen-participants in the Democracy lab recommended measures to prevent the influence on public opinion of populist narratives, the main of which is raising public awareness on populism discourse. The more concrete measures proposed are:

a)  community and civil society contribution to information provision and group dialogue;
b)  public education programs;
c)  participatory instruments and design.

## Suggestions on pandemic restrictions and their long-term consequences: mental health and wellbeing

The overall recommendation made by the citizen participants in the local democracy labs in Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Poland, Scotland and Spain is for the state to develop preventative and support programs for mental health and wellbeing, in the broader context of general health. The programs should strategically include public awareness policy on the importance of mental health and impact on different health dimensions, education programs on mental health, monitoring and follow up of people's mental health status, and counselling and psychological sessions financed by public funds.

## Suggestions on employment and social protection

The overall recommendation of the group in Iceland advocated as a protective measure of the employment sector the tripartite contribution of government-organisations-citizens engagement. The main focus is concentrated here on marginalised and vulnerable groups of people.

Hence, the sustainable contribution to the employment sector must be addressed from different perspectives:

a) by facilitating proper access to information;
b) envisaging monitoring programs for marginalised groups;
c) contribution of civil organisations;
d) favouring the partnership between authority-third sector-citizens;
e) equipping people with resilience mechanisms;
f) creating self-employment programs;
g) developing digital and technology literacy.

## Suggestions on strengthening trust in government

To promote the active role of local authority as a binder/connector between central government on one side and civil organisation and citizens on the other side, is the overall recommendation of the group from Scotland. In their view this would help strengthen trust in the government.

To ensure and bolster this connection and, at the same time, facilitate dialogue and consultation, there is a need for:

a) encouraging and valuing civic engagement and public consultation;

b) re-evaluation of existing laws and policy strategy;

c) early intervention strategies for insertion of civic education and civic participation programs in schools;

d) refinement of communication strategies.

## Suggestions on public consultation and role of civic organisation

The overall recommendation of the Hungarian group promotes policy strategies that encourage public consultation and civic engagement in the form of deliberation, dialogue, cooperation, and opinion exchange.

To ensure these desiderata, some preliminary conditions should be guaranteed, and accommodation of both authorities and citizens are required, that should be focused on:

a)  particularities of community needs;
b)  culture of deliberation acquired through public education programs;
c)  participatory instruments and design to facilitate public-authority dialogue and cooperation.