

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA

**STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC
PARTICIPATION, DIGITAL RIGHTS,
AND TRUST IN EUROPE**

A European policy paper

2026



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Civic Engagement in the Digital Era

Strengthening Democratic Participation, Digital Rights, and Trust in Europe

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Executive Summary

Digital technologies now shape how citizens access information, express views, organise around public issues, and interact with institutions. Across Europe, civic engagement increasingly takes place through hybrid forms of participation that combine online mobilisation, public consultation, civic campaigns, community action, and formal democratic processes.

This shift creates new opportunities for democratic participation, especially for young people and issue-based movements. It can make public information more accessible, widen channels for citizen input, and support faster mobilisation around shared concerns. However, it also creates serious democratic risks. Disinformation, information manipulation, cyberattacks, foreign interference, opaque political advertising, platform recommender systems, online harms, and digital exclusion can weaken public debate, electoral integrity, and trust in institutions. Recent Eurobarometer findings show that Europeans are particularly concerned about disinformation influencing voters, cyberattacks affecting elections, and foreign interference in democratic processes (European Commission, 2025b).

The European Union has responded with a stronger regulatory and policy framework, including rules on digital services, data protection, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, political advertising, and the Digital Decade targets. These frameworks are important. They recognise that digital rights, platform accountability, transparency, security, connectivity, and digital skills are closely connected to democratic life. Yet regulation alone cannot secure meaningful digital democracy.

The central policy gap lies in the quality of implementation and participation. Citizens need more than legal protection. They need accessible digital spaces, media and information literacy, safe participation channels, transparent public communication, and visible feedback from institutions. Civil society organisations, youth groups, educators, local authorities, and community actors also need stronger support to connect digital participation with real decision-making.

This policy paper argues that digital civic engagement should be treated as part of Europe's democratic infrastructure. It should not be reduced to online communication, e-government services, or one-off public consultations. Instead, it should be embedded across democracy policy, digital rights, youth policy, education, civil society support, platform governance, and local democratic innovation. The paper uses Cyprus as an illustrative national case to show how wider European challenges appear in a small EU member state. The Cyprus case helps examine the links between digital participation, youth engagement, civil society capacity, institutional trust, and democratic inclusion.

Therefore, this paper proposes five connected policy priorities: treating digital participation as accessible democratic infrastructure; strengthening civic-focused media and information literacy; standardising institutional feedback and accountability mechanisms; investing in civil society and youth-led capacity; and improving safety, transparency and platform accountability in digital civic spaces. Clear standards, responsible institutions, stable funding and measurable indicators of access, inclusion, safety and policy impact should support these priorities.

1. Introduction

Civic engagement in Europe is no longer organised only through elections, political parties, trade unions, community groups, or formal consultation processes. While these channels still matter, citizens now also encounter public issues, form opinions, organise action, and interact with institutions through digital environments. A common feature of democratic life today, particularly in youth participation, is that a local concern may begin as a social media discussion, develop into an online petition and campaign, and eventually enter a municipal debate or public consultation. Many young people engage with public issues through digital spaces before they enter formal political structures. They follow social causes, share views, join campaigns, support petitions, create content, and participate in issue-based networks. These forms of engagement are often less hierarchical and less dependent on long-term membership in political organisations, allowing young people to be highly active on issues such as climate justice, equality, digital rights or anti-racism while remaining distant from political parties or traditional civic organisations.

These developments involve two related but distinct concepts. In this paper, digital civic engagement refers to citizens' participation in public, community and policy processes through digital or hybrid channels. Digital democracy refers to the broader institutional, legal and social conditions that shape this participation, including rights, access, accountability, safety and institutional responsiveness. However, this does not mean that digital civic engagement automatically strengthens democracy. Research shows that digital media can support participation when online activity connects with organised civic action, offline mobilisation, and institutions that are willing to respond (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Boulianne, 2020). At the same time, digital participation can remain shallow when citizens are asked to express views without seeing any effect on decisions. It can also become fragmented when public debate is shaped by polarisation, harassment, disinformation, or platform systems that prioritise attention over democratic quality.

For this reason, digital civic engagement needs to be understood as more than communication. It is connected to rights, access, skills, trust, institutional design, and democratic accountability. Citizens cannot participate meaningfully if they lack digital access, do not understand how information is targeted, feel unsafe online, cannot use public platforms, or never receive feedback on their contribution. Digital participation depends on the conditions that allow people to take part with confidence and see that their participation matters. The European Union has already recognised many of these conditions through its digital and democracy agenda. The Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030 links Europe's digital transformation to digital skills, secure infrastructure, digital public services, and wider participation in the digital transition (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a). The Digital Services Act addresses platform accountability and systemic risks,

including risks linked to civic discourse and electoral processes (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022c). The Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising responds to concerns about opaque political campaigning and targeted political communication (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024a). These policy developments show that the digital public sphere has become a central democratic concern.

Yet the main challenge is not only regulatory. Europe also needs participation systems that are inclusive, trusted, and connected to decision-making. Public authorities may provide digital consultations, but citizens may still feel that their input disappears into a process they cannot follow. Young people may be active online, but are underrepresented in formal democratic spaces. Civil society organisations may play a key role in reaching communities, but lack stable support. People with fewer digital skills, limited connectivity, disabilities, language barriers, or low trust in institutions may remain excluded from digital participation.

This policy paper examines civic engagement in the digital era from a broader democratic perspective, focusing on the European policy context and drawing on Cyprus as an illustrative national case. Cyprus is not presented as an exceptional case, but rather as a useful example of how the challenges of digital democracy manifest at a national level. The paper considers how digital participation, youth engagement, civil society capacity, institutional trust, and digital rights interact in practice. Thus, it is structured around three main questions. First, how is digital civic engagement changing democratic participation in Europe? Second, what risks and policy gaps affect the quality of digital democracy? Third, what policy priorities can help make digital participation more inclusive, trusted, and connected to democratic decision-making?

