

# T5.5: Local Democracy Lab Bulgaria, July 2021

WP5 – Dissemination and engagement



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## Local Democracy Labs

### Trust in public administration, in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic

The aim of this report is to present the outcomes of the PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria, a contribution of 25 participants to the qualitative research on *“Trust in public administration, in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic”*.

## Acknowledgments

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We acknowledge the active presence of the twenty-five (25) participants for sharing their insights, knowledge, experience, for their contribution to the research on populism movement in Europe and for engaging in such fruitful, constructive and open exchange of perceptions, opinions and ideas about democracy and trust in administration/public authority in Bulgaria in the time of Covid-19 pandemic.

We would like to acknowledge the generous and professional support of Borislav Dimitrov, Dobrena Petrova, Louisa Slavkova, Silvia Ivanova and Vanya Ivanova, as the facilitators' team that contributed along the organisation, implementation, selection of participants and carrying out the local Democracy Lab. We would like to thank Ruzha Smilova, PhD, policy and futures analysis, PaCE Project, who supported the organizing and facilitators team in designing the questions for the local Democracy Lab and presented the project to the participants of the event.

The organizing team consisted of Roxana Cziker, project manager at the Municipality of Reykjavík, Sophie Kiesouw, Project lead, the Netherlands and Aleksandra Zietek, Local connector Krakow, Poland, both from



Democratic Society in Brussels. We would like to acknowledge Róbert Bjarnason, manager of Citizens Foundation in Iceland for the design and development of the online platform for deliberation – Your Priorities available for participants of the Democracy Lab.

We are thankful for all the help from every individual and organizations that supported us in preparing and reaching out to participants, including the [Civic Europe](#) project and network.

And all others that helped.

**We would like to address a special thanks and gratitude to all participants to the PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria, for their time, contribution, ideas, and inspiration.**



## About this document

**Task Lead:** RVK

**Contributors:** DS and CF

**Date:** 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2021

This document outlines the outcomes and lessons learned from the PaCE Local Democracy Lab organised in Bulgaria by **Sofia Platform Foundation** and **Democratic Society in Brussels** on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2021. The outcomes and lessons learned are relevant for the development of future Democracy Labs and serve as guidance for other consortia and organisations engaging citizens in their research. This document is sustaining the academic research of the PaCE project.

Dissemination Level		
PU	Public on the PaCE website.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services).	<input type="checkbox"/>
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services).	<input type="checkbox"/>
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services).	<input type="checkbox"/>

Authors' contribution to the report

Dobrena Petrova, Sofia Platform Foundation, Bulgaria	Analysis of the participants' statements, summary and recommendations and participants' feedback.
Roxana Elena Cziker, RVK	Executive summary, recommendations, qualitative analysis of the participants' statements, graphic description of participants.

A brief summary of revisions will be recorded in the table below.

HISTORY OF CHANGES				
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The working language of the report on PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria is English (EN), as required for reporting purposes by article 20.7 of the Grant Agreement. A Bulgarian version is also available to enable the access of participants to the outcomes in their native language.

## Disclaimer

The project PaCE has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No 822337. The opinions expressed in this document reflect only the authors' view and reflect in no way the European Commission's opinions.

The PaCE project consortium respects the protection of personal information and data and adheres strictly to the rules set down by data protection legislation and GDPR, how we handle the data and the rights of participants to the research.



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The outcomes of the PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria represent strictly the conclusions formulated on the opinions and perception of the *twenty-five (25) participants to the lab* and cannot be extrapolated as representing the general opinion of citizens in Bulgaria because no standardized inclusion and exclusion criteria have been used for the participants' selection. The general strategy of participation selection applied to the local democracy labs is to encourage participation across genders and from under-represented groups of people, and to enable the free will of members of the community to participate in the debate.



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# 1. Executive Summary

## 1.1. Key Findings

The PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria, held on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2021, was the sixth and last event in a series of six local democracy labs in different European countries and one pilot in Italy. The democracy lab in Bulgaria has been carried on in-person in one of the Bulgarian towns called Belene. The meeting deliberated the *Trust in public administration at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic*. Around 300 people were reached via the **Sofia Platform Foundation's network** and invited to the event.

As a result of a diverse outreach strategy for reaching the broader public, such as civil society organizations, local authorities, students, institutions, media, and vulnerable groups, **twenty-five (25) participants** registered and attended the in-person event in Belene.

The participants' age average is 42, the youngest being 23 years of age and the oldest 61. The gender representation is prevalent female (80%) compared with only 20% male representation. The participants' educational background is mostly higher education (92%) compared with only 4% of participants with secondary education.

The PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria revealed several interesting statements and declarations based on the shared opinions and insights of twenty-five (25) participants. The participants' statements have been qualitatively analysed by the thematic analysis method. The **qualitative analysis** of participants' statements was allocated against four themes, based on whether the participants have evaluated the authorities' measures regarding the protection against the Covid-19 pandemic as *positive, negative, challenging*, or whether participants felt responsible for drafting some **recommendations/suggestions**. Thus, the four envisaged categories are:

- Positive insights
- Critical views
- Suggestions
- Challenges

The outcomes of the PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria reveal different dimensions and challenges as premises of the public distrust in authorities such as **communication strategy, clarity, coherence and transparency of information, coherence and fairness of measures, media influence, long-term side effects, impact on social, economic, cultural and educational sectors**, to mention a few participants' viewpoints.

Among the participants' statements, some **positive insights** have been shared regarding the measures adopted by Bulgarian authorities and the changes in the peoples' attitudes. Some participants emphasised resilience attitudes adopted by people in response to the strict measures and lockdown restrictions in towns and cities. Hence, they took voluntary initiatives to support people in their communities, use the time for self-reflection,



went back to their roots in the countryside, and spent time in nature, e.g., gardening. Participants also recognize the worth of online communication solutions that contributed to the improvement of people's digital literacy.

