RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S
NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT

TOWARDS A NEW LOCAL DEMOCRACY

WORKSHOP REPORT

April 2026



TBB
TÜRKİYE BELEDİYELER BİRLİĞİ

ARGÜDEN
GOVERNANCE
ACADEMY
Good Governance for
Quality of Life

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Argüden Governance Academy
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2025, the Council of Europe published the report entitled "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" in order to initiate a renewal of democracy in Europe. In in May 2025, the Council of Europe's report entitled 'Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe'. This report was assessed for the first time in Europe at a workshop held in Türkiye, where recommendations for improvement were put forward from a local level perspective. At the "Towards a New Local Democracy" workshop, organised by the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (TBB) and the Argüden Governance Academy with the support of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (the Congress), findings and proposed solutions were put forward to protect and strengthen democracy across Europe and in Türkiye, starting at the local level.

In this context, a number of recommendations were made, such as: reviewing the Municipality Law and related legislation; making all municipal tenders transparent by publishing them online; employing experienced personnel for civil society relations in municipalities; making the division of powers clear between municipalities and other public institutions for citizens; and strengthening the participation of city councils, civil society organisations, mukhtars (elected neighbourhood head) and other stakeholders in local governing processes.

The workshop was attended by more than 100 participants who also contributed to it's aim, including the member of Presidential Local Administration and Disaster Policies Board, mayors, municipal council members, public officials, and representatives of civil society organisations and universities. This report has been prepared in order to share the findings and proposed solutions with the Council of Europe, the member states and the public in Türkiye.

"The trust and participation established at the local level also strengthen the resilience of democracy at the national and international levels. In this context, as the voice and representative of local governments, the TBB is resolutely pursuing its work on strengthening local democracy across Europe."

Suat Yıldız, Union of Municipalities of Türkiye, Secretary General

"I thank the TBB and the Argüden Governance Academy for responding to the call of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe. We know that consultation and contribution processes of this kind will make valuable contributions to protecting and strengthening democracy."

Mathieu Mori, Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Secretary General

INTRODUCTION

Democracy aims at a social order in which every individual lives freely, in peace and in prosperity. Looking from this perspective, democracy does not consist solely of elections in which political representatives and governments representing the majority of the electorate are determined. Against democratic backsliding — which refers to the increasing weakening of democratic values and institutions worldwide over the past two decades and the decline in the level of trust that societies place in public institutions and politicians — the Council of Europe has taken action to establish a renewed, 'genuine' democracy. To this end, the heads of states and governments of the 46 member states, meeting on 17 May 2023, signed the Reykjavik Declaration.[1] With this declaration, in which the 10 core principles of democracy[2] were adopted, a commitment was made to protect and strengthen democracy. Following this declaration, in May 2025, the Secretariat of the Council of Europe published the report entitled "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" and thereby launched a consultation process.[3] This process, conducted with governments, civil society organisations, the media and various social groups, is continuing. The aim is for the consultation process to be completed by the end of 2026. At the end, a new vision of democracy together with an action plan, to be adopted at the Summit of Heads of State and Government. In the period that follows, the Council of Europe's programme and budget for the new term are envisaged to be shaped in line with that vision and action plan.

On 29 April 2025, the Council of Europe invited all stakeholders to contribute to the consultation process through an information document entitled the **Roadmap for a New Democratic Pact for Europe**, published for the purpose of protecting, renewing and strengthening democracy.[4] Within the scope of this consultation process, Türkiye became the first of the 46 countries to organise a workshop on the subject. The **New Local Democracy Workshop** held in Ankara took place on 23 September 2025. Mayors, municipal executives, experts, academics and civil society representatives attended this workshop, jointly organised by the TBB and the Argüden Governance Academy with the support of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

This event provided a basis for dialogue and opinion-forming on the protection, renewal and strengthening of democracy at the local level generally in Europe and particularly in Türkiye. In a climate of increasing centralist tendencies across Europe, deepening political polarisation and rising digital disinformation, local governments were considered as critical institutions that will protect and strengthen democracy in everyday life. The strategic role of local governments — as the public institutions closest to citizens' daily lives — was assessed in protecting, redefining and deepening, and thereby strengthening, democratic culture and values.