2. Digital Civic Engagement in Europe: Opportunities and Risks

Digital civic engagement has become part of everyday democratic life across Europe. Traditional forms of participation, including elections, political parties, civil society organisations, trade unions, community groups and public meetings, remain important, and digital channels do not replace them. Instead, they add a hybrid, faster and often issue-focused layer through which public concerns can emerge, mobilise support and reach public authorities. Figure 1 presents the opportunities and risks that shape this changing environment.

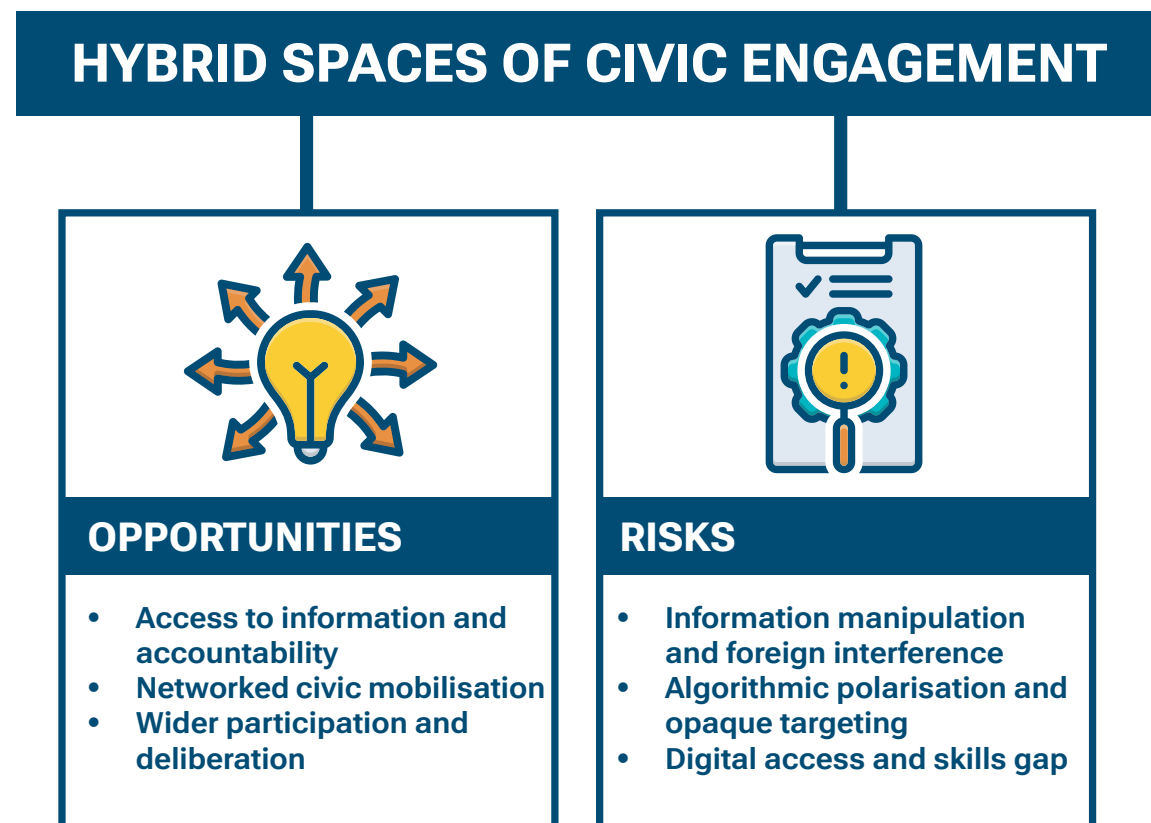


Figure 1. The Conceptual Separation of Opportunities and Risks Within Hybrid Civic Spaces

2.1 Opportunities for democratic participation

Digital technologies can make civic engagement easier, faster, and more visible by giving citizens more ways to access information, connect with others, and respond to public situations without relying only on formal political channels. Three areas illustrate how digital technologies can support democratic participation:

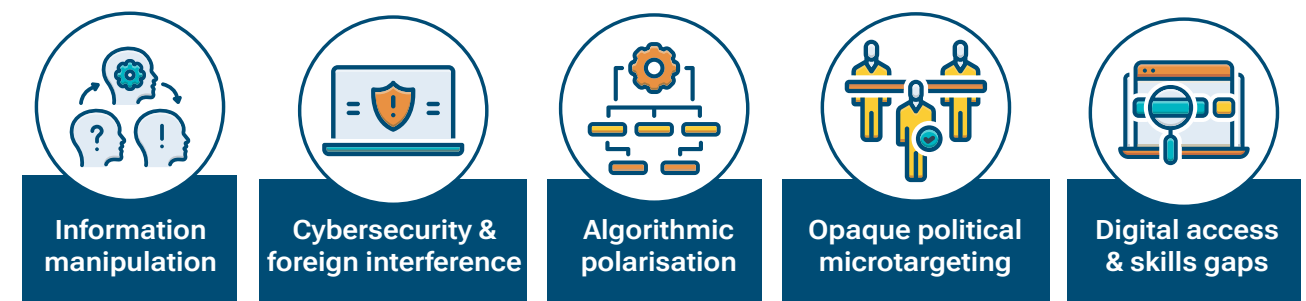
- **Access to information and public accountability:** Digital tools allow citizens to follow policy debates, monitor decisions, and cross-reference public data. Open data portals, public dashboards, and online registers make public action transparent, providing the evidence required to hold institutions accountable.
- **Networked civic mobilisation:** Citizens organise around shared concerns through campaigns, petitions, and social networks. People become active around climate action, housing, or consumer rights without necessarily joining a formal political party.
- **Wider opportunities for public deliberation:** Online consultations, participatory budgeting platforms, and hybrid public meetings create multi-channel routes for sharing views. This is particularly vital for citizens who face physical barriers to attendance due to distance, caring responsibilities, or disabilities.