Some participants to the Democracy Lab feel that the authorities managed the situation well, especially compared to other countries, even though sometimes poorly and inconsistently implementing measures and actions. They find the government's financial compensations beneficial for the business and different categories of professionals affected by the strict lockdown measures. Participants have also positively evaluated the strategies fostered by the local authorities in implementing locally the measures adopted by the central government.

However, the outcomes further unveil several **challenges and critical views** regarding the measures taken by authorities and their application criteria to different contexts, sectors, and groups of people, the coordination, and transparency of public information about the covid pandemic. Overall, the participants' opinion towards the measures highlights the lack of responsibility, hasty, incoherent, contradictory, inconsistent, unfair, and late measures, especially in the economic and health care sectors, that have created a favourable circumstance for people's distrust in authorities. The pandemic has also raised many other issues at different levels, e.g., citizens and institutions, citizens and state, people to people. To tackle a few relevant challenges:

- **National strategies and actions.** Authorities adopted some appropriate public measures, e.g., the financial compensations, isolation of infected people, etc.; however, they were inconsistent and inefficiently applied in different contexts and for different groups of people. The inadequate authorities' explanations about Covid-19 and its impact have led people to fail in recognizing the meaning of the measures and the reality of the virus.
- **People's response.** Even though some well adopted and set up authorities' measures, the people were not willing to follow the rules and thinking to protect the other members of the community.
- **Central government vs local authorities.** Participants have tackled poor coordination between the central government and local authorities with direct consequences on the promptness the local authorities have applied the centralized measures in response to the local needs.
- **Health care system.** Hospitals, especially the ones located in small towns, were lacking of medical staff and adequate equipment that made people reluctant and afraid to use the medical services. On the other hand, the side effect of unidirectional attention toward the patients infected with covid, has been reflected in the medical services and assistance available for patients with other illnesses and chronic diseases.
- **Expertise and knowledge.** The authorities' measures have not been decided based on the knowledge and expertise, but rather on populist tendencies and lobbyism.
- **Accessibility and distribution of information.** According to participants, the authorities could implement a better public information campaign about the virus, its impact, the long-term effects, vaccination strategies, and so forth. The delivery of information to the public should include **data and experts' opinions, updated, objective, and accessible public information**, and more attention to protecting people's mental health rather than inducing panic, fear, and chaos.
- **Media's approach.** Media painted rather a negative picture of the crisis leading people to fear and panic, creating more space for politicians to the detriment of public opinion debate and expert's perspectives.



- **Education.** Participants have considered the authorities' strategy of completely locking down schools as **harmful, inefficient, and significantly impacted education.** Thus, they emphasized the way the online classes have been organized, the access to the internet, and the lack of devices available for online education; online education also has an impact on the children's psychological status due to isolation and extended time spent in front of a computer. Participants have considered the schools' lockdown adequate and helpful as a first stage solution for the children's and teachers' health protection. However, the participants' opinion has leaned toward a hybrid solution where the combination of online and in-person classes might be more beneficial.
- **The culture/cultural branch** was another sector affected by the implementation of authorities' measures. According to some participants, the complete closing of the cultural institutions was not considered appropriate; a hybrid solution (e.g., keeping open and reducing the number of people) would be more beneficial for people's well-being and mental health.
- **Economy.** According to participants, no plan to support Bulgarian tourism has been envisaged by authorities as a part of a post-covid national rehabilitation plan. Further, even though the government launched a financial support programme for businesses and people affected by the lock down measures, the applications measures were not consistent and transparent. In their view, the medical branch was the principal beneficiary of the financial support.

## 1.2. Recommendations

A list of recommendations based on the main findings of the participants' discussions are advocated by the PaCE leaders of local democracy labs in collaboration with the facilitators of the democracy lab in Bulgaria. The recommendations are formulated based on some areas and actions highlighted by participants as not enough and efficiently addressed by the authorities' measures or lacking strategies regarding the distribution, clarity, and accessibility of information for the general public, the broader response to different sectors, and the side and long-term effects of the virus and the implemented restrictions. The proposed recommendations will be a part of the PaCE report shared with the European Commission based on the Grant Agreement of the PaCE project and exploited in a webinar organized with policy actors as a collaboration between the City of Reykjavik and Democratic Society.

Key recommendations that emerged from the Democracy Lab Bulgaria are:

### Healthcare:

- **Knowledge and expertise.** Consider the knowledge and expertise as a valuable and mandatory contribution to setting up and implement the measures in different sectors and for different groups of people.
- **Chronic diseases and other medical issues.** A better focus on medical assistance and treatment of people with other illnesses and chronic diseases during the pandemic.
- **Mental health and psychological support programmes.** Better attention should be paid to public mental health programmes and psychological support:
  - Public psychological consultation funded by the government;
  - Public debates on psychological and side effects of the virus;
  - Hybrid opening hours of cultural institutions and centres as a prevention measure of people's mental health;



- Art therapy programmes;
- Critical thinking workshops for the public.
- **Volunteering programmes.** Encourage public volunteering programmes funded by the national and local government.
- Many suggest measures that incentivize volunteering in general, and in addition incentivize medical professionals, as many of them felt scared to go to work.

#### Education:

- Better governmental support programmes for schools and school staff.
- **Hybrid school programme.** Reconsider the online education programmes and facilities and propose a hybrid schooling solution, as a combination of online and in-person classes.

#### Information campaigns/ sharing and decision-making:

- **Accessible and comprehensive information.** Participants strongly recommend more holistic and consistent explained measures. According to them, this might create circumstances for trust in the authorities and improve people's attitudes to comply with the measures.
- **Experts' contribution.** In direct connection with the point mentioned above, the participants acknowledge the value of transparency, accessibility, and additional information found on the experts' opinions. The lessons from the actual situation might stand as premises for further plans in conditions similar to the actual crisis.
- **Transparent decision-making procedures.** Decentralization measures, sharing and transfer of some responsibilities to the local authorities should make the process more efficient, even though some participants still argue the relevant role of centralized decision-making. According to some participants, a mixed approach would be more beneficial e.g., national decision for some matters, combined with local governments' decisions based on the specific needs of the local community.
- **Coordination and distribution of responsibilities among different authorities** and decentralization by sectors and levels, tailored to the particular needs of different local communities.