1 https://rm.coe.int/4th-summit-of-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-council-of-europe/1680ab40c1

2 1)Democratic Participation 2) Elections and Referendums 3)Independent and Effective Parliaments and Other Democratic Institutions 4) Separation of Powers 5)An Independent, Impartial, and Effective Judiciary 6) Fight Against Corruption 7)Freedom of 8) Expression 9)A Democratic Future 10) Civil Society 11) Full, Equal, and Meaningful Participation in Political and Public Life

3 https://www.coe.int/en/web/secretary-general/report-2025

4 https://rm.coe.int/pdf/0900001680b57511

At the workshop, participants made findings and offered various proposed solutions concerning the level of trust that citizens place in local governments, civic participation practices and how a culture of good governance can be strengthened. Specific topics came to the fore in particular, such as the more effective participation of young people, women and disadvantaged groups in decision-making processes, and the better use of technology for democracy. The participants organised group work, engaged in dialogue and shared their recommendations, placing at the centre the three main pillars highlighted in the Council of Europe's roadmap: **Learning and Practising Democracy**, **Protecting Democracy** and **Innovating for Democracy**.

In this report, the findings and proposed solutions expressed by the participants throughout the workshop on the basis of their field experience are set out. A strategic vision encompassing different experiences and perspectives has been brought together within the framework of this report. Within the scope of the workshop, the views and suggestions of the participants were gathered during thematic sessions and compiled under relevant subject headings. The assessments and recommendations presented in the report reflect the opinions expressed during the workshop and should not be construed as conclusions that have been agreed upon or collectively decided by all participants. The purpose of the report is to reveal the structural obstacles facing local democracy and, by analysing the level of trust in local governments together with its dynamics, to present concrete, applicable and strategic recommendations from Türkiye to the Council of Europe. Ultimately, it aims to contribute to the protection, renewal and strengthening of democracy across the continent through the strengthening of local democracy.

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PACT FOR EUROPE

The aim of the "**Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe**" report, published by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in May 2025, was defined as redefining democracy in order to make it stronger, more flexible and more inclusive in the face of the challenges of the 21st century. It was stated that this aim would be achieved by empowering citizens, consolidating institutions and protecting democratic values through innovative practices, the effective use of technology and increased collective effort.

The report acknowledged that Europe today is in the midst of a "**perfect storm**" dominated by geopolitical rivalries, polarisation, systematic democratic backsliding and rising political extremism. In this period, in which the international order based on the institutions and rules built after the Second World War is under strain and even unravelling, it was argued that it is imperative for the multilateral architecture represented by the Council of Europe to enter into a fundamental "**reset**" process. It was emphasised that the current period of crisis is not only about the question of security, but that it also presents a test of social and institutional resilience in which democratic institutions, freedoms and the rule of law are being eroded. The greatest challenge in this test was stated to be re-establishing citizens' trust in democratic institutions.

It was argued that no form of government that is not based on democratic institutions, an independent judiciary and transparent administration can establish social peace and security. In this context, at the heart of the report stands the aim of ensuring "**the security of democracy**" by re-establishing trust in democratic institutions and rules. The assumption implied here is that a Europe that loses its democratic resilience will face more serious and structural crises. In such a challenging period, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe claimed in this report that, with its structure founded on the equality of the 46 member states and their shared acquis, the Council of Europe will assume the task of being Europe's "**lighthouse**" in this storm.

The report emphasised that democracy in Europe is today under greater erosion than ever before. It set out the reasons for this under three headings:

1. **Democratic backsliding:** The existence of serious threats such as authoritarian tendencies, pressure on freedom of expression and the shrinking of civic space.
2. **Crisis of trust**: Citizens feeling excluded from decisions; disinformation and polarisation weakening their bond with institutions.
3. **New threats:** The climate crisis, uncontrolled technological change (e.g. artificial intelligence), uncontrolled migration and regional wars threatening democratic security.

In response to the problem dynamics set out above, the Council of Europe announced that it has built the work to be carried out on three main pillars. It listed these as follows:

1. **Learning and Practising Democracy:** Supporting formal and informal education initiatives aimed at equipping citizens, and especially young people, with the skills, attitudes and critical thinking required for active citizenship. Also ensuring equal opportunities for everyone in democratic participation and in access to rights.
2. **Protecting Democracy:** Developing robust responses to internal and external threats such as corruption, interference in elections and disinformation, and above all the misuse of digital technology and artificial intelligence. At the same time, safeguarding media freedom as the cornerstone of a healthy democracy.
3. **Innovating for Democracy:** Making use of new technologies in order to improve democratic processes through deliberative and participatory democracy practices, and to increase accessibility, efficiency and trust in governance.

In the report , the approach was explained as to **set a common objective for democracy**, to **conduct a wide-ranging consultation on democratic challenges** to that end, and to **translate the results of the consultation into actionable policies**. In particular, it was shared that new policies are envisaged to be implemented at the European, national, regional and local levels by integrating the conclusions drawn from the consultations into intergovernmental processes. The results of all the works carried out will be assessed at the Council of Europe's Summit of Heads of States and Governments to be held at the end of 2026. At this summit, it is expected to be adopted concrete commitments and decisions that will strengthen European democracy.