POLICY HIGHLIGHT: The Reality of Media Effects

Research on connective action shows how digital media can support personalised and networked forms of mobilisation, while evidence reviews find a generally positive relationship between digital media use and civic or political participation when online activity connects with wider civic action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Boulianne, 2020).

2.2 Risks to the digital public sphere

The digital environment that supports participation can also weaken democratic life. Beyond technical vulnerabilities, digital platforms can create structural risks that affect the quality of public debate and institutional trust. Evidence reviews indicate that digital media can support mobilisation while also being associated, in some contexts, with greater political polarisation and lower institutional trust (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Eurobarometer findings also show high levels of public concern about electoral interference and voter manipulation (European Commission, 2025b). The main structural risks affecting the digital public sphere include:



- **Information manipulation:** Disinformation and other forms of information manipulation pose significant risks to democratic discourse and the integrity of elections (European Commission, 2020).
- **Cybersecurity and foreign interference:** Cyberattacks against public institutions, electoral systems and civic platforms can disrupt democratic processes and weaken public confidence. Coordinated foreign information manipulation can also influence public debate, exploit existing social divisions and affect the integrity of democratic processes (European Commission, 2020, 2025b).
- **Algorithmic polarisation:** Recommender systems and engagement-based business models can increase the visibility of emotionally charged or divisive content. Digital media may contribute to political polarisation in some contexts, although effects vary across platforms, populations and political systems (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).
- **Opaque political microtargeting:** Political advertising may use personal data and audience profiling to target specific groups. This can make it difficult for citizens to understand who financed a message, why they received it and how different audiences are being addressed (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024a).
- **Digital access and skills gaps:** Digital-only participation processes can exclude citizens who lack appropriate devices, reliable connectivity, accessible services or the skills needed to use public platforms. This may particularly affect older people and others who need additional assistance to access digital public services (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

3. The EU Policy and Regulatory Landscape

The European Union has established a broad regulatory and policy framework for the digital environment. Although these instruments do not all focus specifically on civic engagement, together they establish rules and objectives concerning personal data, platform accountability, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, political advertising, digital skills and digital public services. Table 1 summarises their relevance to the digital public sphere.

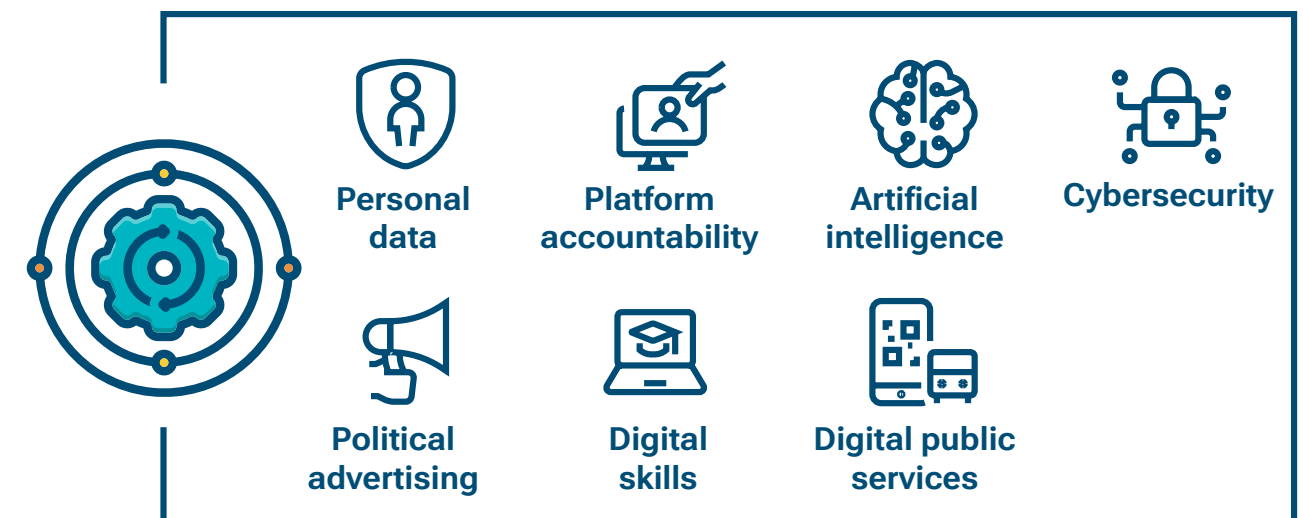


Table 1. Key EU regulatory and policy frameworks governing the digital public sphere and their democratic relevance

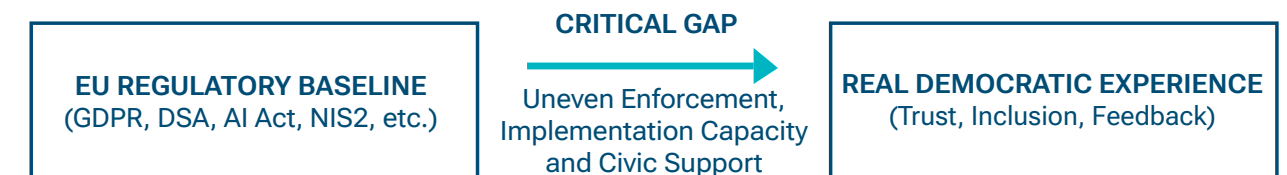
EU Framework	Key Focus Area	Direct Democratic Relevance
General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)	Personal Data Protection	The GDPR protects personal data and establishes rules for lawful, fair and transparent data processing. These protections are relevant to civic and political participation where personal data may be used for profiling, communication or campaign targeting (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2016).
Digital Services Act (DSA)	Platform Accountability	The DSA requires online platforms to improve transparency and manage risks associated with their services. Very large online platforms and search engines have additional obligations concerning systemic risks that may affect fundamental rights, civic discourse and electoral processes (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022c).

