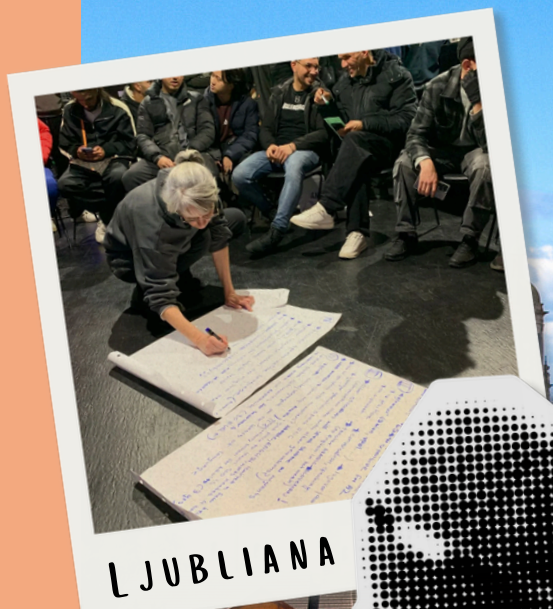
CITIDEM

SELLING DEMOCRACY REPORT & TOOLBOX





JUNE 2026

Prepared by

ALLIANCE4EUROPE

As Part Of

CITIZENS' ACTION FOR DEMOCRACY – CITIDEM (WP15)

Funded by the European Union

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ABOUT CITIDEM

Citizens' Action for Democracy (CitiDem) has received funding under Grant Agreement n.101147423, from the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) programme.





Every citizen should be given the means to engage, but many have not had the experience, resources, or know-how, to properly become part of the discussion.

CitiDem (Citizens' Action for Democracy) set out to promote and enhance citizen engagement and participation across Europe, working both to strengthen the capacity of civil society organisations to inform and engage citizens, and to give citizens themselves the tools and confidence to take an active part in democratic life. Over the course of the project, the consortium delivered a series of citizen assemblies across Europe, addressing pressing challenges including labour and climate justice, migration, democratic reform and citizens' rights, and culminating in a transnational European Citizen Assembly.

The following report and toolbox was designed as the concluding phase of the project. Rather than running further assemblies, it focused on a question that emerges naturally at the end of a participatory process:

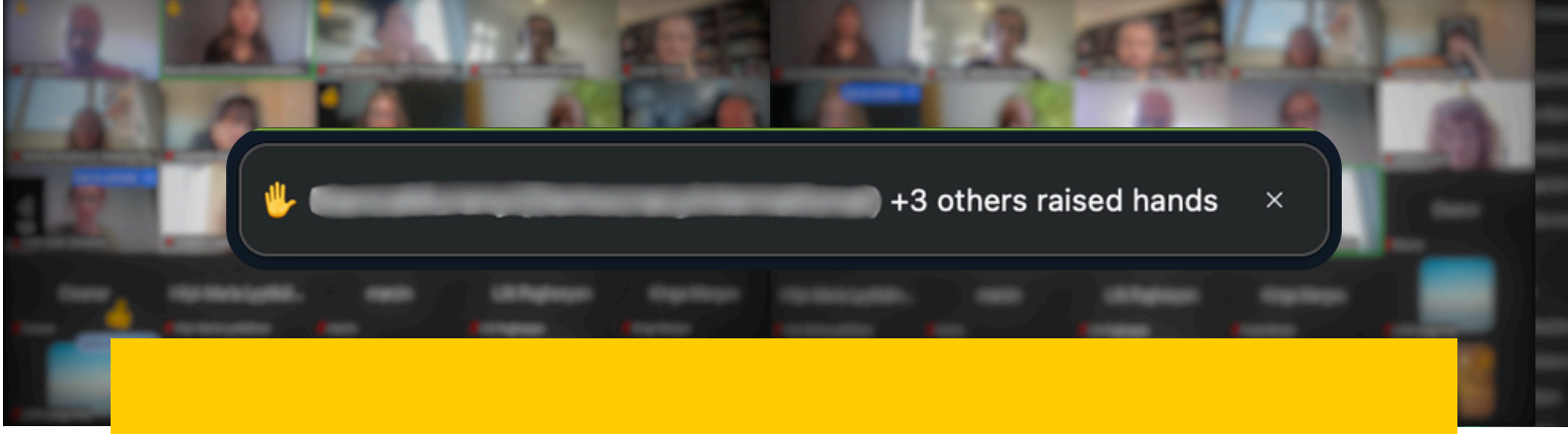
– **how can the insights, deliberations and recommendations generated through citizen assemblies be carried beyond the room in which they were produced?** The work package was therefore delivered as a participatory stakeholder forum and capacity-building series, designed to translate the lessons of CitiDem's assemblies into narratives, communication strategies and engagement approaches capable of sustaining democratic participation long after the project itself has concluded.