In summary, significant steps have begun to be taken under the leadership of the Council of Europe to protect and renew democracy, and to spread it by deepening democracy further in everyday life. In this way, a process has begun of defining and practising democracy not merely as a political system governed by those who represent the majority through elections, but as **an inclusive way of life whose concrete benefits people see in their daily lives and which must be rebuilt anew every day**.

THE TOWARDS A NEW LOCAL DEMOCRACY WORKSHOP

At the proposal of the TBB and the Argüden Governance Academy, and with the support of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, it was decided to contribute to the consultation process initiated after publishing "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" report through a workshop. As a result of the planning and preparations carried out, the workshop entitled **Towards a New Local Democracy** was held in Ankara on 23 September 2025. It should also be emphasised that this workshop carries particular significance as the first consultation workshop held anywhere in Europe after the publication of the report.

Within the scope of the workshop, the aim was to share views and experiences of mayors, representatives of central and local government, civil society actors and other stakeholders on local democracy in Türkiye and, together with the objective of enabling democracy to function more effectively, to reach wider audiences and to acquire a more inclusive structure, also to make recommendations for improving the strategy set out in the report entitled "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe".

Workshop participants emphasised that in Türkiye, too, local governments, civil society and democratic stakeholders face numerous structural problems that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. They presented their findings together with their proposed solutions to these. It was stated that steps towards resolving them would contribute to the efforts to strengthen democracy both in Europe and Türkiye. The findings and recommendations obtained during the workshop are addressed and explained under separate headings in the following pages.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY: ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The participants from local governments, civil society, universities and other fields assessed, in groups, the current obstacles facing local democracy, the possible ways of overcoming them and specific examples of practice. They also shared their findings and recommendations by focusing on a total of five topics across the two main areas standing at the centre of the roadmap of "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" report.

A. PROTECTING DEMOCRACY

1. What are the greatest challenges relating to local democracy currently faced by local governments, civil society, academia and the other stakeholders of local democracy in Türkiye?

a. Relations Between Central and Local Government and the Confusion of Powers

Foremost among the problems most frequently raised by the participants were the relations between central government and local governments. **It was stated that, depending on the political climate in the country, relations between central and local government in some cases make it more difficult for local practices to meet citizens' expectations.** During the workshop, it was noted that political polarization can negatively affect inter-institutional cooperation and the delivery of services. **Concerns have been raised regarding the protection of fiscal autonomy—which supports the democratic functioning of local governments—as well as the scope and exercise of the central administration's power of administrative oversight.**

It was expressed that the confusion of powers negatively affects the unity of public administration and the processes of public value creation. It was recommended that the participation of local governments in central government processes concerning them should be made mandatory. It was expressed that citizens expect services falling within the duties and responsibilities of central government from local governments, and that this can lead to mistaken assessments.

In particular, it was revealed that the ambiguity of the boundaries of powers within the metropolitan system is a serious source of problems, and that the division of duties between the metropolitan municipality and the district municipalities needs to be clarified. It was stated that this ambiguity gives rise both to service disruptions and to a complex structure in which citizens do not know whom to approach.

It was expressed that the extremely limited own-source revenues of municipalities and their remaining dependent on the central government for resource transfers disrupt service delivery. It was argued that difficulty in paying personnel expenses and not having sufficient resources for investment weaken the capacity of services provided to citizens. It was claimed that this negatively affects belief and trust in local governments and in local democracy.

In general, it was recommended that, in securing the appropriate conditions for the protection and strengthening of local democracy, the relationship between central and local government envisaged by the Constitution should be operated in a balanced and healthy manner, and within legal limits. Attention was drawn in particular to the importance of overcoming the confusion of powers, and it was noted that local financial resources need to be more independent and stronger. It was shared that municipalities operate at different scales and under different conditions — such as metropolitan, provincial, metropolitan district, rural district and town municipalities — but that improvements are necessary with regard to legislation, institutional structure, financial resources and operating processes that are distinctive and appropriate to their scale and conditions. In general, it was emphasised that local governments should also be able to express their views and to influence the processes in which regulations and decisions concerning local governments are prepared.

b. Democratic Balance: The Disruption of the Balance between Civil Society, Politics and Public Administration

It was emphasised by the participants that the relationship between civil society — the fundamental pillar of democratic balance at the local level — and politics and public administration does not function in a healthy manner. It was underlined that, because the influence of civil society organisations (CSOs) and city councils is weak and their room for manoeuvre limited, the society–politics–state relationship is neither balanced nor effective. In connection with this situation, it was argued that civil society has a weak influence on democratic participation, assessment and oversight in local political, administrative and financial governing processes. In specific, it was stated that the number of city councils is low, and because of their structural dependence on the municipal administration, they generally do not function in accordance with the spirit of the legislation. It was also expressed that the relationship between civil society and municipalities generally turns into project-based

and one-way cooperation. Another source of concern mentioned is that the nature of relationships with civil society can vary depending on the local government; in some instances, partisan approaches and political polarization may lead to divisions within the civic sphere, negatively affecting inclusive participation and cooperation.

