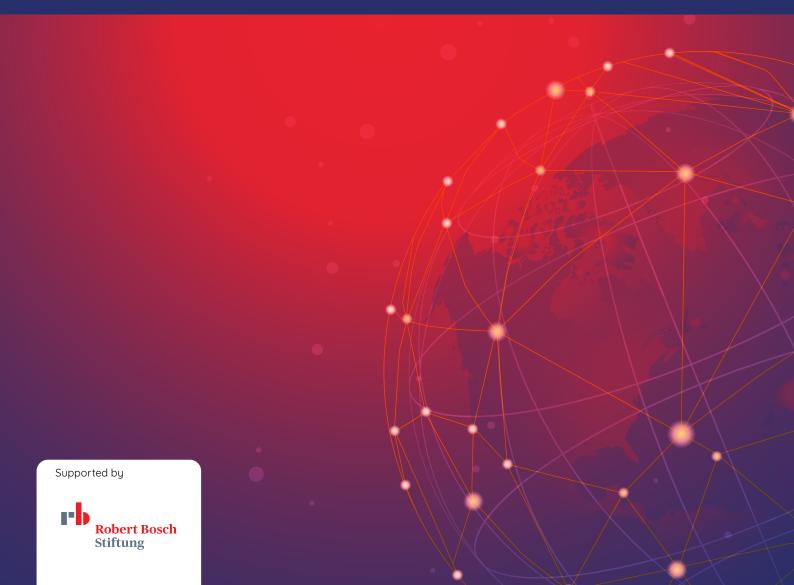# Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations - A case study of North Macedonia

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The European Democracy Hub is a joint initiative of Carnegie Europe and the European Partnership for Democracy. It acts as a focal point for work on democracy, bringing together analysts and policymakers engaged with EU democracy support and democratic challenges in Europe.

Introduction

North Macedonia's three decades of independence have been tumultuous. Although it seceded peacefully from Yugoslavia and escaped the wars, the country's transition from socialism produced high unemployment, weak rule of law, and ethnocentric policies that resulted in an armed conflict in 2001.[1] Following a period of economic and democratic development, the country applied for EU and NATO membership. It received a green light from the EU Commission to start accession talks in 2009; the process was blocked by Greece for nine years, conditioning progress on the country's name being changed[2].

The stalemate was used by successive governments as an excuse for a lack of crucial reforms and the rise of authoritarianism. This culminated in a deep political crisis, which began in 2015 after a wire-tapping scandal revealed the high-level corruption of those in power.[3] Evidence emerged of election tampering and nepotism, instigating public outrage and civic activism never seen before in the country.[4] Massive protests soon ensued under the names "Protestiram'' (I Protest) and "Colourful revolution"; these intensified in 2016, demanding accountability, democracy, and rule of law.[5] The protests, combined with pressure from the international community resulted in early parliamentary elections and a change of government in 2017.[6] After the new government coalition, headed up by the leader of the social democrats (Zoran Zaev), took office in 2017, there was a significant opening of the previously narrowed civic space. The new government pledged to restore and strengthen democracy and rule of law and to get the country back on the path to EU membership, and it introduced several reforms raising citizens' hopes about the country's future[7].

Civil society was invited to contribute to the development and/or monitoring of a variety of policies, strategies, and laws,[8] and several civil society activists joined the Prime Minister's cabinet as councillors, and few were appointed Ministers.[9] Environmental movements became especially prominent and a few of them even managed to pressure the government to hold a number of local referendums and prevented the opening of three mines in the southeast of the country, mitigating their harmful impact on the environment.[10]

Being a young democracy with a socialist past, civil disobedience, participatory democracy, and organised civil society have not been a significant part of the country's history and culture. Therefore, the success of ousting a well-established regime that significantly narrowed the civic space, was, to many, a testimony to the power of the people.

