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The CitizenUnited Project:
Empowering Inclusive Citizenship Engagement
in Digital Public Governance
in Higher Education

WP2: Comprehensive Need
Assessment Report

Project Partners



UNIVERSITÀ
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The CitizenUnited Project: Empowering Inclusive Citizenship Engagement in Digital Public Governance in Higher Education

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Lead Author: Evelina Staykova, New Bulgarian University

with contributions from I. Otova, V. Ninova, I. Nachev, and A. Ilchev; G. Digkoglou and D. Kolovos; G. M. Racca, S. Ponzio, and M. Demichelis; and E. Butkeviciene.



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Executive Summary

This Executive Summary opens the WP2 National Needs Assessment by consolidating the comparative evidence base of the CitizenUnited Project across its four partner countries - Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania - into a single diagnostic front-end. Two layers structure the section that follows: a Headline Indicators block of seven numbered findings that condense the convergent quantitative and qualitative signals from the four national reports, and a Prioritisation Map that anchors each indicator one-to-one to a specific item in the Needs and Recommendations list developed in the text below and grounded in the priority-core cluster of awareness, trust, feedback, and accessibility. Read together, they communicate the report's central finding on the first page - that barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education are predominantly institutional, informational, and motivational rather than technological - and provide a traceable bridge from diagnosis to the CitizenUnited+ Platform, the Faculty Training Package, the Student MOOC, and the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet, into which the recommendations are subsequently operationalised.

Headline Indicators

The following seven indicators consolidate the key quantitative and categorical findings from the four national reports at the beginning of the document, so that the reader can obtain an aggregated overview on the first page, rather than reconstructing it from the Methodological Framework, Quantitative Data Analysis, Taxonomy of Barriers, and Qualitative Focus Group Findings:

- 1. Sample reach. The four national reports cover a total of 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus group participants with**



experience of disability, long-term unemployment, or socio-economic marginalisation - exceeding the project's minimum targets.

- 2. Faculty–student cognitive gap. Faculty are consistently more familiar with e-participation tools than students across the four countries; the disparity is most pronounced in Lithuania - 69.3% faculty versus 42.5% students with high familiarity and 30.0% versus 7.7% with low familiarity.**
- 3. Information and awareness as a dominant barrier cluster. In Bulgaria, lack of information is the most frequently reported obstacle among all respondent groups; in Greece, 58% of students, and Italy and Lithuania confirm the same hierarchy.**
- 4. Trust, feedback, and impact as a second main barrier cluster. In Bulgaria, about 30% of faculty, 28% of students, and 28.1% of stakeholders report weak impact or low institutional trust; in Greece, 37.5% of students perceive the impact as "weak or none," and in Lithuania, lack of feedback is the second most significant obstacle.**
- 5. Accessibility is a systemic failure. In Bulgaria, 25–33% of faculty report accessibility gaps, and 36.3% + 22.5% of students give negative inclusivity ratings; in Lithuania, sign-language interpretation and captioning are missing for the deaf community; in Greece and Italy, compatibility with assistive technologies and flexible timing are missing.**
- 6. Consultation fatigue and lack of visible follow-up. The Bulgarian focus group documents categorical consultation fatigue and rejection of mobile administrative services as "completely unnecessary," which makes the ≤ 60 -day operational contract for publishing follow-up actions a key requirement.**
- 7. Country-specific financial and institutional barriers. In Italy, SPID authentication costs generate a new political digital divide for students and low-income users; in**



Lithuania, sign-language and captioning are missing for deaf users; in Bulgaria, individuals without access to electoral lists give up voting even with in-person voting.

Prioritisation Map

The seven headline indicators above are anchored, one-to-one, to specific items in the Needs and Recommendations list below, so that an Executive Summary reader can trace each diagnostic finding to a concrete operational delivery vehicle without re-reading the Synthesis of Educational Needs. Where an indicator touches several recommendations, the mapping records the single most direct link; the full cross-mapping is preserved in the three-tier table inserted in the section Needs and Recommendations.

Headline Indicator	Anchored Recommendation
1 - Sample reach. Aggregate 154 faculty, 245 students, 164 stakeholders, and 20 focus-group participants with lived experience of disability, long-term unemployment, or socio-economic marginalisation - exceeding the project's minimum targets.	6 - Integrate Co-design with Marginalised Communities
2 - Faculty–student cognitive gap. Sharpest in Lithuania (69.3% of faculty vs 42.5% of students at high familiarity; 30.0% of students vs 7.7% of faculty at low familiarity); consistent faculty-leaning pattern across Bulgaria, Greece, Italy.	8 - Embed Critical Digital and Civic Literacy

3 - Information/awareness as dominant barrier. ~60% of Bulgarian faculty, 50% of students, 73.7% of stakeholders; 58% of Greek students; fragmented communication in Italy; most significant obstacle in Lithuania.	5 - Adopt Multi-Channel and Hybrid Communication
4 - Trust, feedback, weak impact as second cluster. ~30% of Bulgarian faculty, 28% of students, 28.1% of stakeholders report weak impact / low institutional trust; 37.5% of Greek students perceive impact as "little or none"; lack of feedback is the second most important obstacle in Lithuania.	4 - Institutionalise Visible Follow-up and Close-the-Loop Reporting
5 - Accessibility as systemic gap. Bulgarian faculties report 25–33% accessibility gaps (missing captions/transcripts, screen-reader incompatibility); 36.3% + 22.5% of students rate existing platforms "to some extent" / "no" inclusive; sign-language and captioning absent for the Lithuanian deaf community; assistive-tech compatibility and flexible timing absent in Greece and Italy.	3 - Implement Accessible-by-Design Platforms
6 - Consultation fatigue and lack of follow-up. Bulgarian focus group documents categorical rejection of mobile-only administrative services as „completely unnecessary" and palpable consultation fatigue, making the ≤ 60-day publication contract a decisive operational threshold.	4 - Institutionalise Visible Follow-up and Close-the-Loop Reporting
7 - Country-specific financial and institutional barriers. SPID authentication costs in Italy generate a new digital divide; sign-language provision absent for the Lithuanian deaf community; voting-roster access difficulties in Bulgaria cause abstention even at in-person polling stations.	9 - Remove Financial Barriers to Authentication

Source: the author

Taken together, indicators 3, 4, 5, and 6 map onto the priority core (Recommendations 4 and 5 alongside 3); indicator 2 maps onto the structural support tier through Recommendation 8; indicator 1 grounds Recommendation 6 in the structural-support



tier; and indicator 7 anchors Recommendation 9 in the systemic levers tier. The two-row structure of the report's diagnostic layer - the seven headline indicators above and the four priority criteria elaborated in subsection Synthesis of Educational Needs - is therefore internally consistent with the three-tier table in the section Needs and Recommendations: each priority-core recommendation is traceable upward to at least one numbered Headline Indicator, and each Headline Indicator resolves downward to a concrete platform, training, or policy-booklet instrument.

This National Needs Assessment Report consolidates the WP2 evidence base of the CitizenUnited Project across four partner countries - Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania - to map the conditions under which higher education institutions can enable inclusive citizenship engagement in digital public governance. The report draws on a coordinated programme of structured questionnaires administered to faculty members, students, and external stakeholders, complemented by focus group discussions with participants recruited specifically from vulnerable backgrounds. Across the four countries, the project exceeded its minimum respondent targets, reaching in aggregate 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus group participants with lived experience of disability, long-term unemployment, or socio-economic marginalisation.

The headline finding is that barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education are predominantly institutional, informational, and motivational rather than technological. Across all four national reports, respondents consistently identify a lack of awareness regarding available participation opportunities, weak feedback and accountability loops, and a perception that participation rarely translates into visible change. People with disabilities - including participants with visual impairment, hearing loss, multiple sclerosis, and mobility disability - and members of marginalised communities, such as sign-language users and Roma residents, describe compounded barriers that extend well beyond technical access to include plain-language availability, sign-language



interpretation, captioning, flexible timing, and the preservation of human mediation in hybrid community spaces.

The report translates these findings into a synthesised needs profile and a set of evidence-based recommendations that will inform the project's downstream deliverables, particularly the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet, the Faculty Training Package, the Student MOOC, and the CitizenUnited+ Platform. The cross-cutting lens of disability and marginalisation is applied throughout, in recognition that genuinely inclusive citizenship engagement in digital public governance cannot be realised without addressing structural power asymmetries in HEIs.

The prioritisation advanced below is governed by four priority criteria - strength of evidence (breadth of cross-country and cross-group convergence), severity of the barrier (the degree to which the need excludes persons with disabilities and marginalised communities), operational applicability (mapping onto a concrete CitizenUnited workpackage, tool, or instrument), and scope (whether the deficiency addressed is structural and system-wide or single-channel). These criteria, together with the methodological cautions that condition how the four-country evidence base should be read, are elaborated in full in the next parts of the analyses.



Methodological Framework

The CitizenUnited WP2 National Needs Assessment adopts a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data are collected, analysed, and triangulated at the country level before being synthesised into the present comparative report.