It was emphasised that the awareness of both local governments and civil society actors (citizens, city councils, CSOs, etc.) regarding democratic culture and governance should be raised, their capacities should be developed and the cooperation between them should be strengthened. Proposed solutions such as organising training on this subject, allocating budgets for civil society organisations, establishing protocol-based (structured and measurable) cooperation, and making city councils more autonomous were put forward. It was noted that it would be useful for the TBB and other unions and institutions to identify and share relevant examples of good practice on this matter.

c. Lack of Institutional Memory and Coordination Problems

It was claimed by the participants that the lack of coordination between the tiers of local government and between intra-institutional departments leads to citizens' requests going unanswered and to the blocking of the system. It was expressed that the weakness of feedback mechanisms and of institutional memory renders democratic participation, assessment and oversight unfavourable. It was emphasised that this also disrupts institutional learning and continuous improvement. Similarly, it was argued that institutional cooperation among different municipalities also remains insufficient.

It was recommended that guides, standards, training and innovative practices to be developed that will strengthen institutional memory in local governments, ensure continuous improvement and support peer cooperation between municipalities. It was also stated that cooperation and partnerships with universities in particular would be useful in this process.

d. Political Polarisation and Partisanship

It has been noted that when political polarization extends to local governments, it undermines public trust in these institutions and negatively affects inclusive participation. It was pointed out that local governments may occasionally make unrealistic election promises, and that partisan approaches can hinder the delivery of services. Furthermore, an environment characterized by unpredictability and uncertainty can complicate medium- and long-term planning. It was also suggested that excessive politicization can make it difficult to develop collaborative solutions at the local level.

Against these, it was recommended that opportunities to be created that will unite people on the common ground of democracy and support solution-oriented dialogue, participation and cooperation. The view was shared that citizens can take responsibility on the basis of equality and can strengthen democratic culture by contributing to governance through a common will.

e. Gaps in the Legal Framework and Implementation Failures

Many participants stated that serious failures are experienced in the operation and implementation of existing legal regulations. The view was expressed that the effectiveness of existing regulations on transparency—as well as the monitoring tools used—needs to be strengthened. In particular, it was stated that incentivising or compelling interventions are necessary for the implementation of good governance, including participatory governance and planning.

f. Civic Participation

Attention was drawn to the fact that most local governments do not have city councils, and that in most of those that do exist, civic participation is far from being inclusive and effective. Participants expressed that civic participation remains weak in important areas concerning the local level, such as urban planning, budget use and institutional functioning.

In addition to the problems originating from local governments, it was expressed that in some places the number of civil society organisations operating at the local level is insufficient, and that this too negatively affects civic participation. It was noted that the nature of relations with civil society can vary depending on the political structure of local governments, and that in some instances, the civic space itself suffers as a result of partisanization and polarization.

g. Lack of Citizenship Awareness and Culture of Participation

It was emphasised that problems originating from citizens should also not be overlooked in local democracy. Some participants expressed that citizens act solely in line with their own personal interests rather than adopting a rights-based attitude. They demand services from the municipality and from CSOs but avoid contributing through participation in governance. It was shared that a lack of knowledge about what participation means is widespread.

It was recommended that priority should be given to works that will encourage citizens to come together around shared common needs, beyond their individual demands and expectations, and to approach services on rights basis. It was further stated that it would be useful to

provide training that will support the awareness and culture of local citizenship (hemşehricilik), to provide safe spaces and environments for interaction, and to develop the capacity for meaningful participation processes and for producing joint solutions.

2. What is the level of trust that citizens place in local governments?

At the workshop, the issue of trust was addressed as a multidimensional and context-specific phenomenon. The participants revealed that the level of trust cannot be reduced to a single factor and that it shows significant variation according to the topic, the place and the individuals concerned.

a. The General Picture of the Level of Trust

Looking at the general picture, it was understood that the trust citizens place in local governments rests to a large extent on personal trust in the mayor, and institutional trust needs to be strengthened. In the participant evaluations, the need to strengthen the relationship of trust between young people and local governments was highlighted. At the same time, it was expressed that citizens continue to place a certain degree of trust even in local governments whose performance is poor. It was stated that this situation stems from the indispensable functions of local governments in social life and from their greater accessibility.