Political Advertising Regulation	Transparency & Traceability	The Regulation introduces transparency requirements for political advertising and restrictions concerning targeting and ad-delivery techniques. It aims to help citizens identify political advertisements, understand who financed them and receive information about the targeting methods used (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024a).
Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act)	Risk-Based AI Governance	The AI Act establishes risk-based rules for AI systems. High-risk systems are subject to requirements concerning risk management, transparency, documentation, accuracy and human oversight, including where relevant systems are deployed by public authorities (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024b).
NIS2 Directive	Cybersecurity Architecture	The NIS2 Directive strengthens cybersecurity risk management, incident reporting and institutional resilience across critical sectors, including public administration. More secure public systems can help protect the continuity and reliability of digital public services and participation channels (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022b).
Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030	Human Capital & Infrastructure	The programme sets binding targets to enhance digital infrastructure and skills across Europe. The goal is for 80% of European adults to have basic digital skills by 2030 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a).

4. The Policy Gap: Why Regulation Alone is not Enough

The EU regulatory framework establishes important legal protections and responsibilities. However, a gap remains between formal rules and citizens' everyday experience of digital participation. Rights and regulatory obligations may have limited practical effect when public institutions, regulators and civil society organisations lack the capacity, procedures or resources needed to implement them consistently.

Figure 2. *The Policy Implementation Disconnect Between Binding Supranational Rules and Local Citizen Reality*



4.1 Enforcement and access gaps in platform governance

The implementation of the Digital Services Act illustrates the gap that can arise between EU-level rules, national enforcement and citizens' everyday experiences. When an individual or a grassroots civil society organisation faces a coordinated disinformation campaign or targeted online harassment, resolving the issue can be confusing and difficult.

- **Differences in scale and capacity:** Automated content moderation and complaint systems may perform unevenly across languages and cultural contexts, creating particular challenges for smaller language communities.
- **Complex complaint and redress procedures:** Citizens may find it difficult to identify the appropriate complaint, appeal or redress route, particularly when a case involves several institutions or a cross-border platform.
- **Limited capacity to use platform data:** The Digital Services Act establishes routes through which vetted researchers can request access to data from very large online platforms and search engines for research on systemic risks. However, local research institutions, watchdog organisations and civil society groups may lack the technical expertise, computing resources or institutional capacity needed to use large and complex datasets effectively.

4.2 Weaknesses in digital consultation design

The existence of an online consultation platform does not, by itself, guarantee meaningful democratic participation. Public institutions may transfer consultations online while retaining the same barriers found in offline processes. Documents may remain difficult to understand, participation may be inaccessible to some groups, and citizens may receive little information about how their input affected the final decision. The following weaknesses commonly reduce the democratic value of digital consultation.

- **Open comment boxes are not enough:** Many consultation portals ask citizens to write general comments in open text boxes. This gives people a space to participate, but it does not always support meaningful discussion. When feedback is not linked to specific policy questions, themes, or legal proposals, it becomes harder to analyse and easier to overlook.
- **Consultation documents are often hard to understand:** Public consultations often use long legal documents, technical reports, or static PDF files. Many citizens do not have the time, legal knowledge, language skills, or accessibility support needed to engage with these materials. A more inclusive system would provide plain-language summaries, shorter explanations, audio options, clear definitions, and short videos.
- **Public bodies may not have the capacity to analyse all responses:** Digital platforms can collect large volumes of responses, but many public bodies lack sufficient staff, time or appropriate tools to examine them properly. When responses are reviewed manually by overstretched teams, citizens' views may be reduced to general summaries. This means that specific ideas or concerns may not influence the final decision.
- **Citizens rarely see what happened to their input:** Most consultation systems send a simple message confirming that a response was received. They often do not explain whether the response was used, which arguments influenced the proposal, or why some suggestions were rejected. A stronger system would provide a public record showing how citizen input affected the final decision.
- **High participation numbers can hide weak impact:** A large number of submissions may initially appear to indicate a successful consultation. However, if institutions cannot process and respond to them effectively, participation risks becoming symbolic. Citizens contribute their time and knowledge, but their input may have little visible effect on policy decisions.

4.3 Short-term funding and core capacity gaps in civil society

Digital civic engagement relies on trusted intermediaries, including youth groups, independent media and civil society organisations. Where these organisations depend heavily on short-term project funding, they may have limited capacity to retain specialised staff and invest consistently in data protection, cybersecurity, accessible communication and long-term digital infrastructure.

- **Dependence on short-term project funding:** Short project cycles may limit the ability of civil society organisations to plan beyond individual activities, maintain staff positions and invest in core organisational systems.
- **Administrative and compliance burdens:** Smaller organisations may find it difficult to meet complex application, reporting and compliance requirements, particularly when they do not have dedicated administrative staff.
- **Difficulties retaining specialised staff:** Organisations with limited long-term funding may struggle to retain employees with expertise in digital participation, communication, cybersecurity and data analysis.

4.4 Safety and polarisation risks in digital civic spaces

When public consultation portals or digital civic forums are deployed without explicit, rights-based moderation protocols, they can become hostile or exclusionary environments that weaken the quality and diversity of public participation.