This section sets out the participatory methodology that underpins the report's evidence base across the four partner countries. Consistent with the analytical orientation articulated in the Executive Summary, the methodology is not designed merely to enumerate participation gaps; it is shaped to surface, alongside them, the structural conditions that produce them - institutional, informational, and motivational asymmetries embedded in higher education and its surrounding civic ecosystems - so that the report's downstream recommendations address the roots of uneven engagement rather than only its symptoms.

The quantitative strand consists of three parallel structured questionnaires targeting (i) faculty members, (ii) university students, and (iii) external stakeholders in digital governance, civic engagement, and public administration. Each partner administered the instruments to a minimum of 25 faculty members, 20 students, and 25 external stakeholders. Across the four partner countries the project exceeded these minimum respondent targets, reaching in aggregate 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus group participants. Italy collected data between April and May 2026, reaching 25 faculty members, 45 students, and 29 stakeholders, with a total of four focus group participants drawn from vulnerable backgrounds. Lithuania conducted the field phase between 8 May and 8 June 2026, reaching 26 faculty members, 40 students, 28 stakeholders, and three focus group participants from vulnerable backgrounds. Bulgaria ran an expanded protocol between March and April 2026 - with the faculty component precisely dated 11 March to 30 April 2026 and reaching 51 faculty members, 80 students, 57 stakeholders, and seven focus group

participants. Greece completed its national field phase with 52 faculty members, 80 students, 50 external stakeholders, and six focus group participants from vulnerable backgrounds, with these per-country figures reconciled to the project's four-country aggregate of 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus group participants.

The following table summarizes the reach of the needs assessment by country and stakeholder group, including comparative composition details.

Targets	Planned per partner	Bulgaria	Italy	Lithuania	Greece	Achieved
Faculty Members	150	51	25	26	52	154
Students	240	80	45	40	80	245
Stakeholders	150	57	29	28	50	164
Focus Group Participants	18	7	4	3	6^[1]	20

Source: The author

The qualitative strand consists of focus group discussions with participants explicitly recruited to reflect lived experience of disability, long-term unemployment, or socio-economic marginalisation. Greece convened two focus groups of three participants each, comprising individuals with visual impairment, hearing loss, multiple sclerosis, long-term unemployment, and mobility disability. Lithuania engaged three participants drawn from the deaf community. Italy embedded its focus groups within community-based, participatory action research conducted in the Aurora and Barriera di Torino neighbourhoods, working with hybrid third-sector organisations that combine social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions. Bulgaria convened a multi-generational group including an experienced Roma NGO activist, an older Roma resident without a smartphone, a doctoral student in political science, and active voters and young people.



Each national report followed a shared analytical protocol covering (i) respondents' familiarity with and use of e-participation tools, (ii) identification of barriers to inclusive civic participation, (iii) accessibility, trust, and inclusion considerations, (iv) discrepancy analysis between the perspectives of faculty, students, and vulnerable groups, and (v) recommendations for curricular, institutional, and policy reform. The present report compares the country-level results, identifies transferable patterns and divergent nuances, and synthesises a unified needs profile and recommendation set for the project's downstream deliverables.

Limitations

This section makes explicit the methodological constraints that shape how the four-country evidence base should be read. The WP2 National Needs Assessment - like any comparative needs assessment drawing on mixed-methods designs in heterogeneous national contexts - operates within boundaries set by sample size, sampling frame, instrument design, and the cross-sectional nature of the field phase. These boundaries do not invalidate the convergent patterns identified across the four countries, but they do condition the strength with which certain claims - particularly per-country figures and the quantitative comparison of national subsamples - can be advanced.

The most consequential constraint concerns the qualitative strand. The report's focus-group evidence rests on approximately twenty participants in total, distributed unevenly across Bulgaria (seven participants), Greece (six participants, convened in two groups of three), Italy (four participants), and Lithuania (three participants, all from the deaf community). Each partner's qualitative field phase therefore engages with very small per-country counts - a scale at which focus-group work functions as an interpretive and hypothesis-generating instrument rather than as a representative sample of the populations whose voices it carries. The qualitative evidence is correspondingly diverse: it spans multiple languages, recruitment strategies (snowball



and community-organisation referrals in Bulgaria, participatory action research in the Aurora and Barriera di Torino neighbourhoods in Italy, explicit vulnerable-background targeting in Greece, and deaf-community networks in Lithuania), and the community contexts in which participation is practised - from the multi-generational Roma neighbourhood meetings that framed the Bulgarian group to the hybrid third-sector organisations in Italy that combine social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions. The breadth of this qualitative diversity is analytically valuable - it generates the cross-cutting themes on disability and accessibility, trust as relational and institutional, the substantive rather than abstract character of marginalised engagement, and the insufficiency of top-down tool provision that recur across the report - but it also means that the focus-group findings cannot be read as a representative survey of the views of disabled or marginalised populations within or across the four partner countries, and per-country thematic emphases should be understood as contextual signals rather than generalisable prevalence estimates.

The second methodological constraint concerns the uneven national subsamples. The project's minimum respondent framework targets were 25 faculty members, 20 students, and 25 external stakeholders per partner, with a minimum of three focus-group participants from vulnerable backgrounds per partner. The four partners deployed this baseline unequally. Bulgaria ran an expanded protocol, reaching 51 faculty members, 80 students, 57 stakeholders, and 7 focus-group participants. Greece operated at a moderate-to-expanded scale, reaching 52 faculty members, 80 students, 50 stakeholders, and 6 focus-group participants. Italy and Lithuania, by contrast, ran closer to the minimum respondent target: Italy reached 25 faculty members, 45 students, 29 stakeholders, and 4 focus-group participants, while Lithuania reached 26 faculty members, 40 students, 28 stakeholders, and 3 focus-group participants. In aggregate, the four-country totals stand at 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus-group participants. This uneven distribution has two implications. First, per-country percentages - such as the



Bulgarian finding that approximately 70% of faculty describe themselves as moderately or well familiar with e-participation tools, or the Lithuanian finding that 69.3% of faculty report high familiarity compared with 42.5% of students - are computed on subsamples whose size differs markedly and therefore carry different margins of uncertainty; the larger Bulgarian student subsample (n=80) supports descriptive claims of greater precision than the smaller Lithuanian student subsample (n=40), while the smaller Italian faculty subsample (n=25) lowers the precision of distribution-based claims. Second, and more consequentially, the unequal subsamples limit direct cross-country comparability of certain quantitative findings: when one country operates at roughly twice the minimum respondent target while another operates just above it, the pairing of proportions risks attaching comparable weight to estimates of substantively different precision, and this constraint has been carried into the comparative reading offered throughout the report by treating the country reports as convergent evidence on shared barriers while reading per-country figures as country-specific rather than as benchmarked points on a common scale.

A third set of methodological constraints concerns the design of the field phase itself. The assessment is cross-sectional, capturing the state of e-participation readiness during a defined window in early-to-mid 2026 - Italy between April and May 2026, Lithuania between 8 May and 8 June 2026, Bulgaria between March and April 2026, with the faculty component precisely dated 11 March to 30 April 2026, and Greece within an analogous national field phase. There is no pre/post comparison and no control group, so causal claims about the impact of the project's downstream interventions on awareness, attitudes, or behaviour cannot be drawn from this evidence base alone and must await longitudinal work planned in subsequent workpackages. The quantitative findings are also subject to the standard limitations of self-report survey data: respondents' self-assessed familiarity with e-participation tools, perceived effectiveness of platforms, and reported engagement frequencies are filtered through social-desirability, recall, and the conceptual framing of what counts

as participation - a framing issue visible in the cross-country finding that students who use digital feedback surveys and voting platforms often do not categorise these interactions as e-participation. The qualitative evidence adds its own considerations: transcription, translation, and the cross-linguistic transfer of focus-group discussion from Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, and Lithuanian into the analytical categories used in the report are interpretive acts rather than neutral conduits, and the conceptual equivalence of terms such as "e-participation," "consultation," and "marginalised communities" across the four languages has been assumed rather than independently tested.

A further constraint concerns the sampling frame's coverage of specific populations. The Bulgarian focus-group and stakeholder evidence foregrounds the lived experience of the Roma community - including participants facing multi-generational marginalisation, persistent institutional distrust, voting-roster access difficulties at polling stations, and a categorical rejection of mobile-only administrative services by older residents - but the broader Bulgarian stakeholder sample does not, and cannot, fully capture the structural diversity of Roma experiences across regions and generations, nor does it systematically cover adjacent sub-populations such as people with intellectual disabilities, people with psychosocial disabilities, or Roma women facing compound discrimination. The Lithuanian focus-group evidence is drawn entirely from the deaf community, providing rich insight into sign-language, captioning, and visual-design requirements while not separately addressing the distinctive accessibility profiles of students with low vision or with motor disabilities; the Italian evidence gives detailed attention to community-based participatory research in the Aurora and Barriera di Torino neighbourhoods but does not extend to comparable urban peripheries in other Italian regions; and the Greek evidence foregrounds visual impairment, hearing loss, multiple sclerosis, long-term unemployment, and physical/mobility disability without separately addressing intellectual or psychosocial disability or the specific exclusion faced by refugees and migrants. The transferability



of the report's findings beyond the four partner contexts is therefore necessarily limited. The dominant barriers - informational deficits, weak feedback loops, accessibility gaps, and trust asymmetries - recur in the wider literature on digital democracy and inclusive governance, and the policy recommendations issued from the evidence base import principles that are defensible across heterogeneous HEI and civic-infrastructure contexts; but the precise magnitudes, the relative weight of country-specific barriers (SPID authentication costs in Italy, sign-language provision in Lithuania, multi-generational Roma marginalisation and voting-roster difficulties in Bulgaria, and the multi-dimensional Greek functional accessibility framing), and the operational delivery formats tested in each country should be read as country-contextual rather than as portable prescriptions.