The participants expressed that trust begins with personal experience and acquires an institutional dimension over time. It was argued that the mayor being among the people and in direct contact with them, local governments being able to produce on-the-spot solutions to problems, and citizens being made to feel valued when contact is made, are the principal factors that nurture trust.

It was stated that being accessible to citizens is a factor that nurtures trust in local governments. It was recommended that institutional trust to be brought to the fore instead of an understanding of trust based on the mayor's performance. It was argued that providing information about institutional powers, responsibilities and operating principles, together with practical applications, would be beneficial. Actively ensuring transparency and accountability — and in particular making information such as where and how resources are used, what results have been achieved and what will be improved understandable and accessible — was identified as a priority for "trust".

It was recommended that training to be organised for candidates for mayorship and for municipal council membership, and that a Local Government Academy to be established. It was argued that the Academy would be of benefit in increasing the knowledge and skills of decision-makers through continuous training.

b. Trust Varying According to the Topic

The participants also stated that the level of trust differs depending on the area in which the municipality provides services. It was expressed that the level of trust decreases in sensitive areas such as urban zoning and the budget, but that the level of trust is relatively high in social assistance services. This picture revealed that service quality plays a determining role in the formation of trust. It was stated that the service approach of managers and practioners, their decision-making styles and their scope for taking initiative vary, and in connection with this, trust can be fragmented and variable.

It was recommended that a systemic culture of trust extending across the institution as a whole should be developed. It was expressed that, to this end, a sound and merit-based personnel policy, together with practices that will make the institutional culture of trust holistic, would be beneficial. In particular, it was emphasised that coordination between local government units and a culture of producing joint solutions would increase the level of trust.

It was explained that citizens' trust in local governments increases when a service-based and fair approach is displayed, and when urgent intervention is made in times of disaster.

c. Geographical Differences

It was reported that the level of trust is higher in small provinces and districts, and that citizens who are able to maintain close contact with local governments, to convey their problems directly and to follow closely the process of resolving their problems place more trust in the administration. In metropolitan areas, on the other hand, it was emphasised that with the loss of this closeness trust is established with greater difficulty. Attention was drawn to the critical importance, in the building of trust, of the quality of interaction achieved with citizens and with civil society organisations.

For this reason, it was recommended that distinctive approaches, methods and tools should be brought into operation, taking into account of the geographical conditions and institutional capacities of municipalities, in order to increase the performance of local governments and the trust of citizens. It was stated that it would be beneficial for central government to work together with the TBB and other stakeholders on this matter.

d. Factors That Damage Trust

A lack of sufficient and meaningful information exchange, the absence of feedback mechanisms, uncertainty as to whether problems have been resolved, a lack of coordination and the inability to use resources effectively came to the fore as the principal factors that permanently erode trust. In

addition to these, it was shared that insufficient and hard-to-understand data and information sharing, partisanship, the failure to keep election promises and an understanding of governing based on individuals rather than on institutions also feed a sense of distrust.

It was understood that the approach that will strengthen trust holistically lies in the continuous development of the culture and principles of good governance in local governments. It was emphasised that, as much as transparency and accountability, inclusive and meaningful participation, the efficient use of resources, the taking of responsive and inclusive decisions and the establishment of effective stakeholder relations could increase the trust placed in local governments.

3. What measures can be taken in order to strengthen trust in local democracy with the aim of promoting responsiveness to citizens' needs and concerns?

The workshop participants proposed concrete and mutually complementary measures for strengthening the trust placed in local democracy. The emphasis that "democratisation is possible first and foremost through information sharing" came to the fore.

It was argued that the proper use of resources would also increase the trust placed in local democracy. It was stated that practices such as participatory budgeting would increase both trust and the quality of decisions by making it known how the budget is used. In general, it was emphasised that all municipal activities should be presented in a clear and understandable manner. Specific headings of measures and their details are explained below.

a. Transparency Measures

- Municipalities should share their budget expenditures and decision-making processes with the public in a language and format that citizens can access and understand.
- Data should be presented with two separate focuses, namely technical/legal and citizen-oriented. The data and documents shared should provide relevant, accessible and meaningful information.
- When a decision is taken, not only the decision itself but also its rationale and expected results should be explained.
- Council meetings and committee reports should be announced to wide audiences on various platforms, above all social media.
- Open data portals should be created; systems should be established in which citizens can participate and provide feedback anonymously.
- All municipal activities should be presented in a clear and understandable manner; the legal obligation relating to the right of access to information should be strengthened.

