

# DIGITALIZATION AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

**Can the European Union embrace  
and export new forms of democracy**

# DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

## DIGITALIZATION AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION EMBRACE AND EXPORT NEW FORMS OF DEMOCRACY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digitalization and technological advancements are an embedded part of the reality our societies operate in and shall do so in the future. Nevertheless, digital advancement shall serve the improvement of citizen's lives. However, if unprepared societies risk backlash and abuses from governments, with the introduction of new technologies in doing business, besides other external threats. Yet, democracy is a citizen-focused concept. Digital advancement has increased the way citizens can be included in policy making, shaping their policies and holding governments accountable, if the former is equipped with the right set of skills. However, the current representative democracy has long received criticism if it is adapting and if it is suitable to the contemporary societies, we live in. To unfold this topic and the potential that the EU has to adopt new forms of democracy, this policy paper provides concrete recommendations informed by desk research and qualitative expert interviews.

## Social Media summary

Current global developments have highlighted the need for more theoretical debate on governing systems, especially on democracy. The challenges and threats to democracy have also affected the European Union member states, as well as aspiring countries to join the EU such as those of the Western Balkans. Upon several consecutive challenges our societies and the EU have been experiencing recently, it is time to discuss at policy-making level also important theoretical points like reforming democratic and governing systems. Can the EU embrace and export new forms of democracy, such as deliberative democracy, in light of digitalisation?

## Keywords

#deliberate      #democracy      #EuropeanUnion      #WesternBalkans  
#TransformativePower #participation

## Short bio

Lutjona Lula is a researcher and communications professionals with a focus on European Union and the Western Balkans. She pursued her graduate studies at the Joint Interdisciplinary Master in South East European Studies, University of Belgrade and Karl Franzens University of Graz. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from University of Tirana. In 2012 she has been awarded a Research Scholarship at Georgia Southern University, USA. With regard to South Eastern Europe related engagement, she has been actively involved in the Western Balkans Berlin Process, Youth Forums and EU integration related events.

She has been actively engaged in research/consultancies with several bodies such as OSCE Presence in Albania, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, EU-CoE Youth Partnership etc. Her fields of interest vary from political parties, democratization, societies in transition, South Eastern Europe and the EU enlargement.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>EU, Democracy and Digitalisation</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Short theoretical overview of Deliberative Democracy</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>A reminder about EU's transformative power in Western Balkans</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Policy recommendations</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Annex 1: Interview Consent Form</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Annex 2: Interview TEMPLATE</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Annex 3: LIST OF EXPERTS INTERVIEWED</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>19</b>

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CoE – Council of Europe  
CoFoE – Conference on the Future of Europe  
COVID-19 – Coronavirus disease  
EC – European Commission  
EP - European Parliament  
EU – European Union  
WB- Western Balkans

## LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Table 1: Democratic activities	10
Figure 1: Deliberative Democracies in the EU	10

# INTRODUCTION

Current global developments have highlighted the need for more theoretical debate on governing systems, especially on democracy. The challenges and threats to democracy have also affected the European Union member states, as well as aspiring countries to join the EU such as those of the Western Balkans.

As a response, the European Commission presented its European Democracy Action Plan (European Commission, 2020) to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU. Additionally, moments of crises offer opportunities. Upon several consecutive challenges our societies and the EU have been experiencing recently, it is time to discuss at policy-making level also important theoretical points like reforming democratic and governing systems.

This policy paper is based on quantitative methodology of desk research, data gathering and document processing. To provide more in-depth overview, qualitative expert interviews have been conducted. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive, individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation. This research entails in-depth, semi-structured interviews with experts on EU integration, political developments, democratization, and digitalization.

It aims to address and unfold the following questions with concrete policy recommendations:

- What is the potential of deliberative democracy to serve as a new *modus operandi* for the Union's internal democracy
- How can digitalization support potential application of deliberative democracy
- What can be the impact of such application to the democratization process of the candidate countries in the Western Balkans?