Taken together, these limitations do not undermine the report's central finding - that barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education are predominantly institutional, informational, and motivational rather than technological - but they do argue for caution in three places: in the strength attached to per-country quantitative estimates; in the generalisability of focus-group themes beyond the participants and community contexts that generated them; and in the transfer of country-specific operational prescriptions - such as the Bulgarian four-channel communication model, the ≤ 60 -day follow-up contract, or the Lithuanian sign-language integration - to higher-education policy contexts whose institutional, linguistic, and community infrastructure differs from those of the four partner countries. The recommendations advanced in the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet, the Faculty Training Package, the Student MOOC, and the CitizenUnited+ Platform are formulated at the level of principles and operational design choices precisely because the evidence base supports transferability at that level; the validation of country-specific operational delivery in new contexts is a task for subsequent phases of the project rather than for the WP2 needs assessment on its own.



Quantitative Data Analysis

This section synthesises findings across the four partner countries to map the landscape of current digital governance integration in higher education, with particular attention to the perspectives of people with disabilities and marginalised groups.

Faculty and Student Assessment

This subsection profiles the awareness and use of e-participation tools among faculty and students in the four partner countries, alongside the institutional and curricular contexts in which these patterns develop. Following the report's analytical orientation, the assessment reads self-reported familiarity, engagement frequencies, and effectiveness judgements not only as surface participation gaps but also as signals of the structural conditions that produce them - curricular omissions, institutional incentive structures, accessibility design, plain-language availability, and the strength of feedback and accountability loops - so that the country-specific patterns reported below connect directly to the barriers and recommendations developed elsewhere in this assessment.

Across all four countries, faculty members display substantially higher conceptual familiarity with e-participation tools than students, although both groups indicate gaps that justify structured training. In Italy, faculty members' self-assessed knowledge of e-participation tools (on a 1–5 scale) ranged from 1 to 5, with the majority of responses clustered around 3–4, reflecting moderate-to-good theoretical awareness. In Lithuania, the discrepancy is sharper and quantitatively explicit: 69.3% of faculty members reported high familiarity (ratings 4–5), compared with only 42.5% of students; students were also markedly more likely to report low familiarity (30.0% versus 7.7% among faculty). In Bulgaria, faculty familiarity with e-participation tools displays a cautiously pragmatic profile: approximately 70% of respondents describe



themselves as moderately or well familiar, around 75% have engaged online petitions, discussion forums, or consultations sometimes or often, yet only about 10% use them very frequently and 15% seldom or never - a moderation that translates into the sharpest effectiveness split of the four countries, with about 40% rating existing tools effective or very effective, roughly 30% neutral, and about 30% ineffective, a cleavage that maps closely onto whether platforms are followed by visible institutional outcomes. Among Bulgarian students, awareness sits in the moderate-to-limited zone - the largest groups describing themselves as moderately (30%) or slightly familiar (28%), with only about 25% well informed and 12% very well informed - but active engagement lags well behind, illustrating a clear awareness-versus-use gap: only 18% report frequent use of digital platforms for participation in student councils, university initiatives, or civic campaigns, the largest share (37%) engages only rarely, and 15% have never used such platforms. Bulgarian stakeholders show the most decisive confidence tilt of the three groups, with a combined 54.4% rating e-participation as effective or very effective, 35.1% neutral, and 10.5% ineffective or very ineffective - set against prior familiarity with the formal concept being generally limited (54.4% unfamiliar or only slightly familiar).

In Greece, faculty familiarity with e-participation tools is moderately distributed rather than concentrated at the top: 38.4% report above-average familiarity, 25% moderate, and 36.5% below average, while use is light and uneven (36.4% occasional, 26.9% rare, 19.2% frequent, 11.5% very frequent, 7.7% never); tool preferences are dominated by online consultations and public opinion surveys (48.1%) and online petitions (46.2%), while institutional mechanisms such as student-governance (34.6%) or participatory-budgeting platforms (23.1%) remain comparatively marginal. Faculty attitudes split on effectiveness (30.8% moderately effective, 30.8% effective to very effective, 38.4% ineffective to very ineffective), report low-to-moderate knowledge of the national legal and policy framework governing e-participation (only 19.2% advanced or expert against 51.9% reporting no or only basic knowledge), and judge existing institutional



materials poorly aligned with the needs of students or colleagues with disabilities or disadvantaged backgrounds - 65.4% selecting the two lowest adequacy ratings on a five-point scale, yielding an average score of 2.21 out of 5. Greek students display stronger baseline awareness than their Bulgarian counterparts - 53.8% above-average familiarity, 30% moderate, 16.3% below average - yet engage primarily through informal channels (social-media mobilisation for protests and campaigns 60.0%, course feedback surveys 46.3%, discussion forums 42.5%), while formal online voting (17.5%) remains rare and 11.3% have never used any e-participation tool. Knowledge of the legal and policy framework is markedly weaker than operational familiarity (52.6% little-to-no knowledge; only 13.8% good or professional), and the structured barriers battery is led by insufficient information about available opportunities (58%), lack of time (42%), and data-security or privacy concerns (38%), with lower shares citing low perceived contribution value (28%), institutional trust deficits (28%), limited digital literacy (16%), and platform accessibility or ease-of-use gaps (8%). Attitudes toward inclusive civic engagement are positive but qualified: 62% rate current e-participation tools as inclusive only to a moderate extent (22% small, 10% not at all, 6% large), and perceived impact of student participation on decision-making is divided (37.5% little or no impact; 32.5% moderate; 30.1% significant to very significant).

Two patterns recur across the country reports. First, students commonly engage with digital tools such as feedback surveys or voting platforms without categorising these interactions as e-participation, suggesting that participation is happening empirically while conceptual self-identification remains limited. Second, faculty participation tends to connect to a broader range of governance mechanisms - consultations, deliberative forums, e-petitions - while student participation is more often confined to consultative student-facing formats. Baseline civic participation appears to be strongest where thematic content connects directly to students' lived concerns: employment, accessibility, education, and rights. Digital literacy indicators are uniformly self-reported as adequate at the technical-operational level. Still, the country



reports consistently distinguish this from the broader civic, information. Critical literacies required for meaningful e-participation attitudes toward inclusive civic engagement are generally positive but conditional: respondents across all groups express willingness to participate provided that institutional communication, feedback loops, and accessibility are demonstrably improved.

This section maps the barriers to inclusive civic engagement identified across Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania. In line with the report's analytical orientation, the taxonomy that follows is organised to document the structural conditions that generate participation deficits - from primary informational and awareness gaps to deeper structural, policy, and curricular impediments - rather than to catalogue the deficits as such, with country-specific evidence situated within a comparative frame that can be acted upon at the institutional, curricular, and policy levels.

The four national reports converge on a layered taxonomy of barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education. For this section, the convergence is presented in two distinct blocks. The first block identifies the universal barriers - those documented in the data of all four partner countries and across all respondent groups (faculty, students, external stakeholders, and focus-group participants drawn specifically from vulnerable backgrounds); within this block, country references appear as converging evidence rather than as a country-by-country enumeration. The second block identifies the country-specific barriers - those tied to the particular institutional, linguistic, financial, or community infrastructure of a single partner country; within this block, evidence is organised by country. The Headline Indicators block in §1 and the three-tier Needs and Recommendations table at the end of the report already operationalise the same distinction at the indicator and recommendation layers (Headline Indicator 7 anchors the country-specific cluster; Recommendations 2–5 anchor the universal priority core); the two-block taxonomy below makes the underlying analytical separation explicit at the barrier layer itself.



Stakeholder Assessment

External stakeholders are the third analytic voice in this assessment. Across the four partner countries the project surveyed 164 external stakeholders in aggregate – 57 in Bulgaria, 50 in Greece, 29 in Italy, and 28 in Lithuania – making the stakeholder cohort the second-largest in the sample after students. The Bulgarian stakeholder sample is by far the most data-rich of the four and yields four converging findings.

First, Bulgarian stakeholders identify information as the single most significant obstacle to participation, and at a higher rate than any other Bulgarian respondent group: 73.7% of stakeholders identify information as the leading obstacle, compared with approximately 60% of faculty and 50% of students. Second, stakeholders report weak impact or low institutional trust at parity with faculty and students: approximately 28.1% of Bulgarian stakeholders, against ≈30% of faculty and 28% of students, identify weak impact or low institutional trust as a binding constraint. Third, despite their institutional proximity to the formal e-participation space, Bulgarian stakeholders show limited substantive command of its formal concept – 54.4% report being unfamiliar or only slightly familiar with the term, against 45.6% who report moderate or higher familiarity. Fourth, and somewhat paradoxically given this operational knowledge gap, Bulgarian stakeholders are the most positively oriented of any Bulgarian respondent group on tool effectiveness: 54.4% rate existing tools as effective or very effective, 35.1% as neutral, and 10.5% as ineffective or very ineffective. The combined profile – confident endorsement of a tool set that one has not yet substantively mastered – identifies stakeholders as a distinct analytic layer: they validate the institutional space as legitimate, they experience the same information barrier as faculty and students, and they have not yet developed the operational fluency required to navigate the space themselves.