b. Meaningful Participation and Inclusiveness Measures

- No citizen should be marginalised on the grounds of religion, language, race or political opinion; equality and impartiality should be adopted as fundamental principles in service delivery.
- Participation programmes relating to the relevant policy or decision-making processes should be developed for young people, women and disadvantaged groups; profile analysis should be carried out in order to reach these groups.
- Participation methods that are appropriate and accessible for different groups should be applied.
- Special policies should be actively produced in the field of the rights of social groups such as children, young people and women, above all gender equality.
- In order for participation to yield sounder results, citizens should be provided with preliminary information about the issue and the resources during participation processes, and citizens should be informed regarding the possible effects of alternative courses of action.
- Participation mechanisms should be designed according to the consideration of the needs of municipalities of different scales.

c. Accountability Measures

- Feedback mechanisms should be strengthened with an institutional infrastructure; effective channels should be created through which citizens can convey their complaints and assessments relating to the services provided.
- Drawing inspiration from the recall mechanism found in Scandinavian countries, it has been proposed that similar mechanisms—aimed at strengthening the democratic accountability of elected officials—should be evaluated within a framework that preserves the integrity of representative democracy and ensures legal safeguards.
- Council members should assume a more active and independent role; they should vote on proposed regulations on the basis of their own research rather than through possible steering or persuasion.
- The terms of office of mayors should be limited to a reasonable level; it should be ensured that governing is sustained through an operation that is dependent not only on the person but also on the institution.
- Through participatory budgeting practices, where and how the budget is spent should be conveyed to citizens in a manner that renders account to them.
- A Local Government Academy should be established so that elected officials and those in the position of candidates receive training before taking office.

B. INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY

1. What can be done in order to promote democratic innovation and to secure the participation of citizens with a view to renewing and strengthening local democracy in Türkiye?

During the workshop, views were shared regarding the need to develop a culture of local democracy. It was explained that city councils, the fundamental participation mechanism, are neither sufficiently independent and strong nor adequate in encompassing different segments and individuals. At the workshop, it was emphasised that citizen and civil society participation should not remain limited to those individuals and groups who are able to attend meetings, but should be transformed into a participation mechanism that genuinely influences decision-making processes. To this end, it was expressed that local governments need a holistic approach in the field of civic participation.

a. The Institutionalisation of Participation

- A unit that will make civic participation holistic and systematic could be established in every municipality; it would be beneficial for this unit to have strategic objectives, a budget and measurable activities. However, reducing participation to a bureaucratic process should be avoided.
- Participation should be planned in a layered manner; it should be clarified which institution/department will be involved in the process at which stage and with what authority. Citizens and stakeholders need to be informed both before and after the participation process.
- Participation should go beyond merely gathering ideas or expressing views on decisions and should extend to decisions, the use of resources, service delivery and assessment–oversight processes.
- The right to participate in governance should also include the possibilities of monitoring, assessing, overseeing and objecting.
- The results obtained as a result of participation should be shared with the public so that trust and belief in civic participation are encouraged in the period ahead.
- The results arising from participation activities should be announced to the public in an open and accessible manner.
- A stakeholder analysis should be carried out and a budget should be allocated for the activities to be conducted with stakeholders.
- At the workshop, it was proposed that a participation guide be prepared by the TBB.

b. Innovative Participation Mechanisms

- Participatory budgeting practices should be expanded by granting citizens a say over a proportion of the budget determined each year.
- Mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies/citizens' juries, composed of randomly selected citizens, should be operated so that an understanding of the citizens contributing to the preparation of decisions and the evaluation of options/of producing solutions together is put into practice.
- Thematic participation platforms such as children's councils and women's councils should be established. Regular improvements should be made so that these operate more effectively and develop continuously.
- Providing city councils with an independent structure should be considered.
- "Living city laboratories" should be established so that experts, municipal representatives and civil society actors are able to come together on the same ground. Solution-oriented cooperation and partnerships should be encouraged.
- Citizen councils should be established city-wide and at the district or neighbourhood scale; it should be ensured that CSOs, mukhtars and the public are included in decision-making processes through these assemblies.

c. Technology and Digital Tools

- Social media channels should be used effectively for the purpose of announcing council meetings, sharing committee reports and issuing calls for participation.
- Open data and participation platforms on which citizens can express their views anonymously should be put into practice.
- The message of participation should be conveyed to broad segments of society through social media content, advertising campaigns and creative forms of narrative.
- Artificial intelligence and other technological developments should be actively considered for the strengthening of democratic culture and practices.
- The research and development activities of municipalities for democratic practices should be encouraged.
- Identifying and promoting good practices will act as an incentive in the spread of innovations.
- Citizens with low access to the digital sphere and to technology should not be excluded. In this respect, a perspective that complements and enriches physical contact channels should be maintained.