The policy paper has few limitations with regard especially to analysis on digitalisation. It takes into account the process overall, focusing on public services, e-government and not on detail and in-depth aspects and sectors of society such as digitalisation in the private sector, energy etc. Secondly, it bases the analysis on considering the EU as a unique body together with its institutions. The situation of democracy in each member state has not been taken into consideration in this analysis. Nevertheless, conclusions and policy recommendations presented here, fill the gap on current policy research about reforming democracy in Europe. Some of the conclusions serve as food for further evidence-based policy research.

The paper is organized in the following sections. Firstly, an overview and assessment of the current state of democracy within the EU is being presented, followed by a short theoretical compilation on what deliberative democracy is. Furthermore, it continues with a brief analysis of digitalization and EU's strategy, to then move on to the sections on Western Balkans.

It concludes with concrete policy recommendations for the Union in regard to considering a shift to a more participation of citizens and deliberative democracy, as well as on how to strengthen and revitalize the transformative power that the EU has in accession countries of the Western Balkans region.



# EU, DEMOCRACY AND DIGITALISATION

The past years have marked a democratic backsliding globally, with many uncertainties worldwide. The European Union itself has faced several challenges that have impacted democracy. The refugee crisis, Brexit, COVID-19 and the most recent war in Ukraine has brought significant implications to the union itself and the state of democracy. Nevertheless, when discussing the level of democracy within the union, it is important to distinguish between democracy of the EU as a union itself, and the democracy within its member states. In this section the EU as a body is taken into analysis.

The European Union is a complex organism and a vital one that has undergone several challenges and reform since its establishment. It is unique, and one of the most well-established and vivid democratic organisations in the world. However, this does not make it immune from flaws as far as democracy is concerned. Its institutional structure is complicated and vast and there has always been talk about the democratic deficit in the EU (Expert Interview). As mentioned before the ongoing challenges have questioned the democracy situation within the EU itself.

As stated in the European Democracy Action Plan, democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are the foundations on which the European Union is based. Democracy is a core European value, and a precondition for EU membership. The EU's citizens see democracy, human rights and the rule of law as its most important asset (European Commission, 2020).

Moreover, EU citizens have assessed the state of democracy within the EU, based on a Bertelsmann Foundation survey, according to the situation in their home countries. Overall 60 percent of interviewed EU Citizens are satisfied with how democracy works in Europe. Notably, those citizens who express overall satisfaction with their own country's democracy tend to give the EU poorer marks. The EU, on the other hand, gets a better report card by citizens who tend to rate the democratic performance of their own government more poorly. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021)

The way how EU citizens view democracy within the union and its processes at institutional level, affects participation of citizens in decision making. According to Moravcsik (2003), lack of salience, not lack of opportunity, may be the critical constraint on European political participation. This would explain why European citizens fail to exploit even the limited opportunities they have to participate. It follows that referenda, parliamentary elections, or constitutional conventions based on such issues encourage informationally impoverished and institutionally unstructured deliberation, which in turn encourages unstable plebiscitary politics in which individuals have no incentive to reconcile their concrete interests with their immediate choices.

Nevertheless, Bertelsmann Foundation's report highlights an important observation as well. Across Europe, perceptions of what constitutes a robust democracy are very similar. This is an encouraging sign and proves that the EU is not only an economic union but, above all, a community of values. At the same time, the results show that among considerable portions of the population, the standards set and shared by

citizens are not being met – at both the EU and member state levels. This underscores the need for political action. (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2021)

In the same survey, when asked about the response of the EU to crises like that caused by COVID-19, 66 percent of the respondents' express confidence in the actions taken by European institutions (ibid). Thus, concluding that the EU as an organization in light of recent developments, has gained a positive attitude by EU citizens, generally speaking with regards to democracy.