- **The chilling effect of coordinated abuse:** Women, youth activists, journalists, and marginalised communities can face disproportionate levels of online defamation and digital harassment. In the absence of rapid-response protection protocols or legal support, targeted individuals may self-censor or withdraw from digital spaces, weakening the diversity and quality of public debate (OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 2025).
- **Dependence on commercial platforms:** When public authorities rely mainly on commercial social networks for civic communication, the visibility of public-interest content may be shaped by recommender systems designed to maximise engagement. This can increase the prominence of sensational or polarising content and reduce the visibility of more detailed or consensus-oriented discussion (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

5. The Case of Cyprus

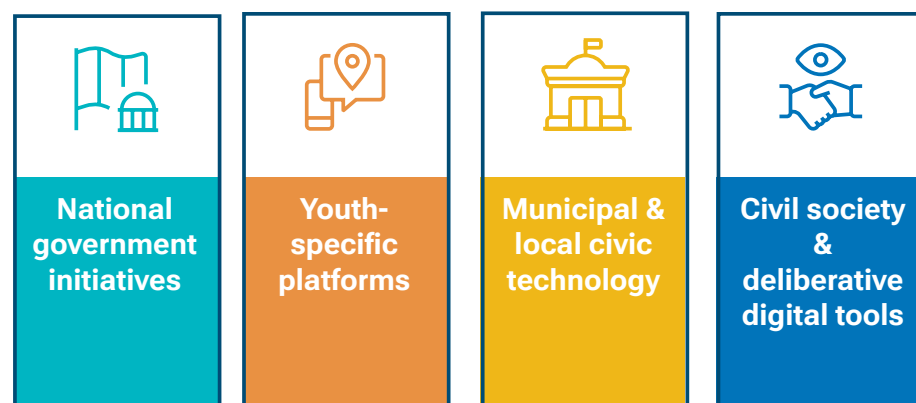
Cyprus provides a useful member-state case to understand how digital civic engagement develops in a small EU country with improving digital public infrastructure, active youth participation mechanisms, and an active civil society sector. The Cyprus case shows that digital participation is no longer limited to the provision of information or basic e-government services. It increasingly includes public consultation, citizen suggestions, youth policy input, municipal reporting tools, and civil society-led deliberative platforms.

5.1 The infrastructure and skills gap

The Republic of Cyprus shows a clear gap between strong digital connectivity and citizens' digital skills. According to the Cyprus 2025 Digital Decade country report, Cyprus demonstrates strong connectivity indicators, including full 5G coverage and high availability of gigabit networks (European Commission, 2025a). In contrast to this physical access, only 49.46% of the population has at least basic digital skills, while gaps persist across different education levels and age cohorts (European Commission, 2025a). This gap can affect democratic equality. If a municipality transitions its planning tools to a digital-only format, it risks concentrating political influence among digitally confident users and excluding older adults, low-income citizens, rural communities, and people who need additional support to access digital public services (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023).

5.2 Existing digital participation mechanisms in Cyprus

Cyprus has introduced several digital tools that support public consultation, citizen input, youth participation, local reporting, and civil society dialogue. The examples presented below show that digital civic engagement in Cyprus is not limited to government portals and is developing across different levels of governance and public life.



National government initiatives

The central government offers several public engagement mechanisms through the **Diakivernisi Portal** (<https://www.diakivernisi.gov.cy/>), which serves as a gateway for citizens to interact with government services and policymaking processes.

e-Consultation / η-Διαβούλευση (<https://e-consultation.gov.cy/>): Allows citizens, organisations and stakeholders to review and provide feedback on draft laws and policy proposals before they are finalised. Its purpose is to support dialogue between public bodies, the private sector and interested groups during the legislative process, based on transparency and accessibility.

e-Suggestion / e-σήγηση (<https://www.diakivernisi.gov.cy/gr/symmetexo/e-sigisi>): Enables citizens to submit suggestions and proposals directly to decision-making centres. The tool is intended to support continuous, two-way dialogue between government and civil society.

Citizen's Voice / Φωνή του Πολίτη (<https://citizenvoice.gov.cy/en>): Provides citizens with a channel for two-way communication with the executive branch of government.

These mechanisms are important because they move digital government beyond service delivery and towards more participatory digital governance. However, their democratic value depends on whether citizens understand how to use them, whether public authorities respond within a clear timeframe, and whether citizens can see how their input has influenced decisions.

Youth-specific platforms

Youth engagement is a particularly important part of Cyprus' digital participation landscape. National initiatives, coordinated through the Youth Board of Cyprus and related policy structures, have placed youth participation within the broader framework of the *National Youth Strategy 2030* (Youth Board of Cyprus, 2024). At the same time, youth mobilisation in Cyprus often remains decentralised, issue-based and network-driven. Young people may be active on climate action, equality, digital rights, housing or employment, while remaining distant from traditional political structures (European Youth Forum, n.d.; Theodorou et al., 2021).

EkfraCY / Έκφραση (<https://ekfracy.gov.cy/>): Launched by the Presidency in July 2024, EkfraCY is an online crowdsourcing platform for people aged 18–35. Registered users can respond to thematic questionnaires and submit proposals on issues that concern them. The platform is intended to support two-way communication between young people and the government and includes a commitment to provide government feedback.

- **PARTICIPA / PARTICIPAndo MOOCs:** Implemented with the Cyprus Youth Council as one of the partners, PARTICIPA aims to strengthen young people's involvement in local decision-making. The project will develop two MOOCs: one for municipal employees working with young people and one for youth council members. The courses will be adapted to the participating countries' institutional and legislative contexts (Cyprus Youth Council, 2026).

Municipal and local civic technology

At the local level, municipalities are also adopting digital citizen-to-government tools to improve responsiveness and accountability. These tools usually begin with practical, everyday issues, but they may support public responsiveness and trust by enabling citizens to track progress and receive updates.

Novoville (<https://www.novoville.com>): Used by Strovolos Municipality, Novoville allows residents and visitors to report local problems through a mobile application or web platform. These may include cleanliness issues, waste, green spaces, abandoned vehicles, lighting and other everyday concerns. Users can select a location, choose a request category, add a photo and send the request to the municipality. They can also receive updates on the progress of their request until it is resolved (Strovolos Municipality, 2025).

The policy challenge is to connect service-oriented tools with broader participation mechanisms, including local consultations, neighbourhood discussions, municipal planning, surveys and public response reports.