8 in-person
in-person Assemblies

2-year
continuous consultation

11+ webinars
and collective activities

1 online drive
of tools and knowledge-sharing



GETTING TOGETHER: ONLINE FORUM

SUMMARY

The Citizen Forum on the Future of Europe was the final activity of CitiDem, delivered as a 3-part online series in April-May 2026, bringing together 162 participants from 23 countries. It set out to explore how we can build the recommendations of CitiDem's citizen assemblies into practical narratives capable of strengthening democratic participation across Europe.



> ***Common stories create common identity and common action.***
>
> ***Persuasion often depends on not facts, but on who you feel you are.***



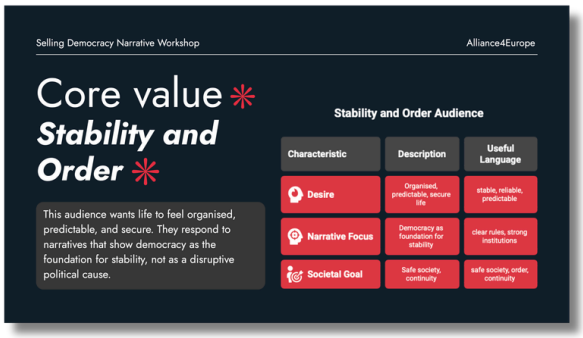
WHY NARRATIVES MATTER

Across Europe, a gap has grown between citizens and the institutions that represent them. Closing that gap requires more than policy: it requires a shared story that people can see themselves inside. Citizen assemblies can generate thoughtful, unifying solutions, but on their own these rarely travel far beyond the participants who produced them. To build lasting public support and engagement, the outcomes of deliberation need to be accompanied by compelling narratives that connect values, lived experience and expertise in ways that resonate with wider audiences.

This was the premise of the Forum, and the rationale for its focus on narrative. It also reflects a core principle that ran through all three sessions: that building an effective narrative is not a matter of crafting a clever message, but of creating that narrative together, grounded in a real understanding of the communities it is meant to reach.

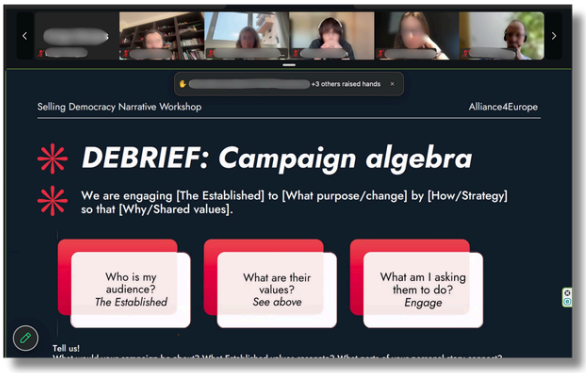
THE FORUM: FORMAT & REACH





The Citizen Forum on the Future of Europe was delivered as three connected online sessions under the banner "A New Narrative for Europe", held in April and May 2026. The sessions brought together citizens, civil-society representatives, activists, communicators, academics and policy actors from across Europe.

The three sessions were designed as a deliberate progression. The first introduced participants to the practice of constructing narratives from the outcomes of citizen assemblies. The second combined expert insight with hands-on application of a structured narrative toolbox. The third took participants into a deeper and more personal engagement with narrative-building, anchored in their own stories and motivations.



TOTAL UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS ACROSS THE SERIES: 162
FROM: 23 COUNTRIES

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3
Title	A New Narrative for Europe	How to craft winning narratives for Europe?	"Selling Democracy" Deep-Dive Narrative Training
Date	20 Apr 2026	20 May 2026	28 May 2026
Format	Online	Online	Online

RESULTS

KEY INSIGHTS ON NARRATIVE AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT



Each of the three sessions contributed to a set of insights on how narratives about democracy can be made to resonate across different audiences and themes. Three in particular ran through the series.