However, despite challenges the EU has also been a promoter of development and innovation. In this light, the EU has adopted a [Digital Strategy](#) and has declared this the digital decade, with the vision "The EU will pursue a human-centric, sustainable vision for digital society throughout the digital decade to empower citizens and businesses." (European Commission, 2021)

"Technology may serve as a great tool to involve more citizens in policy and decision making. As German economist Hayek argues, knowledge is dispersed, it's nonlinear and can be found in every corner of the society. In this vein, technology may bring EU citizens closer to the decision-making process. However, one must be careful to ensure the technology is not abused and hacked by malign forces." (Expert Interview)

Digitalisation, especially of public services and digitalisation processes that involve citizens in decision making processes form an integral part of the EU. As Paska (2021) argues, digital participation of citizens has the potential of making representative democracy more inclusive by giving access and tools for citizens to at least voice their preferences towards the representatives in the periods between the elections. It entails the education of citizens on the concrete procedures of the governing processes, which is a new moment in representative democracies. It constitutes a step towards re-empowerment of citizens and thus has the potential of making representative democracy more resilient by restoring the citizens' trust in it.

On the other hand, as many experts have pointed out during the interviewing process, but also being a common understanding, digitalisation and digital participation of citizens can be hijacked by abuses, in case left unaddressed. The European Democracy Action Plan, highlights that the rapid growth of online campaigning and online platforms has also opened up new vulnerabilities and made it more difficult to maintain the integrity of elections, ensure a free and plural media, and protect the democratic process from disinformation and other manipulation.

Digitalisation enabled new ways to finance political actors from uncontrolled sources, cyber-attacks can target critical electoral infrastructure, journalists face online harassment and hate speech, and false information and polarising messages spread rapidly through on social media, also by coordinated disinformation campaigns. The impact of some of these steps is amplified by the use of opaque algorithms controlled by widely used communication platforms. Our European democratic cultures, in all their diversity, are being challenged by the digital transformation (European Commission).

As elaborated further in the following section, for a well-functioning deliberative democracy, a set of principles have to be considered. Trust in the digital platform and the process is crucial, therefore there is a need for digital literacy measures by the EU, not only at citizen level through education, but often also at policy makers level (Expert Interview).



Deliberative democracy in this light, can be and has the potential to be facilitated and accelerated by the use of technology when used as an enabler for the deliberative process to happen. However, deliberative democracy differs from e-democracy. E-democracy is a strategy for supporting and strengthening democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes and spreading democratic values. It is additional, complementary to, and interlinked with traditional processes of democracy. (Council of Europe 2020)

## SHORT THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Deliberative Democracy has been discussed as a concept for a long time now among political scientists. The merit of reviving the concept and bringing it back to public debate goes to the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas.

Jurgen Habermas has introduced the concept of ‘Deliberative Democracies’ “In deliberation, citizens exchange arguments and consider different claims that are designed to secure the public good. Through this conversation, citizens can come to an agreement about what procedure, action, or policy will best produce the public good. Deliberation is a necessary precondition for the legitimacy of democratic political decisions.” (Olson, 2011)

According to Habermas, three main prerequisites are needed for the deliberative process to take place. Firstly, deliberative participants have to presuppose that anyone can take part in discourse and anyone can introduce and challenge claims that are made there. They must also see one another as equals, reciprocally granting one another equal status in deliberation. Further, they must assume that others are under no compulsion while they are participating, by either the direct or implied force of others. (Olson, 2011)

The main reason why deliberative democracy is an option to consider is the fact that persons should be treated not merely as objects of legislation, as passive subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society, directly or through their representatives (Princeton University Press). In light of digitalisation, participation can be further facilitated. Digital platforms for ongoing public consultation and civic engagement have the potential to sustain connections between people and their elected or appointed officials in a democratic system (Gastil 2021). Scholars have been trying to find practical applications to deliberative democracy through technology. For example, in his paper, Gastil (2021) proposes a model that uses feedback loops to show how deliberation stands at the centre of a continuous process that leads from increased public participation to heightened legitimacy for public institutions and back again.