#### Economy:

- **Long-term plans for sectors affected by pandemic.**
- Better support of business sector and employees.
- Long-term strategies and planning for the economic and social sectors must be better articulated and envisaged by the authorities.
- **Digitalization of the cultural branch.**



## 2. Introduction

### 2.1. Context of the Local Democracy Labs

Across Europe there is a rise of political movements that claim to challenge *liberal elites* and speak for the '*ordinary person*' - *movements* that can be loosely categorised as '*populist*'. Many of these movements have undesirable tendencies.

***The Populism and Civic engagement project (PaCE) aims to understand and address negative tendencies associated with populist politics, to build upon the lessons of positive examples, and hence play a part in constructing a firmer democratic and institutional foundation for citizens of Europe.***

The PaCE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No 822337.

The PaCE research addresses the civic engagement approach by enabling active participation of people from different European countries to the PaCE's qualitative research. Thus, one of the participatory researches aims the carrying out of Local Democracy Labs in different European countries. The purpose of Local Democracy Lab is to assess the public's attitudes to and aspirations for democracy and to identify ways of democratic involvement and to understand the way in which traditional and social media influence political and social opinion. The ***City of Reykjavik, in collaboration with the Democratic Society, Brussels and Citizens Foundation, Iceland*** are the leaders in organising and carrying out, in different locations in Europe, a total of six **Democracy Labs** across Europe.

The Local Democracy Labs are in line with Objective 5 of the PaCE project:

***Engage with stakeholders, especially groups under-represented in public affairs, particularly younger citizens, schools and local communities, in new forms of democratic engagement appropriate in our digital age.***

Local democracy lab is a 'deliberative' event which gathers people to discuss the condition of democracy in different European countries through the lens of present challenges. To this end, we are planning a new type of democracy Lab, turning the pandemic into an asset and proposing an innovative online forum to allow people of different backgrounds across Europe to participate independent of their geographic location.

### 2.2. Purpose of the Local Democracy Labs

The **goal** of the 3-hours-long local Democracy Labs held across the European focus member states is to ensure the widest democratic engagement throughout all stages of the PaCE project. A subsidiary goal (given the emergence of COVID-19) is to learn how to make online Democracy Labs work, so we can package the experiences into guidelines in order to help others how to run them.



The selection criteria of European countries where the local democracy labs are carried out is in line with one of the tasks of the work package WP1 of the project, *case studies of populist and nativist parties and social movements in different European countries*. Thus, the inclusion criteria are to cover Nordic, Eastern, Southern and Central European countries and Western European countries: **Iceland, Spain, Scotland, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria**.

### 2.3. Objectives of the Local Democracy Labs

Democracy Labs aim at reaching the following key objectives:

- To keep the research programme continuously connected to the **lived experiences** of participants;
- To think through, with participants, the ways in which they might want to be involved in making and shaping decisions that affect their lives;

Subsidiary aims:

- To produce rich qualitative data around the perceptions of power, trust, and democratic processes;
- To better understand the way in which traditional and social media influence and shape political and social opinions;
- To better understand the way in which community interactions influence and shape political decisions;

### 2.4. Structure of the Local Democracy Labs

The design of the Democracy Lab is based on the idea of the *World Café qualitative method*, adapted for the online version. The World Café format fits the Positive Psychology frame and creates a welcoming and conducive environment and a respectful relationship that promotes an equal partnership. The World Café operates on the principle that people are at their most creative when they are relaxed. This time the “café” has been taken in an online format, everyone in his/her own space and settings, promoting a diversity of space and coffee.

The World Café process is a simple method for bringing people together to focus on answering key questions. It is founded on the assumption that people have the will and capacity to work together. The process uses connected conversations to share knowledge, ignite innovation, and tap into the intelligence of the group. The key elements of the process include:

- Small groups around table.
- Informal conversations focus on key questions.
- Sharing ideas and knowledge as participants move among small groups.
- Opportunities to record ideas in words and images.
- Weaving of emerging themes and insights.
- Awareness of social nature of learning.
- Noticing that individual conversations are part of and contribute to a larger web through which collective intelligence can become aware of itself. (Löhr K., Weinhardt M. and Sieber S, 2020; Guide to the World Café method).



## Stages of the Local Democracy Lab

1. **Starting up.** Pre-event ideas generation on a dialogue platform. Online participation and ideas exchange on democracy and trust in government through Your Priorities platform for 10 days prior the event.
2. **In-person deliberation event.** A 3-hour-long in-person deliberation event with about 30 participants held in the town of Belene, Bulgaria. This is held in a World Cafe format and run by professional facilitators, ensuring everyone can have a say on democracy and trust in government in pandemic times.
3. **Follow up.** Post-event ideas gathering on Your Priorities platform. Post-event ideas exchange, informed by findings from deliberation, enabling participants to engage further and express your options.

The event started with a plenary session where participants have been introduced to the structure of the Democracy Lab. They were not introduced to the PaCE project yet to avoid priming and framing of their thinking. After the plenary session, the participants were divided in smaller groups at different tables, where participants changed their group for each of three rounds. Each facilitator kept leading the same table and supported one group of participants at a time, but the group was different each round. Each group took notes of their discussion on paper and post-it notes, and so did the table facilitators. The three rounds were followed by a plenary reflection session. In the end of the event, the PaCE project was presented by a representative of the project and the participants were invited to share feedback.