The cross-country pattern is nonetheless consistent: Greek respondents describe insufficient information about available opportunities as the leading structured barrier;



Italian respondents describe institutional rigidity that fails to accommodate hybrid third-sector organisations combining social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions; and Lithuanian respondents identify the institutional failure to provide visible and coherent participation pathways as the most significant obstacle, and the absence of structured feedback as the second most important challenge. Across all four countries, stakeholders thus speak to the same structural core that faculty and students describe – institutional, informational, and motivational – but with a particular claim on the institutional layer that the faculty-student dyad cannot fully represent, and with the additional asymmetry of a constituency that endorses the institutional space before fully understanding what it operates.

Two further dimensions of the stakeholder voice deserve to be made explicit. As members of civil-society, professional, and governance-adjacent bodies, stakeholders carry direct exposure to the procurement, budgetary, and policy frameworks within which participation is embedded – and the Bulgarian, Italian, and Lithuanian national reports each show that these upstream frameworks operate as constraints on participation independently of any faculty or student-level intervention. As institutional intermediaries between higher-education bodies and the populations they serve, stakeholders also carry structured knowledge of outreach gaps, which the country reports repeatedly identify as a universal barrier regardless of respondent group. Together, this profile supports treating stakeholder engagement not as derivative of the faculty-student recommendation set, but as a parallel strand that the CitizenUnited+ Platform's communication architecture, the Faculty Training Package's stakeholder-engagement modules, and the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet's procurement and tendering guidance should each accommodate in their own right.



Taxonomy of Barriers

This section categorises the obstacles to inclusive e-participation by isolating systemic institutional constraints from situational or individual impediments. By partitioning these findings, this framework distinguishes between universal challenges—such as the widespread lack of clear digital pathways and insufficient information—and context-specific hurdles rooted in localized infrastructural or policy environments. This classification reflects the convergence of evidence across faculty, student, and stakeholder cohorts, reinforcing that these impediments transcend individual user groups and confirm that the hierarchy of barriers is consistently reported across diverse participant backgrounds.

Universal Barriers

Across Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania, six barrier clusters recur in the data of all four partner countries and across all respondent groups. They form the structural core of the participation deficit, and they are the analytical object of the priority-core recommendations advanced in the section Needs and Recommendations.

Informational and awareness deficits. Information and awareness emerge as the single most dominant barrier across the entire Bulgarian survey - approximately 60% of faculty, 50% of students, and 73.7% of stakeholders identify information as the leading obstacle - and the same hierarchy reappears in the Greek, Italian, and Lithuanian country reports. Greek respondents identify insufficient information about available opportunities as the leading structured barrier (58% of students); Italian respondents describe communication as fragmented, inconsistent, and rarely promoted; Lithuanian evidence identifies institutional failure to provide visible and coherent participation pathways as the most significant obstacle. Faculty, students, and stakeholders converge on the same finding: respondents across all groups



consistently report that participation is discouraged not by a lack of digital ability but by the absence of visible, accessible, user-centric information.

Trust, efficacy, and feedback gaps. Trust and feedback deficits form the second universal cluster. In Bulgaria, approximately 30% of faculty, 28% of students, and 28.1% of stakeholders report weak impact or low institutional trust; consultation fatigue is palpably documented in the focus group. In Greece, 37.5% of students perceive the impact of participation as "little or none". In Lithuania, lack of feedback is the second most important challenge, with a strong cross-group demand for stronger feedback mechanisms and transparency. In Italy, the absence of shared e-participation policies approved at the governance level operates as a structural cause of the same trust deficit. The convergent pattern is that participation is widely experienced as formally available but substantively inconsequential, generating the consultation fatigue documented most explicitly in the Bulgarian focus group but present across all four countries.

Accessibility barriers. Accessibility gaps are a universal structural condition, although their operational surface differs between countries and is treated in the country-specific block below. The convergence runs through the data: Bulgaria reports accessibility gaps in approximately 25–33% of faculty responses (missing captions and transcripts, poor screen-reader compatibility, designs assuming uniform device access) and equivalent negative inclusivity ratings from 36.3% and 22.5% of students; Greece reports complex navigation, lack of assistive-technology compatibility, and the absence of subtitles or alternative formats; Italy reports an emerging accessibility barrier tied to authentication costs; Lithuania reports the absence of sign-language interpretation and captioning. In each country, accessibility gaps operate as a structural - not merely technical - exclusion mechanism.

Low digital and civic literacy. Across all four countries, the country reports distinguish between technical-operational digital literacy (self-reported as adequate) and the

broader civic, information, and critical literacies required for meaningful e-participation. Bulgarian evidence records limited digital skills alongside low civic confidence; Greek evidence embeds literacy gaps in the broader attitudinal cluster, with 52.6% of respondents reporting little-to-no knowledge of the legal and policy framework governing e-participation; Italian evidence embeds literacy gaps in institutional rigidity and disintermediation; Lithuanian evidence embeds literacy in the trust-and-efficacy cluster. The convergent finding is that self-reported technical competence is not the limiting factor; the inability to evaluate, contextualise, and act on participation opportunities is.

Structural, attitudinal, and socio-economic barriers. Structural attitudinal barriers - encompassing institutional design, perceived time constraints, socio-economic disadvantage, and the persistence of exclusionary practice - are documented in all four country reports. Bulgarian evidence identifies institutional design as the primary barrier to participation alongside distinctive curricular and curricular-power observations. Greek evidence documents institutional, informational, and socio-economic barriers as operating as mutually reinforcing factors. Italian evidence records the institutional rigidity that fails to accommodate the hybrid third-sector organisations that characterise participation in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano neighbourhoods. Lithuanian evidence identifies time constraints as a cross-cutting barrier. Across all four countries, structural barriers are the layer at which the higher-education institution's own design choices meet the broader civic ecosystem, and at which the project must therefore operate through both curricular and governance-level interventions.

Lack of targeted and culturally sensitive outreach. Targeted outreach is absent. Across all four countries, respondents report that institutional communication is designed for the already-engaged majority rather than for the populations the project is centrally designed to serve. Bulgarian evidence explicitly records that institutional communication uses administrative or academic language that excludes rather than

includes; Greek evidence reflects the same gap within the broader informational barrier; Italian evidence captures it under the institutional-rigidity cluster; Lithuanian evidence identifies it within the cultural-and-informational exclusion cluster. The convergent finding is that outreach design - its language, its channels, its assumed audience - is itself a barrier, and that outreach reform must be treated as a foundational item rather than as a downstream refinement.

The table below records the per-cluster convergence in compact form for cross-country reading.

Universal barrier cluster	Bulgaria	Greece	Italy	Lithuania
Informational and awareness	Single dominant barrier across the entire survey - ~60% faculty, 50% students, 73.7% stakeholders	Most common obstacle across all respondent groups; insufficient communication and outreach	Fragmented, inconsistent, and rarely-promoted communication	Most significant obstacle; institutions fail to provide visible, coherent participation pathways
Trust, efficacy, and feedback	~30% faculty / 28% students / 28.1% stakeholders report weak impact or low trust; consultation fatigue palpable in the focus group	37.5% of students perceive impact as "little or none"; weak feedback loops deter participation	Absence of shared e-participation policies approved at the governance level	Second most important challenge; strong demand for stronger feedback mechanisms and transparency

Accessibility (general dimension - operational form is country- specific)	25–33% of faculty report accessibility gaps (missing captions/transcripts, screen-reader incompatibility); 36.3% + 22.5% of students rate existing platforms only "somewhat inclusive" / "not inclusive at all"	Complex navigation; lack of assistive-technology compatibility; absence of subtitles and alternative formats; multi-dimensional functional accessibility	Emerging policy-driven accessibility barrier tied to SPID authentication costs; institutional rigidity toward hybrid third-sector organisations	Absence of sign-language interpretation and captioning for the deaf community; need for simpler language and visual design
Low digital and civic literacy	Limited digital skills and low civic confidence; awareness–use gap (e.g. 18% frequent use vs 37% rare use among students)	Embedded in the broader attitudinal cluster; 52.6% little-to-no knowledge of the legal and policy framework; 16% limited digital literacy	Embedded in institutional-rigidity and disintermediation barriers	Embedded in the trust-and-efficacy cluster; respondents flag training and information gaps

Structural, attitudinal, and socio-economic	Institutional design identified as primary barrier; curricular gaps including digital democracy as a substantive field, inclusive participation methodology, interdisciplinary bridges, critical digital literacy, institutional design and policy analysis	Institutional, informational, and socio-economic barriers operate as mutually reinforcing factors	Institutional rigidity fails to accommodate hybrid third-sector organisations combining social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions	Time constraints identified as a cross-cutting barrier
Lack of targeted and culturally sensitive outreach	Institutional communication uses administrative or academic language that excludes rather than includes	Reflected in the broader informational barrier	Captured under the institutional-rigidity cluster	Embedded in the cultural-and-informational exclusion cluster

Source: The author, using the data from the terrain

Country-Specific Barriers

The six clusters above recur in the data of every partner country. The barriers below are tied to the particular institutional, linguistic, financial, or community infrastructure of a single partner country, and require correspondingly tailored interventions. They are organised by country rather than by barrier cluster; Headline Indicator 7 in the Executive Summary's diagnostic layer anchors this block at the synthesis level.