The recent report of Council of Europe (2022) Mapping Deliberative Democracy in Members of CoE explains the stages from participation to deliberation.

<b>Informing</b> the public and other stakeholders, keeping them up to date with what is proposed and/or happening.	Passive
<b>Consulting</b> directly by going out and seeking public feedback on the proposals or input to the process.	Participatory
<b>Involving</b> the public directly in the process, ensure they are given a voice and their concerns recognised and acknowledged.	Participatory
<b>Collaborating</b> by working in partnership with the public.	Participatory/Deliberative
<b>Empowering</b> the public by putting decision making in their hands.	Deliberative

Table 1: Democratic activities  
Source: Council of Europe, 2022

Other scholars such as Grecu et Chiriac (2021), underline the idea of an EU based on “three deliberative models”, explained by political past, historical heritage, political culture and economic development: a. participative and deliberative model, specific for full democracies; b. hybrid models based on participation and incremental evolution of the civil society, specific for Central Europe and c. an inertial model of deliberation, specific for post-authoritarian political regimes as Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. The map below shows deliberative democracies in the EU as per above mentioned criteria.

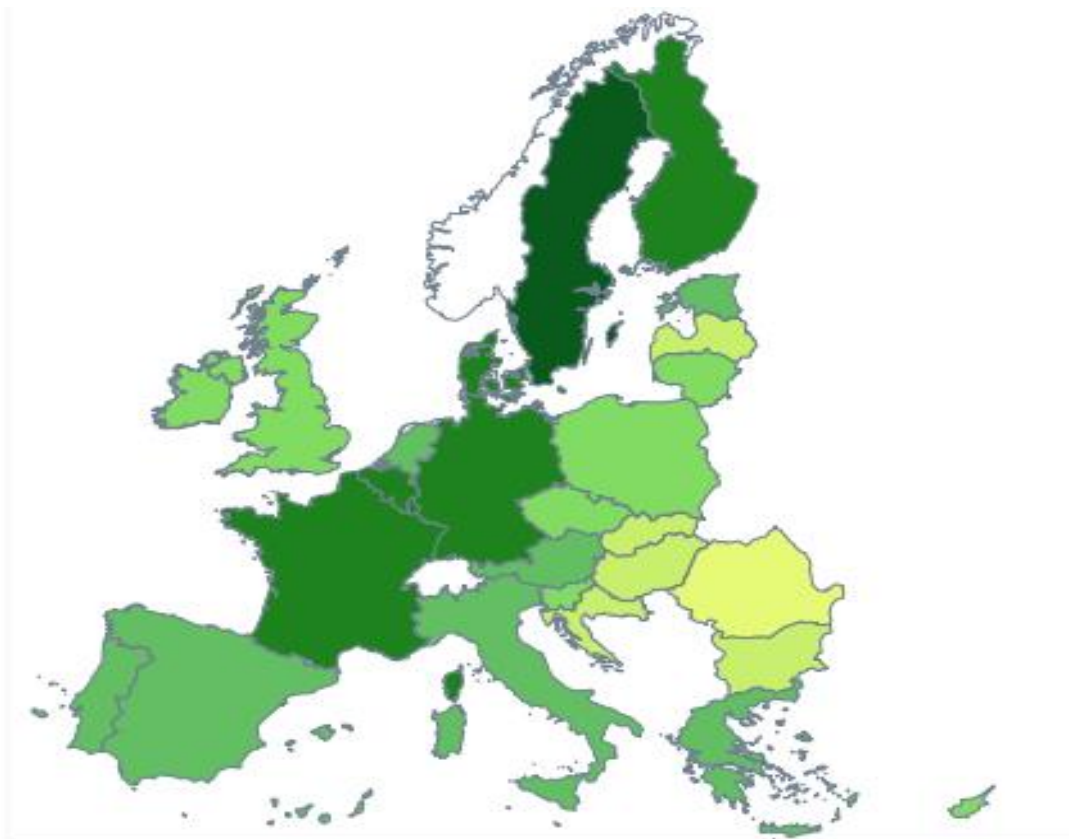


Figure 1: Deliberative Democracies in the EU  
Source: Grecu et Chiriac (2021)

Finally, at the EU level, it is important to also stress a few important initiatives that can pave the way to deliberative democracy applied to the Union, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), European Dialogues and European Citizens' Consultations.