The participants were engaged in three ‘rounds’ of conversation during the Democracy Labs, the discussion in each round being based on a question<sup>1</sup> in order to create a ‘flow’ in the conversations:

1. **Explorative question** - about democracy and the pandemic in general (round 1)  
*In your personal experience how did the authorities (local, regional, national) handle the situation with covid-19 (social, economic, health, personal, cultural impact)?*
2. **Deepening question** - starting to get into the topic of how government is dealing with the pandemic (round 2)  
*How do you feel about the covid-19 restrictions the authorities have implemented (local, regional, national)?*
3. **Reflective or activating question** - linking people's thoughts on the pandemic into some ideas, suggestions, and recommendations (round 3)  
*In a future pandemic situation, what would your recommendation to the authorities be? If you were in charge, what would you have done differently?*

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<sup>1</sup> The questions formulated for the Local Democracy Labs represent a collaborative contribution of Democratic Society, Paris-London University of Salzburg, Centre of Liberal Strategies Foundation, Sofia and Citizens Foundation, Iceland.

## 3. Main Outcomes of the Online Event

### 3.1. Recruitment Process and the Description of Participants

A total number of twenty-five (25) participants have registered to the PaCE Local Democracy Lab as a result of a multi-directional outreach approach. Among the total number of participants, twenty-five (25) attended the in-person event. One (1) participant initially confirmed the participation, was not able to attend due to unexpected circumstances. However, one (1) additional participant not registered initially, but present in the Belene region, attended the in-person event. The participant did not register during the recruitment process. Still, they showed interest in participating and confirmed their attendance once they met the organization team at Belene one day before the in-person event.

The recruitment process was carried out by the local organization **Sofia Platform Foundation's networks**, in charge of the organization and implementation of the Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria. A wide network of stakeholders – *developed through years of experience of local organisation in conducting events in civic education and civil society (i.e., the wider public, civil society actors, organizations, teachers, educators, local authorities, students, institutions, media, hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, representatives of minorities, locals to the town of Belene, Bulgaria, etc.)* – has been reached and invited to the Local Democracy Lab via e-mail. Information about the event's format and the PaCE project was shared with around **three hundred (300) participants** within the network. Hence, they were strongly encouraged to share the information with other potential participants. The organization team has adopted different outreaching strategies in order to ensure the participants' attendance:

- Two reminder emails sent to participants prior to the in-person event;
- A confirmation email upon registration;
- Personal contact via phone for confirmation of the attendance to the in-person event.

The local partner ensured that the information could reach people from diverse background, age and gender, including those who might not have access to online announcements.

The average of the participants' age is 42, the youngest is 23 years and the oldest 61. The gender representation is prevalent female (20 - 80%) compared with only (5 – 20%) male representation.