The first is that people do not engage with democracy through facts, institutions or constitutional principles alone, but through stories about how society works: who contributes, who benefits, who follows the rules, and whether they and those they care about feel safe and secure, today and into the future. Asked what makes engaging citizens on democracy so difficult, participants raised a range of concerns, in their own words:

- "A feeling of powerlessness. The feeling that they can't really do anything against the machine, it's too abstract."
- “A main issue for engaging regular citizens is them not having the mental space and time to actually think about it. Even if they value democracy, the compulsion of everyday life demands more urgency from them.”
- "We do need to keep ourselves mobilised and supported and learning."
- "A sense of a mission is a potent social connection."
- "Warmth beats the coldness of data that feels inaccessible to the majority.”

These reflections point to the same conclusion: narratives that speak to everyday concerns, and that are grounded in how society actually works, travel further than those framed in institutional or abstract language.

The second is that effective narrative work begins with the audience rather than the message. Understanding the values and concerns of the people one is trying to reach, and meeting them where they are, proved more productive than leading with one's own framing or assuming shared starting points. A recurring theme across the sessions was the importance of acknowledging and validating the concerns of the intended audience before attempting to shift a conversation.

Which everyday concerns matter most, and how they are balanced and prioritised, depends on the audience in question – this is where it's important to break down your audience into their beliefs and identity. To illustrate the method, the sessions worked in depth through a single example audience: the "Established" in Germany.

RESULTS
KEY INSIGHTS ON NARRATIVE AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

This audience example was shared as an illustration of how audience analysis is done, rather than as the audience of the Forum itself. Drawing on research by Alliance4Europe which developed evidence-based, values-driven messaging guidance for democracy actors in Germany, the sessions set out this profile:

This audience (the Established) is socially integrated, institutionally anchored and economically established, and more likely than average to be older, married, employed full-time, and parents. It sees itself less as an agent of change and more as a stability stakeholder, and tends to regard democracy as a system that should work quietly and reliably in the background. At the core of its identity, the Established tend to think of themselves as responsible, practical, family-oriented, rule-respecting, institutionally loyal, locally rooted, hard-working, and protective of what has been built. Breaking an audience down into the values it holds in this way allows a communicator to ask how those values connect to the problem the narrative is seeking to address.

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The third is that the credibility of a narrative depends not only on its content but on its messenger. The question of who delivers a message, and whether that voice is trusted by the intended audience, emerged as being as important as the message itself.







Trusted messengers are voices an audience already regards as credible on a given topic, speaking within their role and expertise. The sessions encouraged participants to ask, before selecting a messenger, what kind of story is being told and who the audience would expect to tell it, on the principle that credibility, and with it impact, comes from matching the story to the right voice.

Together, these three insights, on the primacy of everyday stories, on beginning with the audience, and on the importance of the messenger, provided the framework that participants went on to apply in the practical breakout work described below.

RESULTS
NARRATIVE BUILDING



The Forum was designed to be practical, and participants produced concrete narrative work in the breakout sessions of the second and third sessions. In the second session, participants worked from an existing narrative that undermines democratic trust, "Politicians make rules for ordinary people while ignoring them themselves", and used the Selling Democracy toolbox to rebuild the conversation around it.

Groups first analysed why the hostile narrative works. The reflections shared: participants noted that few citizens have a complete understanding of how laws are made, which can feed the assumption that politicians exploit that knowledge gap; that distance from power makes political structures harder to understand and easier to distrust; that corruption is a real and easily grasped problem in some countries, giving the narrative an immediate credibility; and that the framing taps into a familiar "us against them" instinct.

As one group observed, the emotion the narrative activates is a sense of unfairness, and it speaks most directly to those who feel outside the circle of the powerful. A recurring conclusion was that closing information gaps, and being open about how decisions are made, is pivotal to countering it.

Groups then chose a narrative cluster and built an alternative. Two of the three groups whose work is recorded chose Cluster A (fair rules and a stable life), which they judged the most adaptable of the three, while a third worked with Cluster B (responsibility today secures tomorrow).