In 2018, the years-long dispute with Greece was resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement and a change in the constitutional name of the country, propelling North Macedonia into NATO in 2020.[11] EU accession, however, was again halted, first by France demanding change in the accession methodology,[12] and later by

1 Encyclopedia Britannica. "North Macedonia - Independence." Accessed June 2, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Macedonia/Independence.
2 "End of Macedonia'S Name Dispute Opens Road to EU Talks and NATO Membership", Euractive ,2018,
    https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/end-of-macedonias-name-dispute-opens-road-to-eu-talks-and-nato-membership/.
3 "Wire-Tapping Scandal Hits Macedonia", Politico, 2015, https://www.politico.eu/article/wire-tapping-scandal-hits-macedonia/. Accessed June 2, 2022.
4 "Macedonia Government is Blamed for Wiretapping Scandal", New York Times, 2015,
    https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/world/europe/macedonia-government-is-blamed-for-wiretapping-scandal.html, Accessed March 15, 2022
5 Rizankoska Josipa, and Trajkoska Jasmina. "A Social Movement in First Person Singular: The Colours of the "Colourful Revolution" in North Macedonia", Southeastern
    Europe 43, 1 (2019): 1-27, doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-04301001
6 Stojadinovic, Sonja. "North Macedonia's Colorful Revolution is Over. What's Next?" International Center on Nonviolent Conflict: Minds of the Movement. June 2019.
    https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/blog_post/north-macedonias-colorful-revolution-whats-next/
7 International Republican Institute, "Macedonia National Public Opinion Poll.",
    https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/iri_macedonia_july_2018_poll_public_final.pdf.
8 United States Agency for International Development, "2018 Civil Society Organization
    Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia", September 2019,
    https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/resource-csosi-2018-report-europe-eurasia.pdf
9 "Бројот на „шарените" во Владата се зголемува" [The number of the "colourful" in the Government is increasing] (in Macedonian),
    https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/brojot-na-sharenite-vo-vladata-se-zgolemuva
10 Popovska Liljana, "Macedonia Is Too Small for the Big Appetites of the Mining Business." ResPublica, July 14, 2021.
    https://respublica.edu.mk/blog-en/environment/macedonia-is-too-small-for-the-big-appetites-of-the-mining-business/?lang=en.
11 "Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Ceremony Marking the Accession of North Macedonia to NATO." NATO, March 2020.
    Accessed March 7, 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_174650.htm
12 "Emmanuel Macron's EU Accession Veto Is a Historic Mistake" Financial Times, October, 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/eda39e1e-f3eb-11e9-b018-3ef8794b17c6.

Bulgaria over another bilateral dispute, this one related to Macedonian nationhood and language identity.[13] This resulted in widespread disappointment among the public towards the government, reflected in a massive defeat of the ruling party in the 2022 local elections and a decline in trust in the EU and support for EU membership.[14]

The COVID-19 pandemic made the situation even worse, hitting public health and the economic system hard and further exposing the weaknesses in the country's governance. The pandemic emphasised "the importance of digitalising the public administration and strengthening the provision of online services to citizens and businesses".[15]

Although there has been an improvement in several democracy-related areas since 2017,[16] and increased civil society involvement in policy and decision-making processes,[17] numerous reports point to a persistent authoritarian political culture in the country, ineffective and politicised public administration and a lack of civic participation.[18] E-government tools are not widely used.[19] A 2020 monitoring report even noted a decline in the enabling environment for public participation in law-making processes compared to 2015.[20]

Bridging the gap: Innovative forms enabling civic participation

Given this situation where the authorities are not creating enough space for citizens to actively participate in policy-making, civil society organisations (CSOs) have produced solutions, filling the void. There have been several positive examples of CSOs bridging the gap: from an organisation of nationwide deliberative polling to helping municipalities increase citizen participation in the local budgeting process.[21] However, two examples stand out for their innovative approach to participation. First, the informal initiative "Green Human City", which unites CSOs, activists, and citizens and combines the use of IT tools with traditional participatory mechanisms. Second, the digital platform "mZaednica" (mCommunity) which helps municipalities to increase citizen participation.