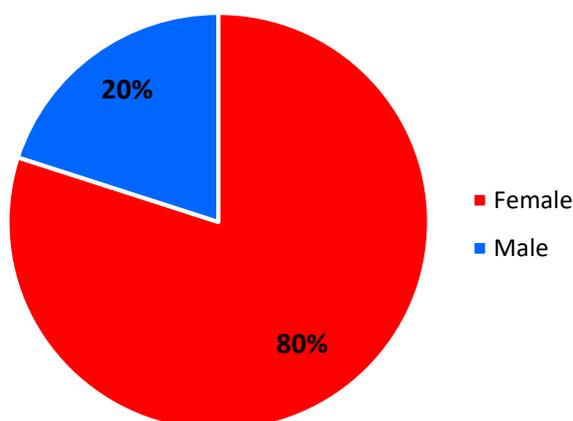


Figure 1. The representation of participants' gender

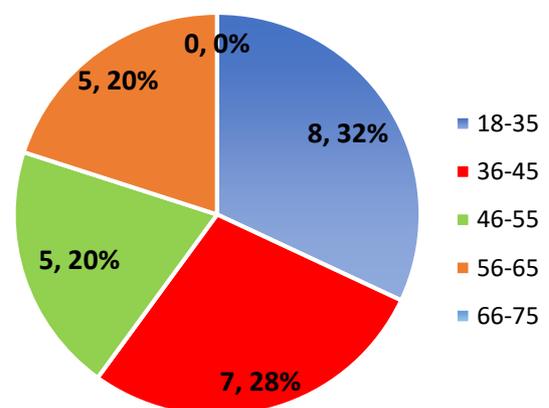


Figure 2. The representation of participants' age

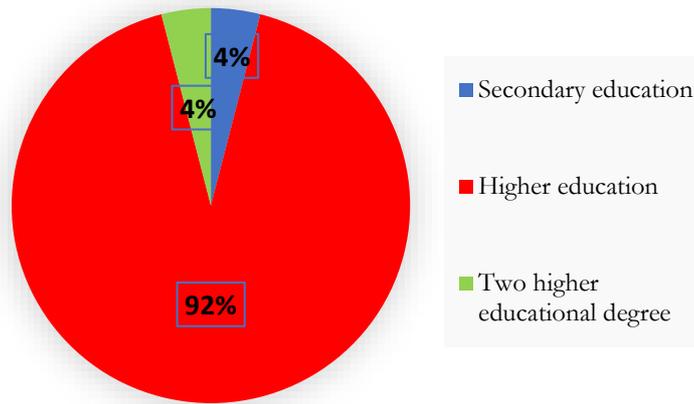


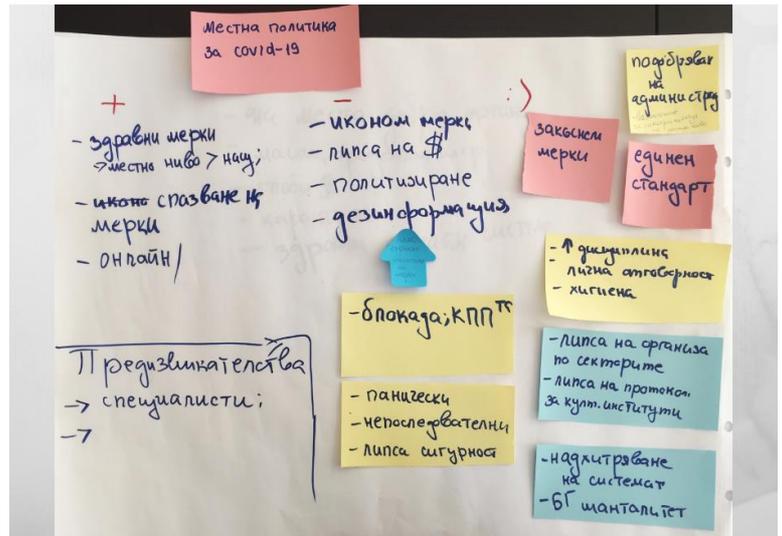
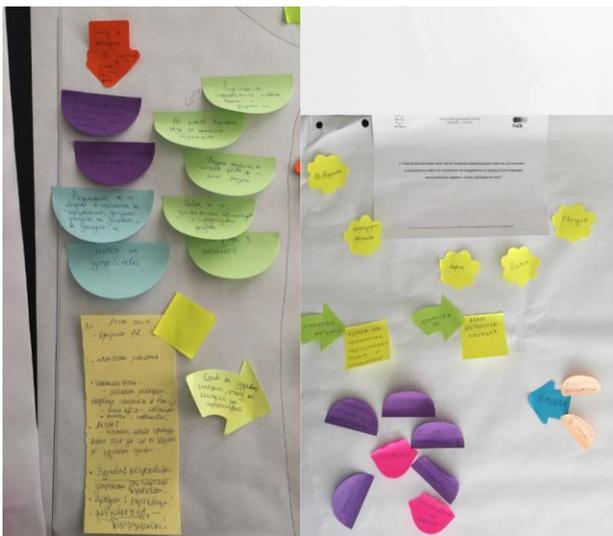
Figure 3. The representation of participants' educational degree

### 3.2. Outcomes & Insights

The qualitative analysis of the participants' statements emerged from the local democracy lab, has highlighted four categories of **themes**:

1. Positive insights
2. Critical views
3. Suggestions
4. Challenges

**Round 1. Q1: In your personal experience how did the authorities (local, regional, national) handle the situation with covid-19 (social, economic, health, personal, cultural impact)?**



The main discussion points for the Q1 for each of the four categories of themes are presented in Table 1.

