

# European Capital of Democracy 2026

## Dimensions of Democracy

Democracy, from our point of view, means much more than going to the polls. Beyond representative democracy, participatory and deliberative democracy provides the basis for inclusive political decision-making, based on pluralism and diversity within a society. Democracy touches almost every aspect of our existence and is ever-changing, as it must be to thrive. Against the background of European values and practices, it is up to political vision and innovation to reshape the way we live together. The Cities' projects will make a substantial contribution in areas of crucial importance to democracy addressed in this Call. Below we set out the main characteristics of *Community*, *Empowerment*, *Participation*, *Sustainability* and *Technology* projects.

### COMMUNITY

Community projects contribute to remarkable services, protecting the City's inhabitants from harm by future-oriented policies and long-term planning. Political practice shows a strong record of anti-discrimination measures and policies fostering inclusion of marginalised groups. The projects promote **cultural diversity and social cohesion** in the best interest of all inhabitants, regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual or religious orientation and geographic location.

**Protecting local democracy** is a priority, as the City strives to uphold democratic self-governance vis-à-vis regional, national, and European authorities. As a result, the projects ensure the best possible provision for its population's needs and include concrete steps to reinforce individual and collective rights at the local level.

The projects help keeping the ever-changing **basic needs and public services** well in sync, supporting the City in taking care of all inhabitants with a focus on social inclusion, building sustainable communities and neighbourhoods and enabling e.g. art projects as a bridge to understanding, tolerance and diversity.

### EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment projects enable the City to establish and maintain strong partnerships with civil society, academia and other relevant stakeholders. To join the Europe-wide discourse on democracy, the City invites civil society members to participate in discussions on relevant topics to co-create, co-design and co-decide. To strengthen democracy, the city provides **education and training** as well as capacity building for all inhabitants, civil servants, elected representatives, and civil society organisations. A special emphasis is placed on the civic education of young people, newly arrived inhabitants, and potentially marginalised or excluded communities.

Free and fair **media and communication** are a priority. As a means of combating disinformation and political pressure, the City offers objective communication and information tools. It supports independent media of all kinds to operate at the local level.

Physical and digital spaces exist within the projects, where individuals and organisations can meet in public and engage in political activity -freely and safely and without cost. These spaces may take any form, from abandoned buildings to libraries, schools, parks, squares, streets, or community centres. Since many of these places cannot be accessed during pandemics, projects might help the City find innovative solutions to transfer **spaces for democracy** into the digital sphere.

## PARTICIPATION

Participation projects provide the City's inhabitants with access to a range of tools to become an active part in decision-making processes. They strive to improve these tools in an innovative and inclusive way, and are committed to promoting and fostering **civic engagement** by all inhabitants with special emphasis on potentially marginalised or excluded parts of the community. The projects are adopting strategies for encouraging all members of the community – individuals, civil society organisations, artists and businesses alike – to take an active part in policy-making. In order to ensure equal access, elected officials, staff or volunteers provide support for people who are seeking information, need assistance, or wish to engage on civic issues.

Empowering its inhabitants and giving them the opportunity to become involved in **participation and decision-making**, including collaboration and agenda-setting as well, is standard procedure in participation projects, implementing measures and programmes to foster institutionalised and non-institutionalised participatory tools.

The projects promote the formation of **partnerships** in order to benefit from the best practices and experiences of others. These partnerships may involve exchange programmes for staff, knowledge exchange, and strategies for outreach and evaluation, ideally including knowledge transfer to and from rural and peripheral municipalities.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability projects aim to foster an international discourse, supporting citizens and other Cities in ensuring that radical climate transformation is a democratic, and not just a technocratic process. A high-level exchange of best practices between Cities is used to facilitate the implementation of low-carbon policies by means of participatory processes and to showcase front-runners in the field of **climate and ecology**. The aim of sustainability projects is a just transition based on democratic processes to tackle the climate crisis and to provide for a secure and healthy environment for all to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To protect its inhabitants in extraordinary situations, the projects contribute to the City's **crisis management**. That guarantees the capacities necessary to quickly react to emerging crises in order to minimise the damage from - among others - natural disasters, health issues or violence and extremism.

## TECHNOLOGY

Rapidly developing technology will profoundly shape the future of democracy. The opportunities presented by digitisation are infinite and so are the challenges it poses. Technology is therefore critical in securing and improving deliberative and participatory democracy. In that sense, technology projects are evaluating the City's implementation of **democratic innovations** with respect to what is already in place and what can be improved. The goal of these innovations is to enlarge the participation toolbox and to reform democracy through practices that place inhabitants at the centre of politics and governance in new ways. This includes **digital dialogue** and mini-publics as well as participatory and gender budgeting.

Technology projects seek new ways to involve all members and sections of its community, reaching out to the community to provide information and support. They either already provide barrier-free access to digital ways of participation or are committed to a long-term strategy for implementing inclusive digital democratic services at the local level. **Open governance and evaluation** guarantee transparency and accountability. In addition to routine audits, the projects provide opportunities for their residents to learn about, and comment on, the functioning of municipal services.