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OpenEU Democracy Festival 2026

Tentative Topic Tracks — Call for Proposals

October 23–25, 2026 · Online · 10 European Universities · 200+ Participants

The OpenEU Democracy Festival is a student-led, online festival exploring democracy not as an institution, but as a human practice — lived, debated, designed, and reimaged every day. We are looking for speakers, researchers, practitioners, and storytellers who can bring fresh, inspiring perspectives to one our Festival. We have created thematic tracks to inspire you. All proposals should be non-partisan, accessible to diverse audiences, and aligned with EU core values of human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, and human rights.

The Festival Experience

The OpenEU Democracy Festival is not a conference. There are no long lecture sessions, no rows of passive listeners staring at slide decks, and no panels where five experts talk at you for an hour while the clock ticks down. This is something different — and something better.

Imagine a space where a researcher presenting a decade of work on democratic participation is interrupted — warmly, deliberately — by the host, because fifty people in the chat just raised the same urgent question and the conversation needs to go there right now. Imagine a speaker who starts not with a PowerPoint but with a story, a provocation, or a question they genuinely do not know the answer to. Imagine an audience that is not waiting for its turn to clap but is actively shaping what happens next — voting on directions, dropping ideas into a shared canvas, jumping into the conversation from anywhere in Europe.

The format draws inspiration from the best of TED — the short, sharp, passionate talk that makes you see something familiar in a completely new way — and combines it with the energy and spontaneity of a live talk show, where the presenter is not a neutral moderator but a genuine interlocutor: curious, prepared, willing to push back, and deeply committed to making the exchange as alive as possible. Our hosts are not there to



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introduce speakers and step aside. They are there to challenge, to connect dots across sessions, to bring the audience into the room, and to make sure that every voice — on screen or in the chat — has a real chance to shape the conversation.

This is a festival about democracy, so it tries to be democratic in every sense of the word. The people watching are not an audience — they are participants. The experts on screen are not authorities — they are contributors to a conversation that belongs to everyone in the room. And the room, stretched across ten countries and dozens of disciplines, is as rich and complicated and full of disagreement as democracy itself.

Come ready to think. Come ready to talk back. Come ready to be surprised.

Track 1 — The Democratic Self

"How do we become democratic citizens — from the inside out?"

Democracy is not only something that happens in parliaments, courtrooms, or polling stations. It begins in the way we listen to someone we disagree with, the way we show up for a community we belong to, and the way we care — for ourselves and for others. This track starts from the inside out, exploring the psychological, philosophical, and deeply personal dimensions of democratic life.

We are interested in what it actually takes — emotionally, cognitively, and physically — to participate in democracy. That means taking seriously the barriers that prevent people from having a voice: chronic illness, neurodivergence, mental health, ableism, and the pace of democratic processes that often excludes those who cannot keep up. It also means examining the philosophical foundations of democracy itself — the hard questions about truth, tolerance, legitimacy, and disagreement that underpin everything else.

This track welcomes contributions that challenge us to think about democratic participation not as a given, but as a practice that needs to be nurtured, made accessible, and continuously reimaged.



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Example topics:

- Democratic Participation as a Skill, not just a legal right
- The Psychology of Citizenship: conflict transformation and listening
- Inner Development Goals (IDGs) for democratic participation
- Democratic Dialogue: Thinking, Listening & Disagreeing Well
- Mental Health Days as Democratic Acts: care as a right, not a luxury
- Long COVID/MECFS & Democratic Participation: chronic illness as a barrier to voice
- The Right to Rest as a Democratic Right
- Who Gets to Decide What's Normal? Neurodiversity, autism, ADHD & democratic norms
- Mad Pride: When Psychiatric Survivors Organize
- Care Is Political, Not Personal: disability, care work & democratic structures
- Ableism in Democratic Spaces: recognizing and dismantling barriers
- Crip Time: When Democracy Moves Too Fast
- Does Truth Matter for Democracy? Post-truth politics & philosophical foundations
- Democracy Is Slow. Authoritarians Get Shit Done. So What? Efficiency vs. legitimacy
- What Do We Owe to People Who Hate Democracy? The tolerance paradox
- The Trolley Problem Is About Democracy: philosophical foundations of democratic choice
- Can Democracy Survive Stupidity? The epistocracy debate

Track 2 — Deep Democracy, Organizations & DEI

"What does real democratic practice look like inside teams, companies, and institutions?"