The outputs included concrete core messages such as "Democracy means the same rules for everyone" and "I vote for our democracy, not mine", alongside a clear working principle that a credible alternative must not dismiss the original concern: if the same rules genuinely do not apply to everyone, that is a real problem, and the new narrative must acknowledge and validate it rather than argue it away, while working to ensure equal access to knowledge.

Participants also began developing the visual and emotional territory for these messages, sketching imagery such as people planting trees together to grow a forest, children of different backgrounds each receiving the same share, and a ballot box filling with votes, each chosen to carry a positive, inclusive message about fairness and shared stake. The group working with Cluster B focused on making security tangible before asking anything of people, reasoning that it is hard to feel responsible for a shared future if your own social or economic footing is uncertain, and that a narrative must therefore begin by understanding what a "secure life" means to its audience.

RESULTS
NARRATIVE BUILDING

The third session intended to bring the discussions on a more personal level, working with the three components of public narrative that operate together:

- **Story of Self** — why am I here, and why work with me?
- **Story of Us** — why are we together, and why are you part of this group?
- **Story of Now** — why are we doing this now, rather than going home?

In the deep-dive training, participants worked in breakout rooms to write and share their own Story of Self: an account of why they do what they do. These stories were built on the idea of "show, don't tell". Rather than stating a position, participants were encouraged to be creative and vivid to define the specific moments that make a story relatable, drawing the audience into the scene so that they can picture what the participant experienced and understand why they chose to act as they did.

Participants then shared and tested these stories with one another. The stories were very personal, and the exercise did much to build understanding between participants. Please find an example of these stories to the right.

Specific, concrete experiences carry the meaning and helps people connect with the mission. Thank you to all the participants for sharing their stories! Each one grounded the narrative tools of the session in real experience and genuine motivation, and demonstrated the power of "show, don't tell".



> *I walked into Berlin's main train station and was handed a high-vis vest. It was a place I had myself arrived in only a few weeks earlier on the same platforms when I moved to the city.*
>
> *Trains were arriving every twenty minutes. Children, families, bags, blankets, toys, tiredness. Within the first days of the Russian invasion, volunteer groups had built an arrival team in the station. Which is where I was that day. Carrying bags and luggage, with those who could speak Ukrainian or Russian helping to answer the questions and provide support.*
>
> *Looking along the platform at all the people. The platform took on a new meaning. No amount of help is a waste of time. It is not for us to look away. An attack on humanity, on democracy, is an attack on all of us. It is your choice, our choice, of how to face this.*

RESULTS

LESSONS FROM EU CITIZEN-PARTICIPATION EFFORTS

The Forum drew deliberately on lessons from citizen-participation and democratic-communication efforts across Europe and beyond, most directly through the expert panel "A Case for Narratives" in the second session, which brought together Julius Fintelmann (Co-Founder and Editor-in-Chief, The European Correspondent) and Daniela Vancic (Political Communicator and Policy & Advocacy Lead, Democracy International).

Several transferable examples came from the discussion. The campaign of Péter Magyar in Hungary, who visited multiple villages a day in the build-up to the elections, demonstrated that fear-based politics does not have to win when met with a persistent, human and locally-rooted presence. The mobilisation of over 100,000 volunteers in Zohran Mamdani's campaign in New York, many of whom were first encountered online, illustrated the importance of thinking carefully about the journey from online mass engagement to meaningful offline connection, and of giving people genuine agency rather than simply a role.

The editorial purpose behind The European Correspondent, to give readers a sense of what is possible with Europe and to help build a picture of what Europe could be, served as a reminder that narrative is not only about naming problems but about opening up possibilities.

The panel also shared about experience with a wider shift in the communications landscape: a move away from polished, highly produced content towards communications that are rawer, more personal and more authentic, and which audiences increasingly find easier to trust.

This observation connects with the practical work participants went on to do in the breakout sessions, where effective narratives were developed using vivid imagery and lived experience rather than institutional messaging.

These external lessons complemented the insights drawn from CitiDem's own citizen assemblies. Across the project, the assemblies demonstrated both the value of structured deliberation in generating thoughtful, unifying positions, and the challenge of carrying those positions beyond the room in which they were produced.