The conference offered a structured and refreshing opportunity for participation. Despite all the shortcomings, however, the CoFoE undoubtedly put the need for citizen engagement more prominently on the EU agenda—adding to the momentum created by other initiatives like the union's new [Competence Centre on Participative and Deliberative Democracy](#) (Youngs, 2022). Even prior to CoFoE, citizens' consultations and dialogues have showed the positive feature of the Consultations process was citizens demanding to be better informed about EU actions and to have a greater voice in the functioning of the Union. (Butcher and Stratulat, 2019).

Nevertheless, as Bialozyt and Le Quiniou (Blockmans & Russack, 2020) argue, *a direct implementation of citizens' input into policies will undoubtedly be confronted by the complex and multi-layered EU decision-making process. The way these two different policy realities will be resolved will define the eventual success of the process of regaining legitimacy and enhancing the democratisation of the European Union.* Further steps towards deliberative democracy, in respect of full principles is a possible solution for policymakers.

Another positive aspect of CoFoE was also the opportunity of Western Balkan citizens to be involved in the process, if they partnered with some EU organizations or initiatives. Although seen as a remote involvement, it provided a level of reassurance.

However, despite offering a sincere attempt at participation and deliberation, the risk is that the expectations generated will remain unfulfilled and trigger another cycle of popular frustration with both the EU and democracy (Youngs, 2022).

Deliberative democracy, if based on principles laid in the section, backed by technological support that offers transparency and trust of citizens, can be a reality within the Union.

# IMPORTANT REMINDER: EU'S TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN WESTERN BALKANS

The final section of the policy paper focuses on the Western Balkans as the region has been in the integration process for almost thirty years now. While the discussion within the EU continues with regard to the EU's form of democracy, it is of utmost importance to highlight the fact that countries with a clear perspective, such as Western Balkan countries must and can not be seen as outskirts of the union, shall aim for a future democratic and deliberative union.

Nevertheless, the union has been considered to have a transformative power towards democratization of accession countries, through conditionality along the process. Transformative power is linked to the integration of candidates or external governance towards countries engaged in various forms of regional integration with the EU and so geographically limited. (Dimitrova et al., 2020)

With regard to Western Balkans, it is often argued the transformative power of the EU's conditionality has weakened given that the process is somehow prolonged and given that the enlargement agenda is put on hold, while other priorities such as Brexit, Refugee Crisis and most recently COVID19 concern European Union's primary agenda (Lula, 2022).

Other scholars and experts during the interviewing process argue that the transformative power is no longer there and that countries of the region are backsliding in their current state of democracy (Expert Interviews). Nevertheless, the majority of interviewed experts stress the fact the EU Integration remains the only way to further democratize the countries.

When analysing the influence of current global events in the region, referring to [Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group](#), Vurmo (2021) highlights, *that in BiEPAG's worst case scenario for enlargement, the EU and Western Balkan countries de facto abandoned the policy, and a new level of unpredictability overtook the region, including nationalist- and conflict-driven agendas. In this scenario, the days of European values and a pro-Western consensus would be gone, and Western Balkan countries would pursue different foreign policy priorities and partnerships.* Vurmo, uses this as an argument that the Western Balkans shall focus on its internal democracy, in light of an ongoing hesitant EU to enlarge.