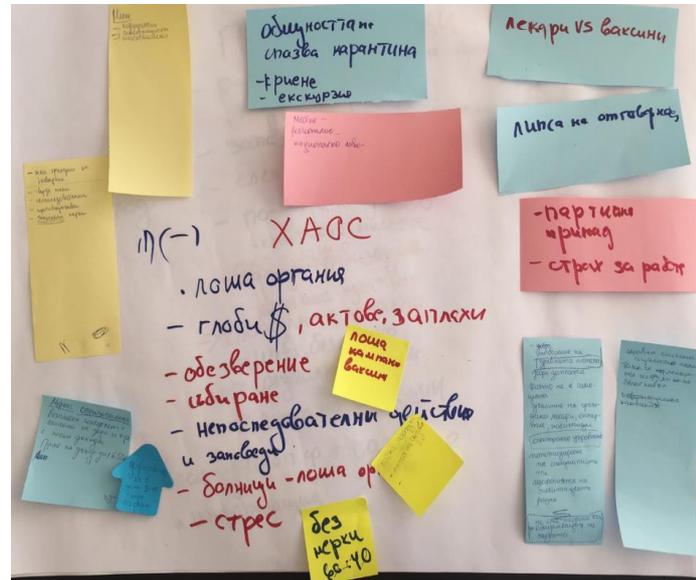


Table 1. Discussion points emerged from the Round 1 of the democracy lab

<p><b>Positive insights</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The education has been quickly adapted to the online solution. <b>Digital skills and digitalisation have been improved</b> due to online education.</li> <li>- Veliko Turnovo University has created an online platform enabling access of students to classes.</li> <li>- People were more focused on own agenda, involved in more volunteering actions and supported the other people. The feeling that we all became better and more sympathetic towards each other. Enhanced civil society engagement.</li> <li>- <b>Parents</b> were able to spend more time with their children when working from home.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Critical views</b></p>	<p><b>Adoption and implementation of measures</b></p> <p>Participants highlighted the lack of authorities’ responsibility, out of control, hasty decisions mostly taken under pressure; inconsistent and late measures applied differently in different sectors, situations, and groups of people. On the national level participants noticed a lack of knowledge regarding covid that <i>“causes fear in everybody.”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Lack of responsibility assumed by authorities</b> as a response to the covid situation. According to some participants, the chaos has been installed to <i>“all levels”</i> leading people to <i>“panic and lack of security”</i>.</li> <li>- <b>Very inconsistent measures</b> favouring the trust of people in conspiracy theories about Covid-19 or even believe this is real.</li> <li>- <b>Inconsistent and unfair measures applied to different sectors and different contexts.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o <i>“Opening of malls and big stores because of people’s grievance was a huge mistake. Schools were closed and malls and clubs weren’t.”</i></li> <li>o <b>Wearing masks or quarantine rules.</b> According to some participants, when several members of the same family got infected with covid, the quarantine measures were applied only to some members; instead no restrictions have been applied to the other members.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- <b>Lack of people’ responsibilities</b> e.g. wearing masks in public spaces, declaring the infection with covid <i>“they would hide and not say they are ill and keep spreading the disease.”</i> <i>“People found a way to go around the system.”</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of communication strategies adopted by authorities for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o wider public e.g. people did not receive consistent and clear information about the virus e.g. <i>“causes, consequences, prevention measures, what exact the virus is.”</i> and</li> <li>o institutions and authorities.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Lean justifications regarded the adopted measures No reasoning ever offered behind why a given measure is being implemented. Overall, participants noticed distrust in authorities and disbelief/distrust in the virus.</li> </ul> <p><b>Media</b></p> <p>According to one participant, media was spreading panic and fear instead of sharing relevant information. <i>“media was manipulated, spilled out so much information; I gave up on following briefings.”</i></p> <p><b>Economy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insignificant and limited measures applied to the economic sector.</li> <li>- Poor planning and communication strategies regarding the compensation allocated to business sector and employees affected by the covid pandemic. Even if compensation measures were adopted by authorities, they were to some extent unfair. Participants highlighted a particular measure called 60/40 that aimed to support employees and businesses whose revenues have suffered losses compared to 2019. According to some participants, they do not have any knowledge that somebody has benefited from this compensatory measure.</li> </ul> <p><b>Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The online education has been impeding by the lack/shortage of devices.</li> <li>- The participants opinion regarding the closing of school was contradictory: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Some considered an unfair decision since the lock down measures have strictly applied to schools, but not to shopping malls, restaurants and cafes,</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Others considered it a helpful measure from the perspective of pupils’ and teachers’ health protection (some teachers were afraid to hold in-person classes because of getting infected; also, the online education solutions contributed to the improvement of digital literacy).</li> </ul> <p><b>Healthcare</b></p> <p>The measures taken by authorities were not based on knowledge and expertise but rather <i>“on populism and lobbyism”</i>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The health care system challenged a lack of coordination; therefore, their response was inconsistent and inadequate, <i>“no one knew what is going on, there was no coordination.” “many doctors denied working.”</i></li> <li>- The covid situation and taken measures had affected mostly hospital in small towns due to lack of medical staff, less support and overloading of work e.g., only one hospital is available in a small town and the surrounding villages.</li> <li>- Overall, hospitals in Bulgaria were challenging the lack of medical staff compared to other EU countries.</li> <li>- Departments in hospitals were transformed in covid units and not enough medical staff have been providing. Therefore, the main support given to patients has been provided by nurses and students.</li> <li>- The medical services and treatment of patients with different illnesses and chronic disease have been neglected due to the decision of closing the hospitals and focus only to the treatment of patients with covid.</li> <li>- The covid and adopted measures affected the people’s mental health and psychological status.</li> <li>- The authorities lacking strategies for organisation and communication of public vaccination. No consistent information campaigns were envisaged. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o However, many share positive insights related to the vaccination in terms of availability of vaccines and vaccination centres compared to other countries.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Culture</b></p> <p>Inadequate and late decision measures for the protection and support of the cultural sector. According to some participants, the cultural activities, museums, theatres, operas, cinemas, galleries, etc., should be kept open as a preventive measure for the citizens’ well-being and mental health.</p>
<p><b>Suggestions</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Information campaigns</b> about the causes, consequences, and preventive measures of covid.</li> <li>- <b>Adoption of prevention strategies.</b></li> <li>- More <b>holistic</b> measures and plans for the support of medical staff, the health care system and volunteering.</li> <li>- <b>Good practice examples</b> are given with the way Greece and the UK deal with the situation. E.g. financial support of 500 EUR a month, free sanitary materials.</li> <li>- Better <b>distribution of support/financial.</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Challenges</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Isolation</b> must be better regulated and even apply some penalties for people not willing to follow the measures.</li> <li>- According to some participants, people in their communities were afraid to confirm their illness, deciding to continue their life in the community, and exposing the others to infection.</li> </ul>

**Round 2. Q2: How do you feel about the covid-19 restrictions the authorities have implemented (local, regional, national)?**

The main discussion points for the Q2 for each of the four categories are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Discussion points emerged from the Round 2 of the democracy lab

Positive insights	General
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Some participants understood and acknowledged the health measures appropriate for the given situation.</b></li> <li>- Government had planned compensation/support measures for businesses and people who have experienced financial harm. However, the application of measures was inconsistent, unfair and inefficient.</li> <li>- <b>Best practices of management</b> of the situation at the local level.</li> <li>- To some extent, the local authorities had the opportunity to implement the measures locally, in line with the locally needs. However, some participants highlighted that some local authorities´ followed decisions on the national level out of fear for making a mistake.</li> </ul> <p><b>Social sector</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Social isolation</b> in Bulgaria has not been evaluated as bad as in other countries. According to some participants, they were getting used to and evaluate them as positive decisions.</li> <li>- Resilient attitudes of people turning the lockdown time (and possibility of working remotely) into the opportunity to move to the countryside, enjoy being outside, gardening, farming etc.</li> <li>- <b>Self-reflection</b>, “going back to their roots – rural hometowns”</li> <li>- Less pragmatism and attachment to objects and possessions.</li> </ul> <p><b>Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Improved digital skills</b> and digitalisation of the education system was strongly stressed. Some participants state that more responsibility on behalf of the students is observed at the university level, compared to primary and secondary education.</li> </ul> <p><b>Healthcare</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Accessibility of population to vaccine</b> especially compared to other countries, e.g. many people living abroad took the decision to return to Bulgaria for getting vaccinated.</li> <li>- <b>Improved level of awareness and knowledge about the hygiene.</b> “Sanitizers at train stations used to be in the sphere of the imaginary”.</li> </ul>



**Critical views**

**Adoption and implementation of strategies**

- **Inconsistent, incoherent and controversial measures**, which lead people to confusion and distrust in the authorities. According to some participants, the measures were too gentle compared to other countries. *“This is why many people don’t believe that Covid is real”*. The measures were often changed and very confusing *“one day you have to wear a mask everywhere, on the next day you did not have to.”*
- **Lack of coordination between central government and local authorities.** *“The regional level would always wait for the national level.”* *“People in rural areas did better because of the local infrastructure. They also found new ways to spend their time by growing vegetables. We barely felt the pandemic.”*
- **Adoption of so-called vaccination green corridors pathways**, a contradictory measure in the participants’ view. The green corridors strategy has been applied in two situations: prioritisation of vaccination and facilitating the safety access of elderly people (65+) to shopping.
  - o Some consider this measure unfair as favouring the access of some people.
  - o Others consider it useless, at least regarding the access of elderly people to shops since they did not use the slot time and went shopping beyond the scheduled time, mixing up with other categories of people, not using masks, etc.
  - o Others consider the measure as an opportunity created for vulnerable people, quick access and less bureaucracy.
- **Poor communication strategies.** TV is the main source of information for most of people in Bulgaria. Therefore, authorities should organise information campaign that monitor the quality and appropriateness of information in order to avoid spreading chaos and fear among people.
- **Politicization of crisis/situation.** Decisions were not taken based on what is right, but based on what would serve political purposes, especially shortly before the elections.
- **The pandemic has raised up many issues on many levels** e.g. citizens and institutions, citizens and state, people to people.
- **Public communication strategies adopted by the media** spread fear and stress among people. *The Astra Zeneca case was purely an economic war lead by media.”*