Most conversations about democracy focus on the state — on elections, constitutions, and political rights. But democracy does not stop at the door of the office, the university, or the community group. This track asks what it looks like to practice democracy in the spaces where most of us actually spend our lives: in organizations, teams, workplaces, and collaborative structures of every kind.



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Drawing on research into deep democracy, holacracy, sociocracy, and participatory management, this track explores both the promise and the limitations of democratic models when applied to real organizational life. It asks what happens when a small group still holds all the power despite a democratic framework. It asks how diversity, equity, and inclusion intersect with democratic decision-making — and whether truly democratic structures look different when the people in the room are neurodivergent, multiply marginalized, or working under structural constraints that mainstream democratic theory rarely accounts for.

This track is particularly interested in contributions that bridge theory and practice — from researchers who study these models scientifically to practitioners who have implemented them, struggled with them, or transformed them in unexpected ways.

Example topics:

- Deep Democracy: theory, practice, and lived experience
- Democracy as a Concept: what it actually means beyond voting
- Holacracy, Sociocracy & Beyond: scientific research on applying democracy in organizations
- When a Small Group Still Holds All the Power: the limits of holacracy in practice
- Workplace Democracy & Participatory Management
- Democracy Within Companies: from boardrooms to self-managed teams
- Democracy and DEI: how inclusion shapes and is shaped by democratic structures
- Deep Democracy in Neurodivergent Teams: do democratic structures help or harm?
- How Neurodivergent Voices Change Democratic Outcomes in Organizations
- The 4-Day Workweek: it's about power, not productivity
- From Consumers to Citizens: stewardship of shared resources
- Fast Fashion Democracy: who decides what gets made and worn?
- Your Rent Keeps Going Up and You Can't Vote About It: housing as democratic failure
- Nothing About Us Without Us: disability rights as organizational principle
- Accessible Democracy: more than just ramps



Track 3 — Democracy in Governance, Health & Society

"Who has power, who is left out, and how do we rebuild trust?"

Democracies are only as strong as the institutions that uphold them — and right now, trust in those institutions is under strain across Europe and beyond. This track examines how democratic values play out, and are contested, across the legal, political, health, and civic structures that shape everyday life. It asks how we hold power accountable, how we protect rights when they are under threat, and how we ensure that every person — regardless of their body, background, or beliefs — has a genuine and equal stake in collective decisions.

Health is a democratic issue. Housing is a democratic issue. Reproductive rights, end-of-life choices, and vaccine policy are all arenas where individual autonomy and collective responsibility collide — and where democratic societies are forced to draw difficult lines. This track welcomes contributions that bring these lived tensions into the open, that examine where democratic institutions are failing the people they are meant to serve, and that offer concrete visions for rebuilding legitimacy, resilience, and accountability.

Example topics:

- Trust, Accountability & Democratic Transparency
- Ethics and Restorative Justice
- Is It Democratic to Ban Anti-Democratic Parties? Germany's defensive democracy
- Your Rights End Where Mine Begin. But Where Is That Line? Freedom vs. harm
- Societal Resilience & Citizens' Engagement: European Democracy Shield
- Civil Dialogue as Prerequisite for Democratic Legitimacy
- My Body, Their Vote: reproductive rights and democratic backlash
- Why Can't We Die on Our Own Terms? Euthanasia, autonomy & democratic taboos
- Vaccine Mandates: where does your freedom end and mine begin?
- Why Do Anti-Vaxxers Exist in the Age of Google? Information vs. trust
- Your Doctor Googled Your Symptoms: medical knowledge democratization
- Rural vs. Urban: the democratic divide in voice and power
- Urban Democracy: who decides your city's future?
- Borders, Walls & Democratic Belonging: geographic mobility and citizenship



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- Climate Migration Is Already Here: geographic displacement & democratic rights
- Should Trees Have Voting Rights? Legal personhood for nature

Track 4 — Digital Democracy, Technology & Futures

"Who controls the tools and systems that shape our collective future?"