Civil society and deliberative digital tools

Civil society organisations in Cyprus also play an important role in digital civic participation, particularly in areas where trust, dialogue and social cohesion are central. This is especially relevant in a small member state where civil society often acts as a bridge between citizens and public institutions.

- **Pusula / Ππούσουλας platform:** Developed through a collaboration between the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development and the World Bank's Mind, Behavior, and Development Unit, Pusula is a digital civic engagement platform that connects people with public decision-makers. It supports users in sharing ideas and jointly identifying solutions to societal problems at the neighbourhood, village, city or island-wide level (Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, n.d.).
- **Structured Democratic Dialogue:** Cyprus also has experience using *Structured Democratic Dialogue* to support stakeholder participation, consensus-building and

reform planning. Its application with local authorities in Cyprus showed how the method can help participants identify concerns, compare priorities and organise proposals when addressing complex policy challenges (Laouris & Michaelides, 2018).

5.3 Policy development and institutional learning

Cyprus also has relevant experience in policy development on active citizenship and participatory governance. In 2022, the Centre for the Advancement of Research and Development in Educational Technology (CARDET) was commissioned by the Commissioner for the Citizen to develop the Republic of Cyprus' [Strategy for Active Citizenship and Participatory Governance](#). To support its preparation, CARDET conducted research and consultations with government officials and civil society organisations, mapped existing participatory procedures, identified implementation challenges, and reviewed relevant practices from other European countries. The Council of Ministers approved the strategy in December 2022, and it was presented at the Presidential Palace in January 2023.

The strategy aimed to strengthen democratic engagement, empower citizens to participate more actively in decision-making, and promote more inclusive and transparent governance. It also included recommendations on the use of digital tools and technologies to facilitate civic participation, citizen engagement, access to information, and interaction between citizens and public institutions. CARDET's contribution was informed by its wider experience in European and national initiatives related to digital citizenship, media and information literacy, civic engagement, digital participation, democratic innovation, online safety, digital rights, cybersecurity awareness and inclusive governance. Through these initiatives, CARDET has supported citizens, educators, youth workers, civil society actors and policymakers in developing the competencies needed to participate effectively in democratic life in the digital age.

5.4 Small-market civil society constraints

In small member states such as Cyprus, civil society organisations can act as important intermediaries between citizens and institutions. They support public participation, organise dialogue, provide civic education and help make policy processes more accessible to different communities. Some smaller or community-based organisations may operate with limited staff and rely largely on project-based resources. Where this occurs, it can restrict their ability to invest consistently in digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, data protection, accessible communication, moderation and staff development. These capacity limitations may particularly affect bicomunal initiatives, youth organisations and other community groups that need to sustain participation over time while also responding to online disinformation, polarisation and safety concerns (Hajisoteriou, 2023; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020).

6. Strategic Policy Priorities

To establish an open, rights-based, and trusted digital public space, policymakers at both the EU and national levels should integrate the following thematic pillars into their long-term democratic planning.

6.1 Reframing Civic Space as Democratic Infrastructure

Digital participation tools should be treated as part of democratic infrastructure rather than as an optional addition to institutional communication.

- **Standardise public portals:** Establish minimum standards for institutional digital participation spaces, including intuitive navigation, accessible and plain-language content, mobile-friendly design, multilingual access where appropriate, and privacy and data protection by design.
- **Support Local Government:** Fund local authorities to develop hybrid participation tools that explicitly connect online citizen inputs with offline municipal council debates.

Practice snapshot

Barcelona's Decidim platform shows how digital participation can operate as civic infrastructure rather than as a simple consultation tool. The platform supports public consultations, participatory budgeting, assemblies and proposal tracking. Its value lies in connecting digital participation with local democratic processes, including face-to-face participation and municipal decision-making (International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, n.d.).

6.2 Cultivating Civic-Focused Media and Information Literacy

Media and information literacy initiatives should extend beyond basic technical skills and help citizens assess information, recognise manipulation, understand digital targeting and participate safely in public debate.

- **Update Educational Curricula:** Integrate critical evaluation modules on algorithm transparency, targeted political advertising, privacy settings, and verification methods into formal education and teacher-training programmes.
- **Deploy Broad Community Training:** Roll out community-based training via local

community centres, public libraries, and youth networks to reach vulnerable demographics and older adults.