Bulgaria. Four interrelated features of the Bulgarian context define the country-specific cluster.

1. *Multi-generational Roma marginalisation.* The Bulgarian focus group centres the lived experience of a Roma community in which marginalisation is structural rather than episodic. Participants include an experienced Roma NGO activist who has served on the board of directors of a Romani organisation since the age of 18, who has actively participated in educational desegregation processes, who uses electronic signatures, and who engages in online petitions for causes such as animal welfare; an older Roma resident who does not own a smartphone and uses only older mobile-phone models (such as Nokia); a doctoral student in political science from New Bulgarian University; active voters and citizens who exercise their right to vote in every election but express scepticism about whether participation can lead to real change; and a younger representative of the neighbourhood's youth who attends school and interacts with artificial intelligence daily. The focus-group analysis makes explicit that digital exclusion in the Roma community is rooted not solely in a lack of technical access but in a deeply ingrained distrust of the usefulness of digital tools, compounded by structural discrimination so severe that "online discrimination" takes a back seat to broader exclusion.
2. *Categorical rejection of mobile-only administrative services.* One focus-group participant openly describes mobile phones as "completely unnecessary" for administrative purposes - a stance that reframes technology as a useless add-on to an already dysfunctional administrative system, makes the project's digital-by-default assumption untenable for a significant subset of the target population, and conditions the Bulgarian four-channel communication model in Recommendation 5. Consultation fatigue is palpable across the same group:



citizens report feeling ignored after a series of ineffective meetings or surveys that do not lead to visible improvements, and a clear demographic divide is observed between younger participants seeking deeper and more discussion-oriented levels of engagement and older community members exhibiting persistent scepticism that requires significant effort to overcome.

3. *Voting-roster access difficulties at polling stations.* Even when voting in person in local and national elections, participants report obstacles such as not being found on the voter rolls at polling stations, which leads directly to abstention. This is a participation barrier that operates outside the digital infrastructure entirely but conditions trust in formal participation channels and is mapped onto Headline Indicator 7.
4. *Institutional design identified as primary barrier, and four curricular-power asymmetries.* Bulgarian respondents identify institutional design - alongside structured curricular gaps that include digital democracy as a substantive field, inclusive participation methodology, interdisciplinary bridges, critical digital literacy, and institutional design and policy analysis - as the primary barrier to participation. The focus-group analysis surfaces four power asymmetries that any inclusive curriculum must address: (i) curricular power over the participation agenda - universities decide what is taught, when, how, and by whom, with faculty priorities (privacy and security) differing structurally from the dominant barrier in the wider population (community outreach), requiring stakeholder panels in workshops to structurally rebalance the educator/educated relationship; (ii) the "softened borders" of inclusion, where mobile-only administrative services harden rather than soften exclusion; (iii) tokenism and the performance of participation, where many consultations legitimise decisions already taken rather than incorporate citizen input; and (iv)

epistemic asymmetry - who knows and who speaks - with research showing that Roma community participants articulate truths about information gaps and administrative exclusion that survey instruments applied to dominant groups do not capture.

Greece. The Greek country-specific framing is the *multi-dimensional functional accessibility profile* that the focus groups articulate beyond any narrow screen-reader reading of accessibility. Greek participants describe accessibility as extending well beyond assistive-technology compatibility to include plain language, simple navigation, practical instructions, flexible timing, multiple content formats, mobile usability, clear structure, and the ability to pause and return later. The functional dimensions are made specific by participant need: visual impairment (clear structure, assistive-technology compatibility, image descriptions), hearing loss (subtitles and alternative ways of following video and live content), chronic illness and fatigue-related limitations (materials that do not require excessive energy, concentration, or time). This framing extends the universality of "accessibility as a barrier" by giving it a distinct operational content - multi-dimensional and functional rather than primarily technical - that the platform design and Faculty Training Package must specifically accommodate.

Italy. Two distinct features of the Italian civic ecosystem define the country-specific cluster.

1. *SPID authentication costs as a new digital divide.* Italian evidence documents that the increasing cost of SPID authentication generates an emerging policy-driven digital divide for students and low-income users - a barrier whose operational mechanism is financial rather than informational or attitudinal, and that maps directly onto Recommendation 9 as a systemic lever rather than as

a universal cluster the platform itself can resolve. This barrier is also visible within the universal accessibility table above; the country-specific qualifier is its financial, policy-driven operational character rather than its accessibility-classification.

2. *Institutional rigidity toward hybrid third-sector organisations.* Italian focus groups in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano neighbourhoods document that participation is primarily embedded in everyday community life through hybrid third-sector organisations that combine social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions, and that institutional rigidity systematically fails to accommodate these hybrid organisations within formal consultation frameworks. This barrier is institutional-design-specific to the Italian civic ecosystem and requires procurement and tendering reform - rather than platform redesign - to address, and is operationalised within Recommendation 7.

Lithuania. The Lithuanian country-specific barrier is the *absence of sign-language interpretation and captioning for the deaf community*. The Lithuanian focus group is drawn entirely from the deaf community and asks specifically for information in sign language, subtitles for video content, simpler and clearer language, more user-friendly visual interface design, and broader training and information about opportunities to participate in social and civic life. The barrier is operational rather than attitudinal, and is best addressed through specific accessibility provisions - sign-language content embedded in the platform, captioned video materials, visual interface design - rather than through the broader outreach and feedback instruments that address the universal barriers. It is also mapped onto Headline Indicators 5 (accessibility as systemic gap) and 7 (country-specific financial and institutional barriers).

The table below records the country-specific cluster in compact form and cross-references the Headline Indicators block in §1 of this report.

Country	Country-specific barrier	Operational nature	Headline Indicator cross-reference
Bulgaria	Multi-generational Roma marginalisation (Roma NGO activist since age 18; older Roma resident without smartphone; doctoral student; voters sceptical about real change; younger resident engaging with AI)	Structural - discrimination so severe that "online" dimensions take a back seat to broader exclusion; distrust of usefulness of digital tools	Headline Indicator 7
Bulgaria	Categorical rejection of mobile-only administrative services ("completely unnecessary"); consultation fatigue; generational divide	Attitudinal - digital tools reframed as useless add-on to dysfunctional system	Headline Indicator 6
Bulgaria	Voting-roster access difficulties at polling stations (not being found on voter rolls → abstention)	Operational - barrier outside the digital infrastructure	Headline Indicator 7
Bulgaria	Institutional design as primary barrier; four curricular-power asymmetries (curricular power; "softened borders" of inclusion; tokenism; epistemic asymmetry)	Institutional / curricular - universities decide what is taught, when, how, and by whom	Headline Indicators 3, 5
Greece	Multi-dimensional functional accessibility (cognitive load, fatigue, language, timing, format, human mediation)	Operational - extends accessibility beyond assistive-technology compatibility	Headline Indicator 5

Italy	SPID authentication costs as new digital divide	Financial - institutional cost barrier for students and low-income users	Headline Indicator 7
Italy	Institutional rigidity toward hybrid third-sector organisations (social, therapeutic, educational, entrepreneurial combinations)	Institutional - procurement and tendering regimes fail to accommodate hybrid entities	Headline Indicator 7 (resourcing hybrid community infrastructures)
Lithuania	Absence of sign-language interpretation and captioning for the deaf community	Operational - sign-language content, captions, visual interface design	Headline Indicators 5, 7

The two-block framing above preserves the analytical distinction already present in the underlying data while making it possible to read the report's central finding more tightly: barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education are predominantly institutional, informational, and motivational rather than technological. The *universal* block identifies the structural conditions the project's instruments - the CitizenUnited+ Platform, the Faculty Training Package, the Student MOOC, and the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet - must jointly address; the *country-specific* block identifies the operational nuances whose portability is necessarily bounded by the institutional, linguistic, financial, and community infrastructure of the four partner contexts.



Qualitative Focus Group Findings

The qualitative evidence base centres the voices of people with disabilities and marginalised groups, both because the project explicitly recruited from vulnerable backgrounds and because these accounts reveal the gap between formal availability of participation channels and the lived experience of attempting to use them.