The digital revolution has transformed how citizens participate in democracy — and not always for the better. Disinformation spreads faster than truth. Algorithms shape public opinion without democratic oversight. Governments and corporations make decisions about technology that affect millions without meaningful public input. And yet, technology also offers extraordinary new possibilities: open-source platforms that enable genuine citizen participation, AI tools that can scale deliberation, and digital infrastructures that can make democracy more accessible, more transparent, and more responsive than ever before.

This track explores both the threats and the opportunities. It asks who gets to build the digital future and under what democratic conditions. It looks at pioneering experiments from around the world — from Estonia's digital state to Taiwan's civic technology movement to Barcelona's open-source democracy platform — and asks what Europe can learn and lead. It also zooms out to the longer horizon: how do we design democratic systems for the challenges of the coming decades? How do we represent future generations in today's decisions? And how do we build institutions capable of circular, systemic, and anticipatory thinking at the scale our crises demand?

Example topics:

- AI in Citizens' Assemblies: scaling democratic quality and institutional capacity
- Augmented Deliberation: AI to cluster citizen viewpoints in real-time
- AI as Tool for Representation, Not Substitute
- Navigating Disinformation: maintaining agency in a digital world
- Taiwan's Digital Democracy Experiment
- Estonia's E-Residency: Can You Be a Digital Citizen?



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- Technological Sovereignty: building independent democratic digital infrastructure
- Europe as Digital Colony? Resisting tech dependency
- The Right to Repair as Radical Democracy
- Smart Contracts & Democratic Ownership at the local level
- Why Voting Machines Can't Be Trusted
- Your City Council Meetings Are on YouTube. Nobody Watches: democratic infrastructure design
- Digital Nomads Are Rewriting Citizenship: place-independent democracy
- Long-termism & Intergenerational Justice: Guardians for Future Generations
- Anticipatory Governance: how policy professionals navigate global change
- Futures Literacy: using the future to change what we do in the present
- How Can AI Help Current Citizens Negotiate Fairly with Future Generations?
- Circular Economy Requires Circular Institutions
- Democracy as Infrastructure: radical civic ownership of shared resources
- Citizen Science: crowdsourced truth-telling against institutional failure
- Open Science vs. Publish or Perish: democratizing academic knowledge
- Peer Review Is Broken. Can We Crowdfund Scientific Truth?
- The Math That Proves Voting Systems Are Broken: Arrow's Impossibility Theorem
- Your Phone's Battery Is Mining Violence: rare earth minerals & democratic supply chains
- Flat Earthers Aren't Stupid, They're Democratic: why conspiracy theories thrive

Track 5 — Democracy in Education & Knowledge

"Who gets to learn, teach, and decide what counts as knowledge?"

Education is one of the most powerful forces in any democracy — and one of the most contested. Who gets access to it, who is excluded from it, what gets taught inside it, and who decides all of the above are fundamentally democratic questions. This track explores the relationship between democracy and knowledge in its broadest sense: from the structure of universities and the governance of academic institutions to the way knowledge itself is produced, validated, distributed, and sometimes gatekept.



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We are interested in the tensions that run through education systems today: between academic freedom and student safety, between open access and institutional prestige, between the democratization of knowledge through technology and the deep inequalities that still determine who gets to participate. We are also interested in the role that students themselves play — not just as recipients of education, but as democratic actors within their institutions, their alliances, and their communities. The OpenEU Student Council is itself an example of students exercising democratic voice at a European level, and this track welcomes proposals that reflect on what that means and what it could become.