**Economy**

- No support for employees and businesses affected, especially those working in tourism.
- No campaign strategies to promote the tourism in Bulgaria. Many Bulgarians prefer to go on holidays abroad, which further affected the tourism sector. This also had negative health effects, e.g. Bulgarian tourists going on vacation to Greece queue at the border crossing points and create the conditions for further infection.
- Preferential financial support provided by authorities directed toward to some branches ignoring the others e.g. *“The only ones who received support were medical professionals.”*

**Education**

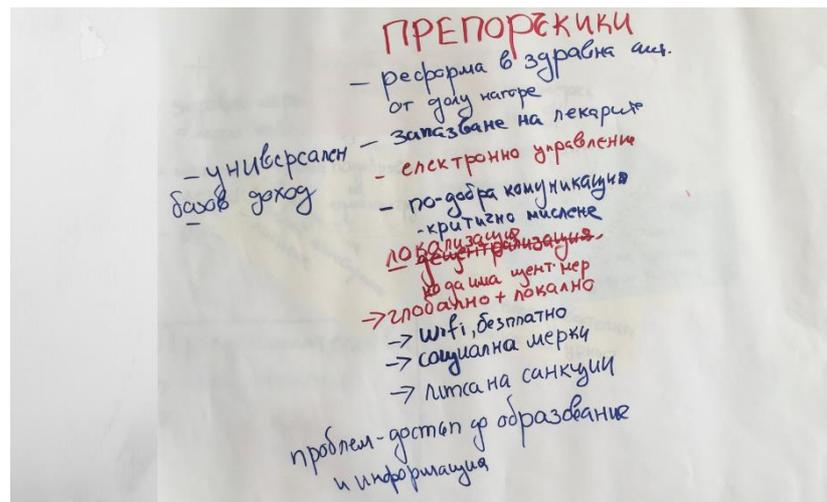
- Schools should not have been closed.
- Lack of devices for online education. Teachers and principals were left alone to decide on the organization of online classes. Sometimes there were not enough laptops and computers for children to attend the online classes. Therefore, teachers and the school decided to use their budget to purchase a part of devices.
- Children are confronted with psychological issues due to isolation. Students who need to pass exams felt very stressed. Sometimes they attended eight hours online classes, and no psychological support was available.

**Healthcare**

- The lack of health care system experts and medical facilities were a challenge in Bulgaria. Therefore, people were scared to go to the hospital.
- Participants have stressed a lack of psychological support. According to some, the government provided on-hour psychological consultation covered by the health insurance. However, this has been considered insufficient and less publicly promoted.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Some participants experienced the vaccination campaign as being strict so that people could not decide the type of the vaccine. On the other hand, the medical staff did not encourage people to take the vaccine but rather hinder people from getting vaccinated.</li></ul> <p><b>Culture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Participants criticised the decision taken by authorities in regard to closing parks and cultural venues.</li></ul>
<b>Suggestions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- National information campaign.</li><li>- Incentivize medical professionals to go to work.</li><li>- More unified/ centralized decisions from the authorities.</li></ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<p><b>Social</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b>Isolation measures</b> were inconsistent and should be better monitored since not everybody is aware of the self-protection and protection of others. Raising awareness of responsibility campaigns should be promoted by the authorities in this regard.</li></ul> <p><b>Healthcare</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Scarcity of medical professionals that are willing to work out of fear.</li><li>- Lack of knowledge about the virus.</li><li>- Vaccines – the majority of citizens are still not convinced about the safety of the vaccines. A personal choice to make, which is challenging.</li><li>- Not enough volunteers in medical facilities when hospitals were understaffed.</li><li>- People fear going to the hospital if they need to due to Covid-19.</li></ul>

**Round 3. Q3: In a future wave pandemic, what would be your recommendations to the government? If you were in charge, what would you do?**





The main discussion points for the Q3 for each of the four categories are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Discussion points emerged from the Round 3 of the democracy lab

