

Invitation

Charting New Paths: Democratic Innovations in the face of Populist Futures in Europe

18 Oct 2024
12:30 CET
Stanhope Hotel

Democracy Retreat

Wellington Room, Stanhope Hotel, 9 Rue du Commerce, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
18 October 2024 | 12:30-14:30 CET

In the past two decades, populism has surged worldwide, often challenging established democratic norms and structures while also increasing the risk of authoritarianism. Under the Chatham House Rule, this lunch dialogue explored the **use and misuse of democratic innovations** — such as referenda, participatory budgeting, and citizen assemblies— **by populist agendas**. It did so with one key question in mind: what strategies can be employed to balance the potential benefits of democratic innovations with the risks of their misuse for populist gains?

Yet, tension remains between the **uses and misuses** of democratic innovations, akin to tools to alleviate the exclusion that gives rise to populism. Democratic innovations such as referendums, participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies are designed to enhance citizen participation. However, these tools can be misused, leading to significant tensions in this journey. As one may notice, a hammer can build a house, but it can also break a window. For example, one can think of referendums such as the 2016 Brexit vote, which allowed direct decision-making but has also been exploited to bypass legislative scrutiny.

Co organised by [TEPSA](#) and the [Egmont Institute](#) in the framework of [Nets4Dem](#), the event discussed the following questions:

- Can participatory reforms and deliberative processes effectively address the rise of populism and its roots?
- How can democratic innovations be safeguarded against misuse by populist movements while still enhancing citizen participation?
- What strategies can be implemented to mitigate the risks of democratic innovations being co-opted by populist agendas?

Digital platforms, such as the Five Star Movement's Rousseau, can democratise party decisions but risk being manipulated to consolidate populist power. Similarly, participatory budgeting, while empowering communities in local fiscal decisions may be co-opted for short-term gains. While these tools have a great potential for deeper democratic engagement, their misuse can undermine democratic systems and facilitate the erosion of institutional checks and balances.

Meet the Speakers

Nets4Dem's second Democracy Retreat featured three interventions from **Elizabeth Calderón Lüning** (The Democratic Society), **David Mekkaoui** (Europe MédiaLab) and **Mara Almeida** (European Commission) and plenary discussions. Invitees also engaged in active conversations around roundtables, guided by a set of questions.

**ELIZABETH
CALDERÓN LÜNING**



Mission lead for Future
Technologies & Democracies
The Democratic Society

**DAVID
MEKKAOUI**



Director
Europe MédiaLab

**MARA
ALMEIDA**



Policy Analyst
European Commission

This lunch brought together around 35 participants from policy circles, such as the European Commission, the Council, Members of Parliament, political parties and experts in democratic innovations and researchers from sister Horizon projects on democracy ([Nets4Dem](#) & [RECLAIM](#)).

About Nets4Dem

This retreat was organised as part of Networks of Networks 4 Democracy (Nets4Dem), an Horizon Europe project coordinated by Democratic Reporting International. To enhance and transform the landscape of democracy initiatives, Nets4Dem brings together more than 200 cities, over 50 think tanks and universities, and dozens of democracy-focused NGOs across 38 European countries. Co-organised by the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and the Egmont Institute, this [series of retreats](#) aims to equip stakeholders with cutting-edge strategies to strengthen and renew democratic processes in Europe. Additionally, by promoting innovative approaches to democratic governance, these events foster knowledge-sharing and collaboration among policy-makers, practitioners, and democracy researchers.