d. Education and Awareness

- Participation and democracy education should be included in the school curriculum.
- Municipal staff should be subject to continuous training on the culture of participation.
- Awareness of local citizenship should be strengthened; social environments that will instil a sense of "we" should be created.
- Citizens should be given training on urban rights, the law of neighbourly relations and the culture of active participation.
- The participation process should be taken to the citizen; field-based work should be conducted for those segments whose possibilities of mobility are limited.
- The necessary conditions should be provided for increasing participation, taking into consideration the economic and social circumstances of citizens. The inclusiveness of participation and the quality of representation should be increased.

e. Strengthening Civil Society and Mukhtar Networks

- It should be ensured that CSOs act independently of political pressure, impartially and inclusively; legal safeguards should be strengthened to this end.
- The bridging function of mukhtars' offices between local government and the citizen should be reinforced; they should be equipped with tools that enable them to overcome bureaucratic obstacles.
- The coming together of mukhtars' offices, civil society and citizens should be supported, along with structures that will operate the participation mechanism in identifying problems and demands at the neighbourhood level.
- The criteria for working with CSOs should be determined on the basis of technical and ethical principles, not on the basis of political leaning or affinity.
- Special work should be carried out so that civil society is strengthened, addresses common issues and contributes to governance.
- Cooperation with civil society should be oriented towards producing outputs and implementing solutions.
- It should be aimed that CSOs develop and implement solutions to local common problems and add value locally through volunteering mechanisms.

2. Can deliberative or participatory democracy models be made use of in order to strengthen citizen participation and to address the current challenges faced by local governments in Türkiye?

While participants generally displayed a positive attitude with regard to deliberative and participatory democracy models, they emphasised in particular that concrete conditions and infrastructure need to be put into practice in order for success to be achieved. It was argued that democratic participation producing concrete solutions to local common needs and demands is critical for the spread and deepening of a culture of democracy.

Although there was general consensus at the workshop regarding deliberative and participatory democracy models, it was consistently expressed that certain preconditions need to be fulfilled in order for these models to be made functional. The basic conditions may be summarised as follows: citizens being able to express their views freely in a safe environment; participation not turning into a merely formal ritual; participants both being provided with preliminary information so that balanced knowledge about the existing problems and resources is acquired, and being provided with post-participation information explaining the reasons for the decisions taken or not taken, so that participation acquires a quality that contributes directly to decisions; participation being seen to produce concrete results; and political polarisation being able to be overcome. Certain proposed solutions were put forward for the development of deliberative and participatory democracy at the local level.

a. Specific Proposed Solutions

- **Citizens' Assemblies/Citizens' Juries:** These are mechanisms recommended by the Council of Europe, such as the Citizens' Assembly or the Citizens' Jury, in which randomly selected citizens deliberate in depth on a particular policy or decision and put forward recommendations. They have been proposed as an effective approach for overcoming the problem of representation and for breaking the dominance of a narrow group of participants.
- **Participatory Budgeting:** This model, in which citizens participate directly in the determination of budget priorities, both increases transparency and offers a concrete tool of active participation in decision-making processes.
- **Citizen Assemblies:** It has been argued that these structures, proposed as independent and strengthened versions of city councils, would function as local democratic participation and oversight mechanisms encompassing CSOs, mukhtars and a broad body of citizens.
- **Living City Laboratories:** It has been proposed that solution-oriented platforms should be put into practice in which concrete urban problems are discussed together with the participation of experts, municipalities and citizens.

- **Recall Mechanism:** Drawing inspiration from the mechanism for recalling elected representatives in the Scandinavian countries, this model, which makes it possible to remove from office elected representatives through a public referendum within certain procedures and conditions whose performance is found to be insufficient, will strengthen the accountability relationship between the voter and the elected representative.

It was expressed by the participants that ensuring, spreading and deepening meaningful and effective participatory democracy, and making it permanent, depends on certain conditions for success being met.