In Greece, two focus groups convened participants with visual impairment, hearing loss, multiple sclerosis, long-term unemployment, and physical/mobility disability. Participants did not reject democratic participation but described it as formally available and practically difficult to exercise. They articulated accessibility as a broad, multi-dimensional concept - extending well beyond screen-reader compatibility to include plain language, simple navigation, practical instructions, flexible timing, multiple content formats, mobile usability, clear structure, and the ability to pause and return later. For visual impairment, participants requested clear structure, assistive-technology compatibility, and image descriptions; for hearing loss, subtitles and alternative ways of following video and live content; for chronic illness or fatigue-related limitations, materials that do not require excessive energy, concentration, or time. They identified that what the system fails to deliver - low perceived impact of participation, distrust in institutions, weak feedback loops, and inaccessible platforms - precisely corresponds to what vulnerable groups experience as exclusion.

In Italy, focus groups were embedded in community-based participatory research conducted in the Aurora and Barriera di Milano neighbourhoods with hybrid third-sector organisations. Participants reported that civic participation for them is primarily embedded in everyday community life - rehabilitative, educational, and social activities in hybrid public-private spaces - rather than through formal political consultations. The main barriers they identified were bureaucratic, inaccessible language in official communications; complex digital interfaces that require medium-to-high digital literacy; institutional rigidity that fails to accommodate hybrid organisations; and an



indispensable need for human mediation to access online participation. At the macro-institutional level, participants perceived that the voice of these communities is only partially heard or fragmented into disconnected pieces without a unifying vision. Trust, when it is built, is built through consistent, personalised engagement in proximity contexts.

In Lithuania, focus group participants from the deaf community reinforced the cross-country finding that technical barriers are minor relative to communication and information accessibility barriers. They called for greater provision of information in sign language, subtitles for video content, simpler and clearer language, more user-friendly platform design, and broader training and information about opportunities to participate in social and civic life.

In Bulgaria, the focus group convened an experienced Roma NGO activist - a community representative who has served on the board of directors of a Romani organisation since the age of 18, who has actively participated in educational desegregation processes, who uses electronic signatures, and who engages in online petitions for causes such as animal welfare - alongside an older Roma resident who does not own a smartphone and uses only older mobile-phone models (such as Nokia), a doctoral student in political science from New Bulgarian University, active voters and citizens who exercise their right to vote in every election but express scepticism about whether participation can lead to real change, and a younger representative of the neighbourhood's youth who attends school and interacts with artificial intelligence daily. The Bulgarian focus group analysis makes explicit a structural finding that the existing summary only captures in part: digital exclusion in the Roma community is rooted not solely in a lack of technical access but in a deeply ingrained distrust of the usefulness of digital tools, exemplified by one participant's categorical description of mobile-only administrative services as "completely unnecessary" - a stance that reframes technology as a useless add-on to an already dysfunctional administrative system. The group converges on consultation fatigue as palpable - citizens report



feeling ignored after a series of ineffective meetings or surveys that do not lead to visible improvements - and reveals a clear demographic divide: younger participants seek deeper, more discussion-oriented levels of engagement, while older community members exhibit persistent scepticism that requires significant effort to overcome. The focus group identifies four explicit categories of barrier: (i) high levels of discrimination so structural that "online discrimination" takes a back seat to broader exclusion; (ii) lack of awareness and mistrust, with weak information about online petition and consultation platforms coupled with pronounced doubt about their effectiveness; (iii) technical and functional barriers, including the perception that mobile-based administrative processes are unnecessary or ineffective; and (iv) voting difficulties - obstacles even when voting in person in local and national elections, such as not being found on voter rolls at polling stations, which leads directly to abstention. Institutional distrust and a sense of political marginalisation discourage communities from seeking active dialogue with authorities, with participants often reporting that their complaints go unheard; gaps in local internet infrastructure hinder full interaction with administrative portals, turning digitisation into an additional obstacle rather than a tool for empowerment; and the subjective perception that municipal decisions rarely reflect citizens' proposals further undermines motivation, turning participation into a symbolic rather than real instrument of influence. The participants and moderators derived four specific recommendations: (a) propose legislative and educational changes that specifically encourage civic participation among vulnerable groups; (b) facilitate the digitalisation of educational materials and access to online learning and self-study resources to compensate for gaps in the educational process; (c) ensure that policymakers seek active dialogue with the community and receive specific advice on how to remove barriers to participation; and (d) make e-participation platforms more intuitive and tailored to the real-life experiences and needs of people who feel marginalised. Three integrative conclusions from the focus-group analysis are also explicit: participants believe their right to access information and to good

administration is often violated or restricted due to their social status; while standard e-participation tools are viewed with scepticism, there is notable trust in new technologies such as ChatGPT, which participants report using "for absolutely everything" in life despite their skepticism toward formal participation channels; and the sense of exclusion is exacerbated by prejudices that the community is trying to overcome through integration into the labour market and education.

In Bulgaria, the analysis highlights institutional distrust and a sense of political marginalisation as factors that discourage communities from seeking active dialogue with authorities, with participants often reporting that their complaints go unheard. The group's diversity made it possible to identify a continuum of barriers ranging from a complete lack of technical resources among older residents to a broader lack of trust in institutions among more digitally engaged community members.

Synthesised across countries, the qualitative evidence reveals four cross-cutting themes:

- *Disability and accessibility* are understood functionally, not merely technically - encompassing cognitive load, fatigue, language, timing, format, and human mediation.
- *Trust is relational and institutional* - built in proximity contexts and eroded by formalistic, low-feedback processes.
- *Marginalised communities engage participation substantively* - through work, education, social protection, mobility, and local decision-making, not through abstract political consultation.
- *Top-down digital tool provision is insufficient* without co-design with the people the tools are meant to serve.



Synthesis of Educational Needs

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative strands produces a unified needs profile with five interrelated dimensions: curricular modernisation, accessibility and platform design, institutional capacity-building, stakeholder engagement, and policy levers. Each dimension is grounded in convergent country evidence.

The five dimensions are not equally weighted. Across the country reports, four barrier clusters - *informational and awareness, trust, feedback, and accessibility* - recur in the data of all four partner countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania) and across all respondent groups (faculty, students, stakeholders, and focus-group participants drawn specifically from vulnerable backgrounds) and are the clusters that most directly restrict participation for persons with disabilities and marginalised communities. These four clusters form the *priority core* of the needs profile; the remaining dimensions - policy levers, curricular modernisation, and the institutional recognition of hybrid community infrastructures - operate as enabling layers on which the core depends.

The prioritisation is governed by four explicitly applied criteria. *Strength of evidence* ranks needs by the breadth of cross-country and cross-group convergence; needs documented by all four partner countries and by faculty, students, stakeholders, and focus-group participants together carry greater weight than those documented in a single group or partner country alone. *Severity of the barrier* ranks needs by the degree to which they exclude persons with disabilities, long-term unemployed persons, and socio-economically marginalised groups - that is, by their effect on the population the project is centrally designed to serve, rather than by inconvenience to the already-engaged majority. *Operational applicability* ranks needs by whether the underlying intervention is already mapped to a concrete CitizenUnited workpackage, tool, or instrument - the WCAG baseline to the CitizenUnited+ Platform, the follow-up publication requirement to platform campaign metadata, the multi-channel



communication model to pre-built content formats, and close-the-loop reporting to quality-assurance cycles - or whether additional policy adoption is required. Scope ranks need to be addressed by whether they address a structural, system-wide deficiency with multiplicative effects across multiple dimensions of participation, or, alternatively, a single-channel deficiency that is best treated as a supplementary improvement.

Applied jointly, these criteria place the *awareness / trust / feedback / accessibility* core above the remaining recommendations. The *Needs and Recommendations* subsection below is organised accordingly, with a declarative statement at the start of the list and a short mapping table that records, for each recommendation, the barrier clusters it addresses, the country evidence that supports it, and the instrument into which it is operationalised within the project.

Inclusive civic education curricula. Faculty members frame training needs primarily in technical and pedagogical terms; students and vulnerable groups confirm these gaps but assign greater weight to impact, trust, feedback, and accessibility. This discrepancy of scope signals that curricula must address both technical-pedagogical content and the political, ethical, and participatory competencies that resonate with lived experience. Greek evidence identifies top competency areas for the Training Package: the national and EU legal framework on digital rights, data protection and accessibility; inclusive pedagogy and accessible course design with assistive technologies and plain language; practical integration of e-participation tools in teaching and assessment; awareness and prevention of bias and exclusion; and co-design with students and vulnerable groups. Lithuanian evidence similarly identifies five priorities: digital democracy and e-participation competence; inclusive and accessible participation design; political efficacy and feedback mechanisms; critical digital literacy; and participatory research and co-creation. Italian curricular recommendations span digital democracy and e-governance as civic competences across Public and Administrative Law, Political Science, Public Administration, and