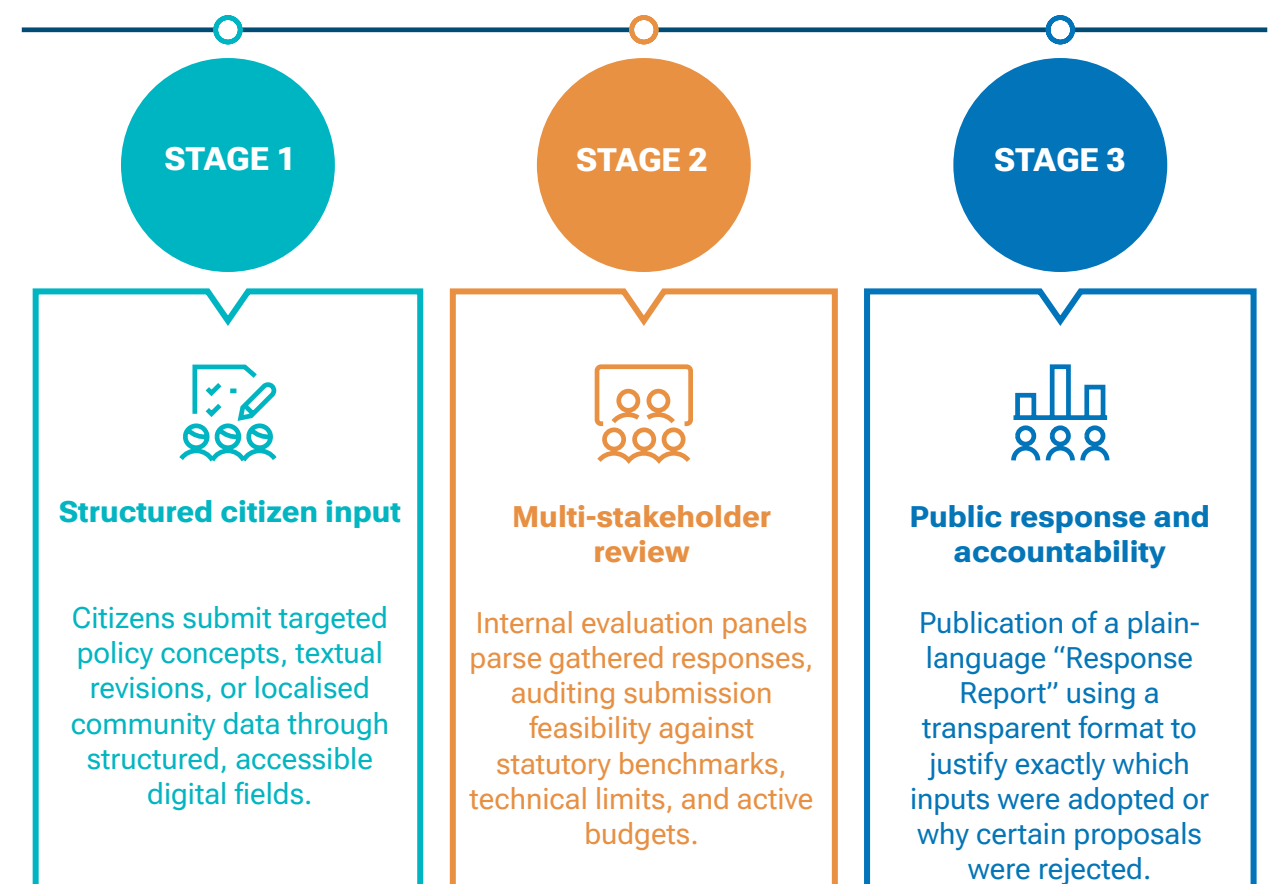
Practice snapshot

Finland provides a strong example of media literacy as a whole-of-society policy. Its national media education policy treats media literacy as a shared responsibility across schools, libraries, youth work, cultural organisations, public authorities and civil society. This approach supports the argument that democratic resilience requires more than technical digital skills. It requires citizens who can evaluate information, understand media influence and participate critically in public debate (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

6.3 Standardising Public Feedback Mechanisms

To combat tokenism and participation fatigue, public institutions must follow transparent, predictable response timelines.

Figure 3. *The Three-Stage Architecture of a Standardised Democratic Public Feedback Loop*



To put Stage 3 of the feedback process into practice, public administrations should establish clear procedures for reporting how citizen input was assessed and used:

- **Publish consultation response reports:** Each public digital consultation should conclude with a plain-language report explaining the main themes raised, which proposals were incorporated, which were not adopted, and the reasons for those decisions. The report should be published within a defined period, such as eight weeks after the consultation closes.
- **Deploy Open Progress Dashboards:** Utilise online progress trackers to display real-time updates on implementation timelines and commitments made during public engagement phases.

Practice snapshot

Estonia's Rahvaalgatus.ee platform provides a useful model for traceable citizen participation. Citizens can discuss proposals, co-create initiatives, collect digital signatures and submit them to Parliament or local authorities once the required threshold is reached. The platform also allows citizens to follow updates on the process, making it especially relevant to feedback mechanisms and public accountability (OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2016).

6.4 Investing in Civil Society and Youth Participation

Sustaining inclusive digital participation requires direct support for the organisations and networks that coordinate community action.

Increase access to flexible and multi-year funding: Complement project-based grants with multi-year and flexible operating support that allows civil society organisations to maintain staff, strengthen digital infrastructure, improve cybersecurity and sustain community engagement.

Co-Design Interventions: Formally involve independent youth organisations, educators, and civil society platforms in the early design phases of public consultation processes, rather than treating them merely as promotional agents.

Practice snapshot

The EU Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme recognises the role of civil society in supporting open, rights-based, democratic, equal and inclusive societies. A practical policy option would be to complement EU-level funding with national micro-grants and re-granting schemes. This could help grassroots groups, youth organisations, libraries and community centres access smaller amounts of support through proportionate application and reporting procedures (European Commission, n.d.).

6.5 Strengthening safety, transparency and platform accountability

Digital civic participation depends on spaces where citizens can contribute without harassment, manipulation or opaque automated decision-making.

- **Establish clear moderation and redress procedures:** Public participation platforms should provide transparent community standards, accessible reporting routes, defined response times and clear appeal procedures.
- **Assess automated systems used in civic processes:** Public bodies should conduct and publish proportionate risk and impact assessments when automated tools are used to moderate content, analyse citizen submissions or shape the visibility of public-interest information.
- **Protect people targeted by online abuse:** National and local authorities should establish referral and support procedures for journalists, youth activists, women and minoritised groups facing coordinated harassment connected to civic participation.

6.6 A Shared Policy Agenda

To establish a unified, cross-sector roadmap that harmonises action across all administrative levels, Table 2 brings together the main policy priorities, responsible actors, proposed actions and intended results.