Suggestions	General
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Authorities should adopt more cohesive measures based on the experience and expertise of medical staff, cooperation, and communication among different authorities and make use of the best practices and experience.</li> <li>- The authorities must envisage legislation for crisis situations to better coordinate and distribute responsibilities among different authorities. Longer-term planning of the economic and social sectors must be considered.</li> <li>- Better coordination of support strategies adapted to different sectors in order to encourage shared vision, better focus, and straightforward protocol for each sector. The educational sector was, for instance, more in focus to the detriment of the other sectors.</li> <li>- <b>Tighter measures and implementation rules, a measure that has not been shared by all participants</b> – compared to other countries, authorities imposed very light measures.</li> <li>- <b>Prioritization</b> of measures in the favour of chaotic and constant changing.</li> <li>- The distribution of responsibilities among different authorities.</li> <li>- <b>Decentralization</b> of 1) sectors, and 2) levels (i.e. local level to have more freedom in deciding on local anti-Covid measures). <b>Envisaging strategic plans for the distribution of information to the public and preventive measures for a future pandemic. The distribution of information should be considered based on the impact created in different sectors and domains</b>, such as people’s mental health (avoid spreading panic). Information should <b>motivate the public</b> to take <b>action and responsibility</b> instead of frightening them with scary information and statistics.</li> <li>- <b>Create sustainable policy on preventive measures.</b></li> <li>- <b>The volunteering programmes should be encouraged by the authorities and stipulated into the law.</b></li> <li>- <b>Provision of universal free internet</b> to enable access to education.</li> <li>- Health experts who share information to the wider public should <b>not be affiliated to any party</b>.</li> <li>- Some participants suggested <b>full digitalization</b>, meaning all levels – administration, invoicing, education, meetings, voting etc. (the Estonian example)</li> <li>- Better communication strategies for public information and critical thinking programmes.</li> </ul> <p><b>Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Re-consider the open-school hours vs. closed schools or provide a hybrid solution</b> – more in-person classes and less online. Rotation of students in schools might be one of the solutions.</li> <li>- Better planning of the online classes to reduce the amount of time invested by children in front of the computer for online classes (e.g., students’ rotation). The France strategies might be taken as a model.</li> <li>- Educational campaign about the virus and vaccine must be introduced in schools.</li> </ul> <p><b>Economy and social</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Long-term planning</b> of measures for the economic, social, and tourism sectors, even though long-term planning must be challenging to be envisaged in advance. The participants have suggested an open application format for financial support and favour a temporary opening application. One of the examples suggested by participants is that people who have lost their jobs due to covid and are unable to find another job within one month create financial support starting with month two.</li> <li>- <b>Authorities transparency</b> regarding the criteria of selection regarding the distribution of financial support.</li> <li>- <b>Inter-generation support programme</b> that encourage young generation to get involved in support programmes and activities for older generation.</li> </ul>



#### Healthcare and social

- **Consider implementation of support programme for mental health** e.g. psychological support financed by the government.
- **Educational programmes for public provided by psychologists** where to give more information about the side effect and impact of the virus. The effect might be more visible in ten years after the crisis, according to some participants.
- Health reform is needed, some argue for **universal healthcare**.
- Education about the virus and vaccination for Roma minorities.
- Not closing parks but rather **encouraging people to spend more time outside having fresh air and doing exercise** (preventive measures for mental health).
- **More holistic measures** and plans supporting and **incentivizing medical professionals**, the health sector and volunteering.
- **Involvement of expertise and medical professionals** such as microbiologists, virologists etc.
- **Preventive measures for people exposed to the risk of suicide.**

#### Culture

- **Art therapy.**
- Keep the art and physical education as an option of the online education. **More attention to cultural centres, libraries, museums** – to not close these down but think of appropriate measures to keep them open and safe.
- Digitalization of cultural branch.



## 4. Participants' Feedback

### 4.1 Participants' Feedback

The participants acknowledged the engagement in the Local Democracy Lab as first opportunity created for sharing their opinion and ideas about what should be improved. Furthermore, they were enthusiastic/delighted that their ideas and insights would be considered part of the research and policy that will be shared with the broader public and policymakers. The format of the in-person event was very much appreciated.

The overall participants' evaluation regarding the response to the covid pandemic was rather critical; however, they appreciated the positive impact of measures in slowing down the speed of life. Moreover, the local democracy lab has created a proper framework for reflection about Bulgaria's situation compared to the situation in other countries, and it raises an appreciative perspective on how the crisis has been handled at the local level. The participants had the opportunity to share some recommendations including both general and particular measures that might be considered by authorities. However, participants highlighted a possible strategy that might be considered at the European level: **the pan-European plan** including the measures have been so far envisaged (i.e. joint EU measures, availability of vaccines, etc.) but also how measures might be foresight in the future and to implement a recovery plan (NGEU<sup>2</sup>).

Quotes taken from participants' feedback forms include:

- *'The opportunity to share and hear diverse points of view. A tribune of citizen's opinion on important contemporary topics.'*
- *'I like that I have been heard and that my opinion is important to somebody.'*
- *'The opportunity to discuss concrete topics and specific goals and solutions. I like the open format and the informal feeling, tolerance, solidarity towards others opinions. A setting where we can agree to disagree.'*
- *'Hope and positivism.'*
- *'The opportunity to find out that more and more young people have an opinion on contemporary topics and are inclined to share it.'*

### 4.2. Learning from Event

The participants appreciated the mixed-group format proposed by the democracy lab. In this context, they had the opportunity to be actively involved in the discussion and share similar or different insights. However, the facilitation team should pay attention to the strategy used for enabling the contribution of each participant and diminishing the few dominant participants.

The participants' insights and opinions were very diverse and thorough, tackling the main issues encountered in different sectors as a consequence of the covid pandemic and the adopted measures. Furthermore, the participants had knowledge about the overall situation both at the national and international levels. They have highlighted similar issues faced by people in different Bulgarian' regions. Overall, people followed the measures adopted by the central government. However, the way the measures were implemented differs from one region to another or even in different contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> Next Generation Europe



The rounds questions that driven the participants' discussion should be formulated and distributed differently for the Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria since participants almost answered all three questions in the first round. Therefore, the suggestion is to formulate a general question about the participants' opinion on trust/distrust in the authorities, continue by asking how the pandemic should be handled from their perspective, and close by what should be done differently.

**Your Priorities platform** created for participants' deliberation before and after the in-person event has not been used by participants, even though the participants were promoted several times by facilitators and the organization team. One possible explanation might be that *people in Bulgaria are not familiar with such platforms and are not used to deliberate through an online tool.*

For the **Sofia Platform Foundation**, the most valuable lesson learned is the participant's insights, also reflected in the Bulgarian Civic Health Index 2021 that highlights the significant contribution of people of different ages to political debate, like the opportunity of sharing opinions in the PaCE democracy lab. According to the Index and the participants' view, *people would like to be consulted and be listened to.* The experience of the PaCE democracy lab in Bulgaria revealed that two-third of participants did not get the chance to participate in such a debate as the one proposed by the PaCE project.

The overall outcomes of the PaCE Local Democracy Lab in Bulgaria encourage the **Sofia Platform Foundation** and our team to consider this kind of active participation of citizens and create other events for enabling people to share their opinions, concerns, insights.