The stalled EU integration and the bloc's broken promises threaten democracy in the Western Balkans. There are three reasons for this. First, the process has helped fuel [Euroscepticism](#), which has both undermined the efforts of the region's progressive camp and strengthened the hands of its populists. Second, the EU has been criticized for unintentionally promoting "[stabilitocracies](#)" and for not taking a stronger position against autocratic tendencies. Third, the stalled EU integration process may encourage countries in the Western Balkans to seek out alternative partners, such as Russia, Turkey and China, whose authoritarian influence is likely to weaken their democracies (Idea.int, 2022)

However, it is important to highlight that the classic consideration that the region benefits more from EU integration than the EU embracing these 6 countries is faulty and damaging to the process. First of all, it does not help the image of EU citizens about the countries and secondly, it does not create an equal space for dialogue. In terms of digitalisation requirements, the region shall comply with EU acquis and reforms. In this case, the EU integration process is an accelerator of digitalisation. (Expert Interview).

On the other hand, when discussing successful initiatives of applied deliberative democracy, the region has much to offer to the EU. While some participatory initiatives of the EU face criticism, small local initiatives in the Western Balkans can serve as good practices, especially for multi-ethnic member states within EU. One of the cases is the project [Buidling Mostar \(\*Gradimo Mostar\*\)](#).

The first Citizens' Assembly in Mostar was organised in July 2021 based on a transparent and inclusive process tailored for Mostar. It brought together a representative group of 48 randomly selected citizens who deliberated during four consecutive weekends and developed 32 recommendations on the cleanliness of the city and maintenance of public spaces in Mostar. (mostargradimo.ba, 2022) Such initiatives serve as an important reminder that the EU-WB relationship can be two-folded, although asymmetric. Secondly, in light of ongoing challenges to democracy, the EU needs to regain its transformative power in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The European Union is facing several challenges in the past years including hybrid threats. Such situation has shifted urgent priorities in the agenda, while the rise of populism is observed to threaten the democracy. Still, EU citizens have a positive attitude generally to the democracy and rule of law within the EU.

Nevertheless, the Union has taken further measures to strengthen democracy and increase citizens' participations from the Digital Strategy, to European Democracy Action Plan, as well as Competence Centre on Participatory and Deliberative Democracy. Digitalisation of the Union can serve as a path for application of deliberative democracy.

Moreover, the Union must strengthen its transformative power to new accession countries. It has historically been considered to have served democratization of the countries along the process. The democratization of countries can be in line to new participatory forms of democracy, given that during the negotiation process, candidate countries must fulfil *acquis communautaire* and other reforms.

The Western Balkans region in this light, must not be considered as an ornament or remote area. Such organic integration and perspective serve the well-functioning of a more democratic and participatory union. It is time for the union to take the discussion on governing systems closer to policy level and well-informed public debate, rather than this being a subject of academic discussions.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of the paper and above-mentioned conclusions, this section offers a set of recommendations on several aspects, as listed below.

- A. On the deliberative democracy and the potential to embrace new forms of democracy
  - There is a need for more public debate and policy debate on what forms of democracy will the EU embrace. The ongoing transversal challenges and threats require a large discussion not only at theoretical level, but also at policy making, on new forms of democracy.
  - Deliberative democracy is no longer part of scholastic bookshelves. Members of the European Parliament must raise such points of discussion within EU Institution and Parliament's debate caucuses.
  - Deliberative democracy requests for well-informed citizens. The European Union can promote further civic education within existing education programmes such as Erasmus+. This mechanism has been efficient in young people's education and behavioural change.
  - Deliberative democracy requests for a moral prerequisite of every citizen's perspective being relevant. The EU must embrace more



inclusive initiatives and provide an enabling space for discussion for all citizens.

- The EU should offer the opportunity for each citizen to understand complex issues, through effective and tailored communication.

B. On digitalisation process:

- Digitalisation especially of public services requests for more literacy among citizens, especially older generations.
- Through the Regional Cohesions Policy, the EU should consider rapprochement of technologies used to deliver citizens' services and provide citizens inclusion, to even its most remote areas.
- Digital literacy is crucial to happen at all aspects of society, including policy-makers, public administrators at the lowest level, in order to increase trust of citizens to participate.
- For digitalisation to serve a successful deliberative initiative, respect of digital rights, mutual trust and possibility to include each and every member of the society is a prerequisite.