b. Meaningful and Effective Participation

- **Effective Participation:** It should be adopted that participation is transformed into a genuine process of influencing governance. It is imperative that participation cease to be symbolic.
- **Meaningful Participation:** It should be ensured that all segments of society, and not a narrow elite group, are included in the process and that mechanisms appropriate to this are developed. The diversity and inclusiveness of participation should be strengthened. At the same time, it should be ensured that participants acquire preliminary information about the problems, the possibilities of alternative courses of action and the resources, as well as about the possible differing effects of the alternatives on different segments.
- **The Communication of Participation:** In order to ensure the significant nature and the transparency of the outputs, the results emerging from participation processes need to be reflected in decision-making mechanisms and the reasons for not/adopting the proposals shared with the public.
- **Institutional Support and Sustainability:** Processes need to be owned by municipalities, to be repeated at regular intervals and to possess an institutional memory.
- **Adaptation According to Scale:** Every deliberation and participation process should be designed in a manner appropriate to the scales of metropolitan, provincial and district municipalities and taking local conditions into consideration.
- **A Climate of Trust:** Placing at the centre of the approach that "trust is essential in order to be able to feel willing to participate", it should be recognised that the building of trust is a precondition of participatory democracy. Accordingly, a climate should be created in which citizens can share their views freely and without hesitation, in which they can see the results of participation processes, and which will strengthen dialogue between different segments.

It was also expressed by participants that there are certain risks standing in the way of the establishment and strengthening of local participatory democracy.

c. Prominent Risks

- **Narrow Participation:** Participation processes that are confined to particular individuals and whose diversity and inclusiveness are weak obstruct the development of democracy and its social ownership.
- **Ineffective Participation:** In order to overcome the perception that "whatever I say, in the end it will not be done", it is of great importance that it to be demonstrated to the public in a transparent manner that participation leads to concrete change.
- **Financial Dependence:** The dependence of the use of financial resources at the local level on local government weakens the ability of civil actors to act independently and to exert influence.
- **The Risk of Politicisation:** There is a risk that participation processes may be captured by political groups. The failure to establish safeguards that will protect the independence of these structures politicises participation processes and distances them from their civic character.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

In this turbulent period through which Europe is passing through, democracy is our most strategic security asset. The report "Towards a New Democratic Pact for Europe" was prepared with the vision of building for the peoples of Europe, a future in which no one is left behind, in which rights are safeguarded and where institutions inspire trust. The Council of Europe stated that in this process it has set out to provide guidance not merely as an institution, but in the role of a "lighthouse" that ensures the democratic security of the continent. In this challenging and comprehensive task, the view was adopted that protecting and strengthening democracy at the local, national and regional levels will serve the building of a better future.

On the other hand, prior to this work by the Council of Europe, the Twelfth Development Plan prepared by the Turkish Presidency of Strategy and Budget for the 2024–2028 period set out as its main objective the heading "Democratic Good Governance Based on Justice".[5] It was envisaged that this plan would guide the shaping of the country's future. Under Objective 236 of the Plan, it was stated that the strengthening of civic democratic participation is a priority in raising the efficiency and quality of public services. Providing local governments with "a structure that is participatory, transparent and accountable and that ensures financial sustainability" was designated as the fundamental objective (Objective 950). It was also shared with the public that the Plan includes objectives such as strengthening the participation of women, young people and persons with disabilities in local governments and rendering city councils effective. For this reason, the workshop that was held should also be considered as an activity serving the country's development vision and its objective of democratic good governance. The findings and recommendations presented by the participants should also be assessed from this perspective.

With this report, the findings and proposed solutions obtained at the Towards a New Local Democracy Workshop, organised with the aim of strengthening **local democracy**, have been presented comprehensively. **During the workshop, it was noted that issues such as the confusion over the division of authority between central and local governments, financial dependency, and political polarization have a negative impact on local democracy. In order to strengthen citizen trust**, it was emphasised that data and information should be shared using digital means, that these should be accessible and understandable to citizens, and that mechanisms such as participatory budgeting should be put into practice. In addition,

5 https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/On-Ikinci-Kalkinma-Plani_Ingilizce_2024-2028.pdf

the inclusive and meaningful inclusion of citizens and civil society in decision-making processes, and in particular the encouragement of the participation of young people, women and other under-represented groups in governance, came to the fore. It was recommended that democratic culture to be renewed and strengthened at the local level through innovative models such as **Citizens' Assemblies** and the mechanism for **recalling** elected representatives.

One of the key messages to emerge from the workshop was that a cultural transformation is necessary in order to overcome the lack of trust in democratic culture. To this end, it was once again understood that good governance is the precondition of democracy and the guarantee of its permanence. It also emerged that when principles such as transparency, accountability and participation are put into practice through carefully designed institutional mechanisms, democracy can be protected and strengthened through the rebuilding of trust and a process of social awareness.

It is hoped that the findings and recommendations obtained at the workshop will contribute to the goal of building a new vision and culture of democracy, pursued under the leadership of the Council of Europe. Taking these findings and recommendations into account at the Council of Europe Summit of Heads of States and Governments to be held at the end of 2026 will render the envisaged goal successful. The protection and strengthening of democracy, first and foremost at the local level, across Europe and throughout the world will contribute to humanity having a better future.