Two-way communication via "mZaednica" (mCommunity)

Responding to the need to improve the low level of citizen participation, a local CSO working on social innovation, Blink 172-41, developed the first digital platform in the country that allows for two-way communication between citizens and municipalities.[22] Launched in 2019, the platform named "mZaednica" (mCommunity) allows citizens access to digital services and offers them the ability to submit proposals to their local municipality. It also enables the municipalities to reach out to citizens and encourage them to participate in local decision-making processes. For this reason, mZaednica was awarded the European Youth Award 2019 by the World Summit Awards in the category of Active Citizenship.[23] The mZaednica platform consists of mobile and web applications and was initially developed as a project supported by USAID and offered to municipalities to be implemented free of charge. It was piloted in 2019 in the Municipality of Karposh in the City of Skopje. Following technical upgrades, two other municipalities have started to use mZaednica in 2021 and contracts have been signed with six additional municipalities within the first two months of 2022.[24]

When the platform was presented to local governments, most of these were hesitant at first, expressing concerns over the financial implications, the challenges linked to the digitalisation of local services, data protection and especially the lack of digital skills of their staff.

13 "Bulgaria Blocks EU Membership Talks with North Macedonia." Deutsche Welle, November.2020. Accessed March 7, 2022.
   https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-blocks-eu-membership-talks-with-north-macedonia/a-55641332.
14 Velinovska, Nikolovski and Kirchner, "From a poster to a foster child. 2021 public opinion analysis on North Macedonia's EU accession process", Konrad Adenauer
   Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia and Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, February 2022,
   https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf
15 European Commission, "North Macedonia 2021 Report", Accessed March 14, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/north-macedonia-report-2021_en.
16 Bliznakovski Jovan, North Macedonia: Nations in Transit 2021 Country Report, Freedom House 2022,
   https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2021
17 United States Agency for International Development, "2020 Civil Society Organization
   Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia", November 2021,
   https://lt.usembassy.gov/2020-civil-society-organization-sustainability-index-latest-report-published/
18 Kamilovska Trpovska, S., Valentina V., and Jasmina C., "Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development Country Report for North Macedonia
   2021." Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, September 2021,
   https://mcms.mk/images/docs/2021/Enabling_Environment_for_CS_development_Report_2020.pdf.
19 Cvetanova, G., Pachovski, V., & Bojadzievska, I.," Strengthening Democracy through Citizen e-Participation on Local Level in the Republic of Macedonia". European
   Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities, 7(2), 1-16., 2018
20 Atanasovska, V., "Огледало на Владата: Учество на јавноста во процесите на подготовка на закони [Mirror to the government: Public participation in law-making processes].
   Macedonian Center for International Communication, 2020, Accessed June 7, 2022, https://rcgo.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ogledalo-na-vladata-2019-final.pdf
21 "Macedonia Deliberative Poll", 2017, Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy, Accessed June 7, 2022, https://cdd.stanford.edu/2017/macedonia-deliberative-poll/;
   "Engaging the Community in Planning for the Future", 2020, USAID. Accessed June 7, 2022
   https://www.usaid.gov/north-macedonia/news-information/news/engaging-community-planning-future.22 "About", MZaednica, Accessed June 7, 2022,
   https://mzaednica.mk/about
23 "mCommunity", European Youth Award, last modified November, 2019, Accessed June 7, 2022, https://eu-youthaward.org/winning-project/mcommunity/
24 Zorica Velkovska, Co-founder of Blink 172-41and mZaednica, February 20, 2022, in discussion with the author

Persuasion was needed by the project team to convince the local governments that the platform would not increase their daily workload and would, in fact, make their work more efficient. Once implemented, the local governments saw the benefits of using the platform and promoted it actively on their communication channels. However, they have been reluctant to commit any funds from their annual budgets (between 1-2000 Euros) for using the platform if it is not free of charge.[25]

The most significant challenge around the platform for the project team has been to motivate citizens to participate and use the platform, due to peoples' doubts that local governments would address their concerns. To address this, the project team supported the promotion of the platform via social media campaigns and targeted promotional activities. They also explained the importance of timely responses to the local administration, as well as the importance of maintaining a high success rate in resolving issues.[26] This has proven to be a good strategy based on citizens' comments and feedback on the municipality's official Facebook page. When citizens see their submissions being taken seriously by the local administration, it is likely their willingness to engage and their overall sense of trust increases. This can be done in several ways, such as municipalities presenting proof that they have solved problems raised by citizens. It can also be achieved by putting citizens' initiatives forward for a vote in the municipal councils, or by accepting citizens' proposals for the local budget. Additionally, when citizens provide good feedback on the responsiveness and work of local government departments, it can create a positive relationship and motivate public servants who otherwise feel their work is not recognised or valued.