C. On the enlargement policy:

- Direct inclusion of the Western Balkan citizens in participatory initiatives within the union is necessary. Citizens of the region with the current real and credible perspective, announced with the New Enlargement Methodology (2019) are future citizens of the EU. For a better integration, their involvement and inclusion must start now.
- The EU citizens shall be informed that the relationship with the region is two folded and the region has what to offer to the union, compared to the mainstream widespread perceptions.
- The current situation in Ukraine requires that transformative power of the EU in the Western Balkans shall be revived through revitalisation of the enlargement process, beyond political rhetoric.
- Deliberative processes within the region can serve as good practices to multi ethnic member states of the EU.

# ANNEX 1: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the policy research project “Digitalization and Deliberate Democracy: How can the European Union embrace and export new forms of democracy” by Lutjona Lula, author, supported by the Institute for European Democrats IED, Belgium.

The interview will be recorded, and a transcript summary will be produced. The transcript of the interview will be analysed by Lutjona Lula, in the capacity of author. Parts of the interview can and might be quoted in the policy research, which will be published online upon finalization.

The actual recording/written responses will be kept for the duration until which this research will be finalized and personal data provided during the interview process shall be processed in accordance to data privacy regulations

I also understand that my words may be quoted directly. With regards to being quoted, please initial next to any of the statements that you agree with:

	I wish to review the notes, transcripts, or other data collected during the research process pertaining to my participation.
	I agree to be quoted directly.
	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published
	I agree that the researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me.

By signing this form I agree that I have read and understood the Information above. For any issues/concerns you can contact the author at [lulalutjona@gmail.com](mailto:lulalutjona@gmail.com) or IED at [info@iedonline.eu](mailto:info@iedonline.eu).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participants Signature

Date

## ANNEX 2: INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

Thank you for accepting to respond to this interview, conducted as part of the policy research project “Digitalization and Deliberative Democracy: How can the European Union embrace and export new forms of democracy” by Lutjona Lula, author, supported by the Institute for European Democrats IED, Belgium.

Please if you are not available to conduct the interview in person or online, kindly fill this form and return to [lulalutjona@gmail.com](mailto:lulalutjona@gmail.com)

1. Brief introduction of the project and participant profile
2. How do you assess the current state of democracy within the European Union itself?
3. This paper tries to explore the potential of EU to embrace new forms of Democracy such as Deliberative Democracy. Do you believe the EU is willing to adapt new forms of Democracy?
4. As we speak, the EU has adopted a [Digital Strategy](#) and has declared this the digital decade, with the vision “The EU will pursue a human-centric, sustainable vision for digital society throughout the digital decade to empower citizens and businesses.” How do you assess the readiness of the EU and member states towards the strategy?
5. Do you think that the digitalisation process can support the shift towards new forms of democracy such as deliberative and participatory democracy? If yes, how?
6. How do you assess the Western Balkan countries current state of affairs towards the EU Digital Strategy?
7. How do you perceive the WB path towards European integration? What are the main consequences to the WB democracies of the current situation in the process?
8. Do you believe that the EU can export new forms of democracy to accession countries of the Western Balkans?
9. Any other comments

**\*\*\*NOTE:** For any issues/concerns you can contact the author at [lulalutjona@gmail.com](mailto:lulalutjona@gmail.com) or IED at [info@iedonline.eu](mailto:info@iedonline.eu). Details on data processing can be found in the consent form, accompanying this interview form.

## ANNEX 3: LIST OF EXPERTS INTERVIEWED

1. Adnan Cerimagic
2. Alba Brojka
3. Alba Cela
4. Aleksandar Pavlovic
5. Altin Gjeta
6. Andi Hoxha
7. Blerjana Bino
8. Damir Kapidzic
9. Erjon Curraj
10. Gentiola Madhi
11. Lura Pollozhani
12. Nebojsa Vladislavljevic

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