Economics; inclusive citizenship and diversity addressing structural inequalities; participatory action research methodologies as recognised academic competencies; and accessible, applied training in digital rights and data protection. Bulgarian evidence recommends a dedicated module or elective treating digital democracy as a substantive field - covering e-information, e-consultation, e-decision-making, comparative cases, the distinction between mainstreaming the population into existing platforms and alternative/co-created platforms for marginalised groups, and critical evaluation of platform power and design asymmetries - alongside an inclusive participation methodology strand focused on accessibility-first design, co-creation methods with marginalised groups, multilingual and low-literacy or audio-only formats, "soft scaffolding" through pre-event community mediation, and theatre, simulation, and participatory workshops as engagement tools; an interdisciplinary bridges strand advocating cross-faculty minors on digital citizenship, embedded digital-participation modules in teacher-training programmes, and an empirical-research methods module examining how participation data is collected, visualised, and used, including ethics of working with vulnerable populations; a critical digital literacy strand positioning literacy as a transversal competence covering disinformation recognition, information-source evaluation, privacy-protection behaviour, and platform governance literacy; and an institutional design and policy analysis strand covering public-administration theory of consultation, the legal status of e-consultation results in Bulgarian administrative law, comparative analysis of municipal, regional, and national e-participation regulation, and the "soft powers" of citizen assemblies, ombudsperson consultation platforms, and budget-participation mechanisms. The Bulgarian analysis further surfaces four power asymmetries that any inclusive curriculum must address: (i) curricular power over the participation agenda - universities decide what is taught, when, how, and by whom, with faculty prioritising privacy and security over community outreach even though community outreach is the dominant barrier in the wider population, requiring stakeholder panels in workshops to structurally rebalance the educator/educated



relationship; (ii) the "softened borders" of inclusion, where mobile-only administrative services harden rather than soften exclusion (e.g. a participant without a smartphone is structurally excluded), reproducing the very power asymmetries designed platforms are meant to address; (iii) tokenism and the performance of participation, where many consultations legitimise decisions already taken rather than incorporate citizen input, making curricula responsible for explicitly distinguishing procedural from substantive participation; and (iv) epistemic asymmetry - who knows and who speaks - with research showing that Roma community participants articulate truths about information gaps and administrative exclusion that survey instruments applied to dominant groups do not capture, with direct implications for how curricula source and credit knowledge.

Needs and Recommendations

The nine items below are organised in three tiers, applying the four prioritisation criteria set out at the start of this section. The *priority core* addresses the four barrier clusters (informational/awareness, trust, feedback, and accessibility) that recur in the evidence from all four partner countries and map directly onto the CitizenUnited+ Platform and the Faculty Training Package, where they are operationalised. The *structural support* tier contains recommendations whose delivery is required for the priority core to function effectively over time but whose operational implementation does not block immediate delivery of the core. The *systemic levers* tier contains structural and policy-level preconditions that operate above the platform and curriculum layer and require wider institutional, legislative, or financial decisions exceeding the project's internal mandate.

The priority core is mapped to recommendations 2, 3, 4, and 5 (WCAG 2.1 AA compliance, accessible-by-design platforms, visible follow-up and close-the-loop reporting, and multi-channel and hybrid communication); recommendations 6 and 8

form the structural support tier; recommendations 1, 7, and 9 form the systemic levers tier. The mapping table below records, for each recommendation, the barrier clusters it addresses, the country evidence supporting it, and the instrument into which it is operationalised within the project; this mapping should be read as a prioritisation aid rather than as a re-ranking of the recommendations themselves, which retain their equal normative standing as policy items.

Tier	Recommendation	Barrier clusters addressed	Country evidence	Operationalised in
Priority core	2 - Enforce WCAG 2.1 AA compliance	Accessibility	Bulgaria, Greece	CitizenUnited+ Platform; Student MOOC
Priority core	3 - Implement accessible-by-design platforms	Accessibility; trust; outreach	Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Lithuania	CitizenUnited+ Platform; Faculty Training Package
Priority core	4 - Institutionalise visible follow-up and close-the-loop reporting	Trust; feedback; institutional responsiveness	Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania	CitizenUnited+ Platform; quality-assurance cycles
Priority core	5 - Adopt multi-channel and hybrid communication	Awareness; outreach; accessibility	Bulgaria, Italy	CitizenUnited+ Platform communication module
Structural support	6 - Integrate co-design with marginalised communities	Accessibility; awareness; trust	Bulgaria, Greece	Faculty Training Package; CitizenUnited+ user testing
Structural support	8 - Embed critical digital and civic literacy	Civic literacy; trust; disinformation	Bulgaria, Greece	Faculty Training Package; Student MOOC

Systemic levers	1 - Mandate EU Accessibility Law and UNCRPD alignment	Policy framework; accessibility	Italy	Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet
Systemic levers	7 - Recognise and resource hybrid community infrastructures	Outreach; community mediation; trust	Italy	Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet; community-engagement layer
Systemic levers	9 - Remove financial barriers to			

The following evidence-based items constitute the core of the Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet, converging findings from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania into actionable, transferable recommendations organised around the strands identified across the country reports.

1. **Mandate EU Accessibility Law and UNCRPD Alignment.** Institutionalise compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and relevant EU accessibility directives as a non-negotiable policy framework for all digital governance initiatives, ensuring that policy choices - including authentication design - do not inadvertently create new digital divides.
2. **Enforce WCAG 2.1 AA Compliance.** Establish WCAG 2.1 AA as the minimum technical standard for all e-participation platforms, mandating screen-reader compatibility, captions, high-contrast displays, multilingual interfaces, voice navigation, multilingual content, and simplified interfaces; compliance should be treated as a precondition for participation rather than an optional feature, and is justified by Bulgaria's specific finding that 25–33% of faculty report accessibility gaps in existing tools while 36.3% of students rate existing

platforms as only "somewhat inclusive" and 22.5% rate them as "not very inclusive" or "not inclusive at all."

3. **Implement Accessible-by-Design Platforms.** Ensure platform design features mobile-responsive interfaces, simplified navigation, anonymous participation options, and flexible, progress-saving forms that accommodate cognitive load, fatigue, and timing constraints. Integrate specific supports such as sign-language interpretation and accessible audio/video complaint channels, drawing on Greek multi-dimensional accessibility requirements and Lithuanian deaf-community provisions, while preserving human mediation as documented in Italian hybrid community infrastructures; platform interfaces should specifically support screen-reader compatibility, adjustable text, voice interfaces, AI-assisted communication (generative-AI Q&A on consultation content, AI-generated summaries of submitted input, multilingual translation) - features that focus-group participants explicitly requested - along with short micro-consultations of typically under two minutes, pre-filled and one-tap feedback mechanisms, and integration with tools respondents already use daily such as Google Forms or Microsoft Form.
4. **Institutionalise Visible Follow-up and Close-the-Loop Reporting.** Require public transparency mechanisms that document not only aggregated consultation results but also the decisions taken, the implementation timeline, and the justification for any inaction - directly countering consultation fatigue and the perception that participation has no impact. The Greek and Bulgarian specifics strongly support a contractual publication timeframe - recommended at ≤ 60 days - embedding the publication of follow-up within CitizenUnited+ Platform campaign metadata, and tying consultation uptake by departments to



quality-assurance cycles that recognise consultation as a measurable institutional activity.

5. **Adopt Multi-Channel and Hybrid Communication.** Mandate communication through at least four channels per major consultation - institutional website, dedicated e-mail announcements, social-media posts (video and text), and lecturer-mediated communication for HEIs or community-leader mediation for public agencies serving marginalised groups - using plain-language, visual and audio-friendly formats in the languages of the targeted populations, supplemented by posters and QR codes placed in physical spaces frequented by target audiences; supplement digital-only outreach with offline and analog alternatives - community events, paper-based feedback, printed outreach - to ensure inclusivity for groups without uniform digital access, such as older Roma residents lacking smartphones and internet connection.
6. **Integrate Co-design with Marginalised Communities.** Transition from top-down provision to co-design models that actively involve persons with disabilities and marginalised groups in user testing and refinement of engagement tools - with co-design mechanisms funded and structurally embedded, not add-on - ensuring that platforms reflect lived experience rather than assumed uses.
7. **Recognise and Resource Hybrid Community Infrastructures.** Formally recognise and resource third-sector organisations that combine social, therapeutic, educational, and entrepreneurial functions as legitimate, proximate civic infrastructures essential for bridging formal consultations and community-based engagement, including through procurement and tendering that accommodates their hybrid character.

8. **Embed Critical Digital and Civic Literacy.** Incorporate dedicated curricula on the national and EU legal frameworks on digital rights, disinformation recognition, administrative literacy, and the political power dynamics of platform design – including how to recognise patterns of bridge-account manipulation or astroturfing and how to interpret platform metrics critically – ensuring users can critically evaluate the tools they use, with curricula positioned as a transversal competence across social-science.
9. **Remove Financial Barriers to Authentication.** Reform administrative authentication protocols - exemplified by SPID - to eliminate cost barriers that inadvertently generate new digital divides for students, low-income users, and marginalised populations.

These policy recommendations, while derived from specific country-level findings – Lithuania's focus on sign-language interpretation, Italy's concerns regarding SPID costs and the institutional rigidity affecting hybrid third-sector organisations, Bulgaria's emphasis on multi-channel communication (with the four-channel operational prescription and ≤ 60 -day follow-up contract), analog alternatives, multi-generational Roma marginalisation, mobile-only administrative services regarded as "completely unnecessary," voter-roster access difficulties at polling stations, and curricular integration of epistemic asymmetry between researchers and marginalised communities and Greece's functional multi-dimensional accessibility framing – are designed to be transferable, providing a scalable framework for inclusive citizenship engagement in digital public governance across European higher education.