In the short period of implementation thus far, the platform has already achieved significant results. Citizens have submitted different types of proposals and every user can track the feedback provided by the municipality.[27] The most frequent suggestions are for the arrangement of public spaces (creating new green areas, dog parks, sports playgrounds, etc.), improvements to the traffic and the street infrastructure (suggestions include one-way streets and signalisation), and improvement to waste management services, such as changing the location for new bins.
The municipality of Karposh utilised the platform for gathering citizens' opinions on the municipal budget for 2021, on a summer cultural programme and on a massive cleaning action in the municipality. Once submitted as proposals by the municipality, citizens were able to discuss and vote on issues and if interested, they

got notified about any related follow-up activity. This approach by municipalities to be proactive in requesting citizens' feedback has been much appreciated by the citizens and has generated further citizen engagement. So far, the three municipalities using the platform have requested citizens' feedback via mZaednica for the preparation of their 2022 local budgets. To raise awareness, the mayors of these municipalities have actively promoted the platform among the public, urging citizens to get engaged in the process.

Building on the positive citizen experience in the municipality of Karposh, there was significant interest when mZaednica was introduced in another municipality in the City of Skopje, Aerodrom. In the two weeks following its launch, in March 2022, the platform had more than 1,000 users and more than 115 submissions.

Deliberative Digital Democracy for a Green Human City

Zelen Human Grad (Green Human City or GHC) is another initiative aimed to correct the low level of citizen participation in policy and decision-making at the local level. It does this by relying on three principles: local sovereignty, grassroots participation, and digital community.[28] It was set up in September 2020 as an informal initiative by twelve local CSOs operating in North Macedonia's capital city of Skopje with an aim "to transfer power from the political and business elite to the citizens by uniting and empowering CSOs, activists, and ordinary citizens behind concrete projects that contribute to the public good in a [the] short and medium-term".[29]The initiative deals with issues and projects in six thematic areas, in line with the thematic focus of the founding CSOs: social justice, sustainable development, energy independence, clean environment, animal protection, and urban mobility. The projects are sourced from the expertise of the activist organisations that make up Green Human City; citizens' proposals submitted and voted for via an open online platform "Moj Grad" (My City) created and administered by Green Human City; and the demands of the protest movements in which Green Human City has participated in.[30]

The My City open platform, launched in May 2021, is a key component of Green Human City. Similarly to mZaednica, it enables citizens to participate in local-level

25 Zorica Velkovska
26 Zorica Velkovska
27 https://mzaednica.mk/reports
28 Зелен Хуман Град,[Green Human City], Accessed March 15, 2022. https://zhg.mk/
29 Зелен Хуман Град,[Green Human City]
30 Зелен Хуман Град,[Green Human City]

policy and decision-making. Any citizen, CSO or social movement can use the My City participatory platform if they create their own profile by linking their Facebook account to the platform. Through their profiles, they can submit, discuss and vote for proposals on projects or policies. The three most voted proposals per month are formally submitted as an initiative to the Skopje City Council by the members of the council who are part of the Green Human City coalition. In accordance with the principles defined by the Law of the City of Skopje and the Law on Self-Governance[31], the council may adopt any of the submitted initiatives that fall under its competencies with a majority vote. Before submitting, the proposals are fine-tuned by expert members of Green Human City together with their creators in order to be legally and financially sound.