Example topics:

- Student Voice in University Governance: students as democratic actors in their institutions
- OpenEU and the Democratization of Higher Education in Europe: students in governing boards and alliance decisions
- The TikTok University: When Students Teach Each Other — peer-to-peer learning as democratic education
- Teaching Democracy or Teaching Democratically? Is pedagogy democratic?
- Free Education as a Democratic Right: tuition, debt & access to knowledge
- Decolonizing the Curriculum: whose knowledge gets taught?
- The Hidden Curriculum: what schools really teach about authority and power
- Grade Inflation or Democratic Education? Assessment as power structure
- Trigger Warnings or Academic Freedom? Safety vs. intellectual challenge
- The University Strike: when students and staff unite — collective action in education
- Open Educational Resources: Wikipedia for Everything? Democratizing academic materials
- Disabled Students Taught Us About Flexible Learning: pandemic lessons and universal design
- The OpenEU Micro-Degree on European Values and Democracy: democratizing higher education across Europe

Track 6 — Language, Culture, History & Democratic Expression



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"How does culture — and the language we speak — shape, challenge, and inspire democracy?"

Democracy does not only live in institutions and laws — it lives in stories, songs, paintings, protests, and the languages we use to speak to one another. This track explores the cultural, artistic, linguistic, and historical dimensions of democratic life, starting from a conviction that how we communicate is inseparable from whether we can participate equally.

Language is a democratic issue. When people cannot access public life in their own language, they are effectively excluded from democracy — no matter what the law says. Multilingualism and language diversity are not just facts of European life; they are active expressions of democratic values and protecting them requires deliberate effort. This track explores what it means to build truly multilingual democratic spaces, and what is lost when we fail to do so.

Beyond language, this track celebrates the role of art, music, humor, and culture in democratic life. From street art and protest poetry to Eurovision and viral memes, culture has always been a space where democratic ideas are tested, challenged, and reimagined. History, too, has much to teach us: about the democratic experiments that failed and why, about the rights that were won through struggle and can be lost again, and about the practices and innovations that previous generations discovered and we have since forgotten. This track welcomes contributions that bring any of these threads to life — with creativity, rigor, and a genuine love for the messy, beautiful, contested project of living together.

Example topics:

- Why Languages Matter in Democracy: how language barriers prevent full democratic participation
- Language Diversity and Multilingualism as a Result and Requirement of Democracy
- Language as a Tool for Equal Participation: translation, interpretation & plain language movements
- Equality Through Language Access: reducing barriers and empowering minority languages



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- Plain Language Movements and Accessibility in Democratic Communication
- Social Media Language Trends and Youth Democratic Expression
- Media, Arts & Expression: theatre, poetry, and social media as platforms for public voice
- Music Blending Cultures to Reflect Shared Democratic Values
- Art as Political Risk: from protest murals to dissident performance
- Banksy vs. Advertising: who owns public space?
- Eurovision's Secret Democratic Power: music and European identity
- Fandom as Political Organizing: how pop culture shapes participation
- Graffiti Is a Vote: why cities criminalize visual dissent
- Your Spotify Wrapped Is Propaganda: cultural algorithms and identity
- Bernie's Mittens Won the Internet: meme art and political power
- Failed Democracies: lessons from Weimar, Ancient Rome & beyond
- Forgotten Democratic Innovations: sortition, citizen juries & lost practices
- How Voting Rights Were Won (and Lost, and Won Again)
- The Museum Gave Back the Stolen Artifacts. Now What? Repatriation & historical justice
- Your Grandchildren's Lawyer: intergenerational democracy lessons from history
- Climate Scientists Are Gluing Themselves to Roads: when expertise meets activism

Selection criteria: Related to theme · Inspiring · Non-partisan · Accessible to a broad audience · Innovative · Aligned with EU values

Submission deadline: May 30, 2026

Link for submission: <https://forms.gle/rr67QWPpuWdj3WM9A>

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