WP15 was designed as a direct response to that challenge, and the Forum's focus on narrative reflects a lesson learned across the life of the project: that participatory processes achieve their fullest impact only when their outcomes are actively translated into stories capable of reaching and engaging wider publics.





RECOMMENDATIONS

When it comes to selling democracy, here are our recommendations for civil society organisations, communicators and others working to strengthen democratic engagement across Europe, from the work of the Forum and the activities of the Selling Democracy toolbox.

- **1. Start with your audience, not your message.** Begin by analysing the values, concerns and identity associations of the specific audience you are trying to reach. Detailed, evidence-based audience insight can be difficult to develop without time and resources, particularly where focus groups or surveys are involved. Organisations are nonetheless encouraged to undertake this step to the best of their available capacity, whether by drawing on existing research, conducting local interviews, or connecting with community leaders working with the audience in question.

- **2. Define your message territory.** Establish the area of meaning and emotional resonance within which your narrative can credibly operate before drafting specific messages. A clear message territory keeps communication coherent and consistent across audiences and channels.

- **3. Ground narratives in real deliberation.** Use the outcomes of citizen assemblies and other participatory processes as source material for narrative development. Narratives rooted in what citizens actually think and care about are more authentic, and more durable, than those constructed in the abstract.

- **4. Rebuild the conversation rather than rebutting it.** When confronting a narrative that undermines democratic trust, the goal is not to argue against it but to rebuild the conversation around it. Acknowledge and validate the genuine concern beneath a hostile narrative rather than dismissing it, and respond in the audience's own terms. The aim is to build bridges, not to win an argument or convert people to a different worldview.

- **5. Messenger is as important as the message.** Pay as much attention to who delivers a message as to what the message says. Identify the most credible and trusted source for a given audience, and let the narrative be carried by voices the audience already recognises and respects, asking what kind of story is being told and who the audience would naturally expect to tell it.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Citizen Forum on the Future of Europe brought the story arc of CitiDem to a close. It explored what it means to translate the deliberations and recommendations of the project's citizen assemblies into practical narratives and communication strategies, equipped a diverse group of participants with the tools to engage audiences beyond those already convinced of the value of democratic participation, and helped to build a continuing network of individuals and organisations committed to carrying the dialogue on the future of Europe forward.

The project's citizen assemblies, held across Europe on questions from labour and climate justice to migration, democratic reform and citizens' rights, demonstrated the importance of structured deliberation to produce thoughtful, unifying positions. Yet deliberation alone does not guarantee that those positions are heard beyond the room in which they were reached. The Forum took the outcomes of that deliberative work as its starting point and asked how they could be carried further: how the insights and recommendations of ordinary citizens could be shaped into stories capable of reaching, and moving, the wider public.

At a time when the distance between citizens and institutions presents a real challenge to European democracy, the Forum explored how closing that distance is not only a matter of better policy, but of better stories: stories that are honest, grounded in lived experience, and capable of helping people see themselves inside the democratic project.

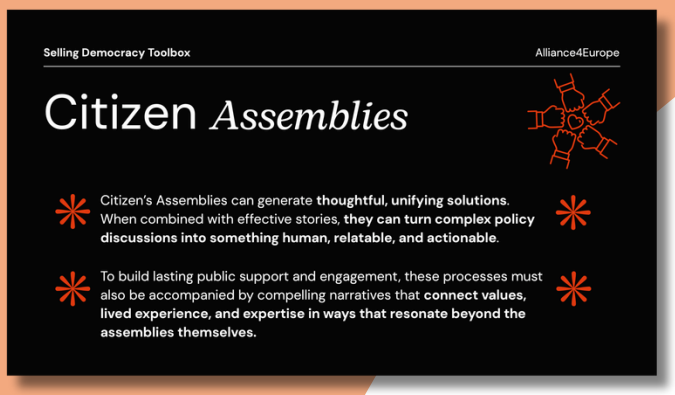


THE SELLING DEMOCRACY TOOLBOX

We're excited to soon launch the Selling Democracy Toolbox! (Summer 2026) Thank you to all partners and participants who shared feedback. Follow the updates at: www.alliance4europe.eu/selling-democracy

You can access the Toolbox activity that was held in the Breakout Rooms during the Forum through the website above.







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