For establishing a formal link between citizens and the decision-making institutions and for overcoming the lack of transparency and accountability of the city council, Green Human City relies on having its own elected representatives on the Skopje City Council who will represent the My City proposals and the Green Human City positions.[32] Therefore, throughout 2021 significant effort was put into promotion and awareness-raising about Green Human City to ensure their representatives were elected as councillors in the October 2021 local elections. In an effort to provide citizens with more opportunities for participation, Green Human City invited citizens to submit their nominations for candidates to the independent list of the Green Human City coalition for the Skopje City Council.[33]

The desire to engage citizens was the reasoning behind the "My candidate" addition to the "My City" participatory platform, through which citizens could nominate people who they thought were "competent in their profession, have an interest in local topics, are characterised by progressive political visions, and share an aversion to the party-careerist model of political action". Twenty candidates with the most votes from citizens were included in the Green Human City independent list of nominations.

Although it may appear complex to navigate between CSOs, citizens, social movements, officials and politicians, Green Human City seems to be functioning well due to its firm principles of horizontality, inclusivity and transparency and their clear commitment to direct democracy. Because of this, Green Human City has

achieved notable results in the local elections winning more than nine thousand votes, which earned them two out of forty-five seats in the city council.[34] This is especially impressive considering it is a very new initiative operating (for less than a year) in a society dominated by established political parties.

Through their councillors, Green Human City publishes timely information on their platform about council sessions in Skopje, which, thus far, has not been made available on the council's website. All the information published on the Green Human City platform is all material related to the work of the Skopje City Council. These include things such as council recordings, biographies, the status of the proposals submitted by Green Human City and voting outcomes (including how each councillor voted).[35] By making all materials available, the Green Human City's goal is to digitalise and make the work of the Council as transparent as possible, with the hope that the City of Skopje will eventually take over and continue the practice.[36]

The first measurable result of Green Human City has been the number of their submitted and accepted proposals. At the time of writing, 63 proposals have been submitted by citizens via the My City participatory platform, of which 5 have had between 500 and 4500 supporting votes on the platform itself and have received up to 145 comments.[37] So far, 11 proposals have already been submitted to the Skopje City Council. Green Human City's initiatives have also made a significant contribution to the preparation of the annual budget for the city of Skopje, submitting 33 proposals for budget amendments, out of which 5 have been adopted.[38] The adopted proposals refer to:

- Increased budget for improved traffic safety;
- Preparation of a Strategy with an Action Plan for improving the well-being of children;
- Hyper-network of sensors for measuring and location mapping of air pollution;
- Establishing the first organic composting station;

As published on their platform, the focus of Green Human City for the forthcoming period is to increase the use of the participatory platform so citizens are better informed and more engaged, also making it mandatory for Skopje City Council to hear their opinions in this format.

31 Law on Local Self-Governance 'Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia number 5/2002'; Law on the City of Skopje 'Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia number 158/201"

32 Post on the official Facebook Page of Green Human City, https://www.facebook.com/ZelenHumanGrad

33 „Зелен хуман град" ги повикува скопјани да се кандидираат за претстојните избори преку „Мој кандидат" ["Green Humane City" calls on Skopje residents to run in the upcoming elections through "My Candidate"], 360 Степени, 2021, Accessed June 7, 2022, https://360stepeni.mk/zelen-human-grad-gi-povikuva-skopjani-da-se-kandidiraat-za-pretstojnite-izbori-preku-moj-kandidat/

34 "Local Elections 2021 - 31.10.2021," State Election Commission, Accessed June 7, 2022, https://rezultati2021lokalni2krug.sec.mk/en/asmb-sk/r

35 "Совет" [Council], Moj Grad, Last modified June 7, 2022, http://mojgrad.mk/sovet/

36 Facebook post by Gorjan Jovanovski, councilor in the Council of the City of Skopje at the Green Human City Official Facebook Page, https://www.facebook.com/gorjanjovanovski/posts/pfbid0WsMkuWBvR6VjgoGXMj8AF2X412H4SNEVRajNCon7Bhpar7Dd2nfnSr5pMbZbWNNgl

37 "Предлози" [Initiatives], Moj Grad, Last modified June 7, 2022, https://mojgrad.mk/initiatives/

38 "Постигнувања" [Achievments] Moj Grad, Last modified June 7, 2022, https://zhg.mk/postignuvanja/

Conclusion

Two key lessons can be drawn from the mZaednica and Green Human City initiatives. Both initiatives sought new participatory techniques because of an absence of participatory culture, the lack of demand on the side of the citizens and the lack of willingness of institutions to promote and institutionalise citizens' participation in political decision-making.