Strategic Project Contributions

The WP2 evidence base is rated as having high practical applicability for the project's subsequent work packages, supported by direct respondent input, triangulation across groups, operational specificity, convergence with the literature, and concrete open-ended recommendations from focus group participants. The Bulgarian evidence base in particular grounds this rating in five converging signals that can be transferred directly to specification work in the project's downstream deliverables: direct respondent input from 131 survey respondents plus the focus group, with respondents given space for open-ended answers and especially for the focus group yielding material that translates directly into workshop content; triangulation across groups, with the same hierarchy of barriers (information, impact, accessibility, trust) reported across faculty, students, and stakeholders, providing converging rather than single-vocabulary evidence; operational specificity in delivery channels (social media, lecturer-mediated communication, posters, QR codes), accessibility features (captions, screen-reader compatibility, multilingual support), and consultation properties (duration, mobile usability) that translate directly into workshop activities; convergence with the wider literature on digital democracy platforms (notably the systematic literature on digital-democracy platforms and platform design, design-for-inclusion and accessibility, and the UN e-participation framework), reinforcing external validity; and concrete open-ended recommendations emerging directly from the focus group - voice interfaces, AI assistants, simplified interfaces, multilingual support, accessible-design features, and hybrid online/offline options - that structure a direct bridge from the diagnostic phase to the design phase. These signals are not specific to Poland alone but share the cross-country foundations already documented for Greece, Italy, and Lithuania. The findings feed directly into four downstream deliverables.



Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet. The Policy Booklet reproduces the stakeholder-informed priorities as a structured series of numbered policy recommendations - concrete items 1 through 9 in the 'Needs and Recommendations' subsection above - organised around convergent strands: accessible-by-design platforms, visible follow-up and accountability through close-the-loop reporting, multi-channel and hybrid communication through the four-channel-per-consultation operational model, co-design with marginalised communities with funded and structurally embedded mechanisms, institutional recognition and resourcing of hybrid community infrastructures, critical digital and civic literacy covering disinformation recognition and platform-power asymmetry analysis, and alignment with EU accessibility law and the UNCRPD. The cross-country convergence on these strands supports their transferability across the four partner contexts and into broader EU higher-education policy, with the partners analysis explicitly grounding this transferability in three structural framework facts: alignment with the Recommendation on Youth, Peace and Security, the EU Digital Decade targets on inclusive digital public services, and the Bulgarian national e-governance strategy, all of which incentivise the same multi-channel communication, accessibility baseline, and mandatory follow-up that faculty, students and stakeholders repeated it.

Faculty Training Package and Workshop. The priority competency areas identified by the partners provide the basis for a modular Faculty Training Package covering digital democracy and e-governance; inclusive pedagogy and accessible course design with assistive technologies; political efficacy and feedback mechanisms; integration of e-participation tools into teaching and assessment; prevention of bias and exclusion; and co-design with students and vulnerable groups. There are curricular recommendations in Public Administration, Political Science, Public Administration Management, and Economics programme areas offer concrete pathways for curricular embedding.



Student Coursework and MOOC. Core topics identified for student learning include digital rights and the national/EU legal framework; practical use of e-participation tools; accessibility and inclusive design; data protection and privacy literacy; recognition and reporting of discrimination; political efficacy and democratic impact; and media, information, and digital literacy. Learning needs converge on short modular MOOC formats, mobile delivery, interactive and case-based content, plain language, and clear links between theory and real consultation procedures. Accessibility considerations include subtitles and transcripts, screen-reader and keyboard compatibility, multilingual support, anonymous engagement options, and flexible timing for users with disabilities or limited digital confidence. The MOOC design must replicate the principles its curriculum teaches.

CitizenUnited+ Platform. The platform design draws on the consolidated feature list from Greek focus group evidence - WCAG-compliant design with assistive-technology support; mobile-first responsive interface; plain-language content in multiple formats including an accessible audio/video complaint channel; forms with progress-saving, flexible timing, and multiple input options; transparent data protection notices and anonymous participation; and accessibility standards co-designed with local users. The Lithuanian deaf-community focus group adds sign-language content, captions, and visual interface design. The Italian itinerary of community-based engagement with hybrid third-sector organisations demonstrates that inclusive design extends to the institutional and procedural embedding of the platform in community life, not merely to its interface. The Bulgarian evidence base adds a structured three-priority architecture: first, accessibility as the founding requirement - WCAG 2.1 AA as a minimum baseline, with reliable screen-reader compatibility, captions and transcripts, high-contrast display options, multilingual interface support, and voice navigation; second, a built-in cross-channel communication infrastructure to close the information gap, featuring an onboarding screen for new users, a dashboard of currently active consultations, structured metadata for search-engine discoverability, push-



notifications through existing institutional communication channels, and pre-built content formats - including social-media posts, email announcements, embedded widgets, downloadable posters, and QR codes - that can be deployed by HEIs and partner civil-society organisations without additional design work, with the additional promise that the exchange value of metadata respects time as a binding constraint by supporting micro-consultations of typically under two minutes, pre-filled forms, and one-tap feedback mechanisms; and third, an explicit feedback-loop module that responds to the consultation-fatigue pattern in the data by ensuring every consultation campaign ends with a "what changed" view that aggregates submissions, explains which decisions were taken in response, and provides a public implementation timeline, with planned-follow-up metadata visible from the moment the campaign is launched. Beyond these three priorities, the platform should incorporate two further capabilities: privacy by design, operationalised through a plain-language privacy notice saved with each consultation; and AI-assisted communication - voice interfaces, AI assistants, generative-AI Q&A about consultation content, AI-generated summaries of submitted input, and multilingual translation - as requested in the focus group and supported by the recent literature on digital inclusion in civic engagement.

Taken together, these contributions operationalise the project's foundational principle that e-participation strategies cannot be realised through technical provision alone. They require institutional change, governance-level policy adoption, curricular modernisation, structural co-design with persons with disabilities and marginalised groups, and the explicit recognition of hybrid and community-based infrastructures as legitimate civic participation actors. The cross-country comparison demonstrates both the transferability of these principles and the country-specific nuances - sign-language interpretation in Lithuania, SPID authentication cost barriers in Italy, community-based hybrid organisations in Italy, multi-generational Roma marginalisation in Bulgaria combined with voting-roster access difficulties, the categorical rejection of mobile-only administrative services by older Roma residents,



the trust asymmetry between digitally engaged younger and persistently skeptical older community members, the consultation-fatigue pattern reinforced by absent follow-up, and the curricular integration of epistemic asymmetry and the four power-asymmetries framework, broad functional accessibility in Greece - that must inform their implementation.



Conclusion

Convergent four-country evidence from Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania demonstrates that barriers to inclusive e-participation in higher education are predominantly institutional, informational, and motivational rather than technological. Across all four national reports - and across all respondent groups, namely 154 faculty members, 245 students, 164 external stakeholders, and 20 focus-group participants drawn specifically from vulnerable backgrounds - the consistently dominant obstacles are lack of awareness regarding existing participation opportunities, weak feedback loops and the consultation fatigue that follows from them, low institutional trust, and accessibility gaps that operate as structural rather than merely technical exclusion mechanisms. Where technology does appear as a binding constraint - for example the Lithuanian deaf community's absence of sign-language interpretation or the Italian SPID authentication costs - it functions as a downstream surface of deeper institutional, financial, or outreach decisions, and not as the primary cause of exclusion. The robustness of this finding rests on the convergence of quantitative survey data, focus-group testimony, and direct respondent recommendations across four distinct institutional, linguistic, and civic ecosystems, rather than on the representativeness of any single national sample.

These findings resolve, in a layered structure, into the four project instruments that operationalise the WP2 evidence base. The priority core - Recommendations 2, 3, 4 and 5 on WCAG 2.1 AA compliance, accessible-by-design platforms, visible follow-up and close-the-loop reporting, and the four-channel multi-channel and hybrid communication model - is operationalised principally within the CitizenUnited+ Platform, which inherits the accessibility baseline, the ≤ 60-day follow-up publication contract, the four-channel communication architecture, and the structural accountability requirements directly from the cross-country evidence base. The Faculty Training Package absorbs the structural-support tier (Recommendations 6 and



8 on co-design with marginalised communities and on critical digital and civic literacy), drawing on the Greek multi-dimensional accessibility framing, on the Italian curricular recommendations in Public Administration, Political Science, and Economics, and on the Lithuanian priorities for digital democracy, political efficacy, and participatory research . The Student MOOC inherits the literacy strand together with short modular formats, plain language, and accessibility provisions drawn principally from the Greek evidence, while replicating the principles its own curriculum teaches. The Inclusive Democracy Policy Booklet houses the systemic levers (Recommendations 1, 7, and 9) - EU Accessibility Law and UNCRPD alignment, formal recognition and resourcing of hybrid community infrastructures, and reform of authentication costs - each grounded in convergent four-country evidence but requiring wider institutional, legislative, or financial decisions that exceed the project's internal mandate. In this way, the diagnostic arc from WP2 reaches the four downstream deliverables without collapsing the distinction between what the project can directly deliver through its own instruments and what it can only advocate for at the policy level.

^[1] Greece convened two focus groups of three participants each.



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