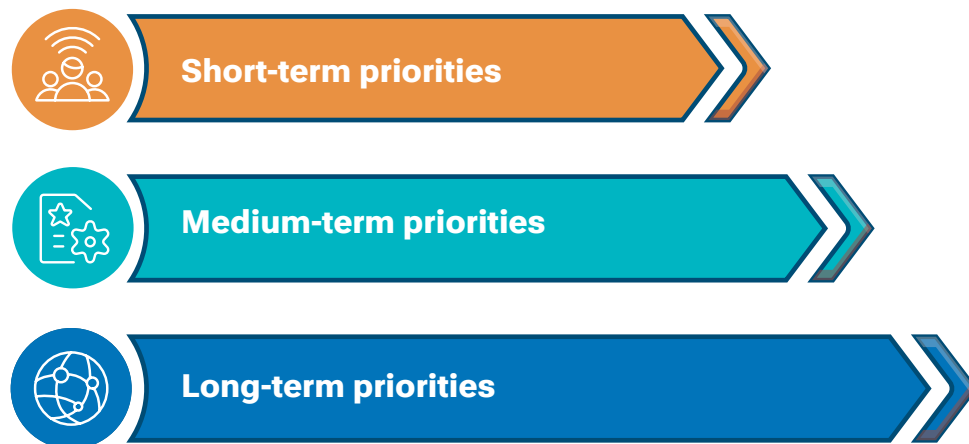
Table 2. *The Shared Digital Civic Engagement Agenda: Cross-Sector Policy Prioritisation and Expected Institutional Outcomes*

Policy Priority Pillar	Primary Actors Involved	Operational Actions Required	Expected Systemic Result
Democratic Infrastructure	EU Institutions, National Governments, Local Councils	Establish unified civic portal standards; deploy hybrid e-democracy pilots.	More coherent and accessible participation, with less fragmentation across institutions.
Information & Media Literacy	Education Ministries, Schools, Civil Society	Integrate algorithmic and media literacy into primary and secondary education; deploy targeted workshops for adult communities.	Citizens and communities better equipped to safely navigate and evaluate information.
Universal Accessibility	Public administrations, municipal digital teams and accessibility bodies	Mandate mobile optimisation; require plain-language content and multilingual versions where appropriate.	Reduced participation gaps across demographics.
Accountable Feedback Loops	Public administrations and consultation authorities	Require public consultation response reports and progress dashboards that track institutional commitments and implementation.	Greater transparency, potential improvements in public trust, and reductions in consultation fatigue.

Civic Capacity Support	National Treasuries, European Commission	Expand access to multi-year and flexible operating support alongside project-based grants; fund regional civic-tech incubators.	Civil society organisations are better able to protect data and sustain or expand their advocacy.
Discourse Transparency	Regulators, Media Actors, Technology Platforms	Require transparency on the use of automated systems and conduct regular risk and impact assessments.	A transparent digital public sphere with public accountability mechanisms.
Note. Developed by the authors based on the policy analysis presented in Sections 3–5.			

7. Implementation Pathway Towards 2030

The recommendations outlined in this paper require gradual implementation across the EU, national and local levels. A 2030 horizon is appropriate because it aligns with the European Union's Digital Decade framework, which sets targets for digital skills, digital public services, secure infrastructure and participation in Europe's digital transformation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022a).



Short-term priorities: Strengthening standards and safeguards

- Public authorities should improve the quality and accessibility of existing digital participation systems, including consultation portals, public dashboards and civic engagement platforms.
- Public consultation websites should be audited for mobile access, plain-language communication, compliance with accessibility standards, and clear data protection information.
- Public bodies should explain when automated tools are used to process citizen input and should ensure transparency, fairness and human review.
- Public bodies should introduce standard consultation response reports, published within a defined timeframe, and progress dashboards that allow citizens to follow institutional commitments.
- Public digital participation spaces should introduce clear moderation standards, accessible reporting and appeal procedures, and support routes for people targeted by coordinated online abuse.

Medium-term priorities: Funding, capacity and participation design

- Governments should invest in stable systems, trained staff, accessible tools and civil society partnerships, rather than relying only on short-term digital participation projects.
- Civil society organisations, youth groups, libraries, schools and municipalities should receive support for digital facilitation, outreach, accessibility, data protection, cybersecurity and moderation.
- Funding procedures should be simplified so that smaller organisations can access support without disproportionate administrative burdens.
- Municipalities should pilot hybrid participation models that connect online engagement with public meetings, local councils and community debates.
- Education authorities should integrate media, information and algorithmic literacy into curricula and teacher education, while libraries, youth organisations and community centres should provide accessible learning opportunities for adults.

Long-term priorities: Mainstreaming democratic digital participation

- By 2030, digital civic engagement should be assessed by the quality, inclusiveness, safety and impact of participation, not only by the number of platforms or users.
- Public authorities should monitor who participates, whose voices are missing, whether citizens receive feedback and whether public input influences decisions.
- Digital civic participation indicators should be integrated into national strategies for democracy, digital transformation, and public administration.
- Digital Decade monitoring should include indicators of democratic participation, such as the accessibility of consultations, online safety, transparency of political advertising, and demographic inclusion.

Progress should be assessed through a limited set of common indicators. These may include the percentage of consultations that provide plain-language and accessible materials; the percentage that publish a response report within eight weeks; compliance of participation portals with recognised accessibility requirements; the demographic range of participants; the number of municipalities using hybrid participation models; and evidence that citizen input contributed to policy revisions or implementation decisions.

8. Conclusion

Digital civic engagement is now an established part of democratic life in Europe. It can improve access to public information, support mobilisation around shared concerns and widen participation for people who face barriers to traditional forms of engagement. These benefits depend on how digital participation is designed and governed. Information manipulation, opaque automated systems, digital exclusion, online abuse and consultation processes without visible follow-up can contribute to political polarisation and weaken institutional trust.

The European Union has established an important regulatory foundation for the digital public sphere, but citizens experience digital democracy through the accessibility, safety and responsiveness of actual participation processes. The priorities set out in this paper are therefore closely connected: digital participation should be treated as accessible democratic infrastructure; citizens need media and information literacy; institutions should provide clear feedback; civil society and youth-led initiatives require stable support; and digital civic spaces need transparent governance and effective safeguards. The Cyprus case shows that strong connectivity alone is insufficient without digital skills, institutional capacity and credible routes for citizens to influence decisions. Applying these priorities through measurable implementation and monitoring can help the European Union and its Member States develop more trusted, inclusive and effective forms of digital participation.

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