Two key lessons can be drawn from the mZaednica and Green Human City initiatives. Both initiatives sought new participatory techniques because of an absence of participatory culture, the lack of demand on the side of the citizens and the lack of willingness of institutions to promote and institutionalise citizens' participation in political decision-making.

Therefore, the first conclusion that can be made is that in countries where the participatory culture is low, organised civil society can be a strong driver for promoting citizen participation. The approach taken by mZaednica seeks to institutionalise citizen participation by utilising the possibilities offered by digital technologies, relying mostly on the willingness and the interest of municipalities. On the other hand, Green Human City's strategy is to strengthen participatory culture by creating stronger demand on behalf of citizens and upgrading the traditional tools of representative democracy.

There have been several contextual factors that contributed to this type of democratic innovation, like the strong civil society awakening and the sense of its empowerment after the ousting of a political party that had captured the state. Unfulfilled high expectations about the future reforms in the country and growing dissatisfaction among citizens with public institutions have also inspired civil society to place more pressure on institutions and those in power so they can better serve North Macedonia's citizens. Furthermore, the urgent need for digitalisation of services emphasised amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential of information technologies to respond to citizens' needs more effectively have also been eye-opening for civil society as well as citizens and institutions.

It is still too early to tell whether mZaednica, Green Human City or similar initiatives will achieve their aims to make policy-planning and decision-making at the local level a more participatory process based on citizens' opinions instead of being driven by the interests of those in power. This will depend on whether citizens engage and create pressure on the institutions on the one hand, and whether the municipalities will use the full potential of the platforms to engage citizens, on the other.

The second conclusion that can be drawn is that social trust in institutions is an underlying factor in the success of measures promoting participatory democracy. Currently, low levels of trust are affecting the willingness of citizens to engage with public institutions. The case of mZaednica has shown that the efforts of local governments to engage citizens can contribute to improving citizens' trust in local government. By introducing more initiatives promoting the participation of citizens, taking timely action and providing proof of action, providing adequate feedback to citizens' requests or using data generated via citizen-focused digital platforms when considering municipal strategic planning and development; local governments have the opportunity to show they are worthy of citizens' trust. However, local governments will need to show a sense of ownership over solutions which enable citizen participation and demonstrate accountability and genuine willingness to engage with and listen to the citizenry.

The case of Green Human City and its participatory platform, on the other hand, demonstrates a pathway for empowering citizens themselves and civil society. By enabling citizens to be informed, debate and vote, they create public pressure on the institutions to respect

the needs and opinions of the local communities in the decision-making processes. They also create a demand for more accountability for more competent and professional institutions and the mandatory involvement of citizens and civil society in decision-making. Therefore, a decisive factor determining success for Green Human City in the short run will be to have more citizens engaged with them, giving them adequate leverage in front of the Skopje City Council. In the long run, success would mean Green Human City triggers a cultural shift and will have contributed to increased demand for more direct participation in decision-making that pressures institutions to systematically integrate citizen perspectives. The key challenge for initiatives such as Green Human City is to resist monopolising citizens' participation mechanisms and being perceived as the ones responsible for it, as this can give a free pass to institutions in terms of their own responsibility to develop citizen engagement mechanisms, ultimately endangering rather than institutionalising public participation.

Lastly, as both initiatives target local-level democracy, it might be difficult to replicate them for national-level decision-making processes. However, both rely on the potential of digital solutions to introduce a new culture of participatory democracy that stands out from the traditional political party narratives that can further drive much needed social activism.

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About the project:

'Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations' is a research project supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung, which explores emerging innovations in democratic participation around the world and offering an overview of the lessons learned throughout the application of these innovations.The project highlights policy implications and gives a set of recommendations for European policymakers and practitioners working on the EU's internal democratic renewal. The project brings together researchers, practitioners and policymakers to exchange best practices in democratic political innovations.