

# **Volt's Mapping of Policies**

*Edition 8.1*

*Challenge 5 - Citizen Empowerment*

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# Challenge 5 - Citizen Empowerment

## Vision

For Volt, the EU is a unique political space waiting to be filled with democratic life. European citizens need to be empowered to make informed political decisions, be able to influence politics beyond elections alone, and exercise their democratic rights within vibrant, resilient, and deliberative democracies.

First, we encourage local communities to start looking at the European Union as a potential problem-solver - as opposed to problem-maker - and to collaborate across borders when tackling local problems. Volt will highlight opportunities to constructively use the European spaces where they exist, to use the tools already available for doing so, and develop new channels for citizens to participate in political life. Furthermore, Volt will engage in capacity-building activities to strengthen citizens' ability to meaningfully participate in and influence political processes. And of course, we will practice what we preach by applying the standards we put down for citizen empowerment to ourselves.

We want to foster vibrant, pluralistic and accessible public spheres, which is why we advocate for a range of measures to safeguard media freedom and pluralism throughout Europe and support fostering the emergence of a transnational European media landscape. We also support strong and dynamic cultural and creative industry sectors, as these are key to maintaining European pluralism. We also want to ensure the openness of public data. We think open data provides an ideal and effective gateway for citizen empowerment: it can provide an objective basis for analysis, debate, and education, as well as empower citizens to make innovative use of the data available to them and to acknowledge their role in generating change.

We want to multiply citizens' opportunities to influence political and policy processes. Throughout Europe, citizens choose their European, national and local representatives through the act of elections, and we want to make sure that elections across all of Europe are free and fair. We also acknowledge that political innovations in general, and digital technologies in particular, have given rise to a variety of tools and processes that make it possible for citizens to actively take part in democratic civic life beyond elections alone. This is why we advocate for a range of concrete tools for strengthening participatory and transnational European democracy.

# **I. Foster vibrant, pluralistic and accessible public spheres to enable citizens to make informed political decisions**

Empowered European citizenship requires vibrant, pluralistic, and accessible public spheres in the individual EU member States and in Europe as a whole. Informed political decisions are only possible under conditions in which information is freely accessible. This requires a functioning, healthy and independent public sphere, one in which citizens not only have access to quality information, but are also able to process this information; where diverse perspectives are publicly deliberated by media, political actors, and civil society, and where citizens are able to choose between valid political alternatives.

## **A. Promote free and pluralistic cultural and media landscapes**

“The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.”<sup>1</sup> Media freedom and pluralism are essential pillars of democracy, and thus are enshrined as fundamental values in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, today’s European media landscapes are under high pressure and stress: independence and pluralism of media are threatened in many European states, and a transnational European media landscape is still in its infancy.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many citizens’ information and communication habits have shifted towards the Internet. On the one hand, the Internet facilitates access to information and offers citizens new opportunities for participation, discussion, and shaping opinions. On the other hand, the emergence of a digital marketplace of news poses fundamental challenges to quality journalism, both online and in print. News outlets everywhere are struggling to find sustainable business models, while coordinated misinformation campaigns are undermining the very essence of rational discourse and decision-making across the globe. This undermines public trust in democratic institutions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, article 11.2, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The EU’s commitment to respect freedom and pluralism of the media, as well as the right to information and freedom of expression is enshrined in Art. 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, similar to the provision of Art. 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. See also the Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on media freedom and pluralism in the digital environment, 2014/C 32/04 available at [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204\(02\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204(02)&from=EN)

<sup>3</sup> The Media Pluralism Monitor publishes a yearly report on the risks for media pluralism in Europe. Media Pluralism Monitor, 2017 Report, available at <http://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2017-2/>

<sup>4</sup> Edelman, 2018 Executive summary, available at [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018\\_Edelman\\_TrustBarometer\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_Jan.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2018-10/2018_Edelman_TrustBarometer_Executive_Summary_Jan.pdf)

Volt strives to support innovative solutions to these challenges by challenging citizens to use available tools needed to navigate today's complex media landscapes. Volt therefore advocates for a range of measures to safeguard media freedom and pluralism throughout Europe and to foster the emergence of a transnational European public sphere. Volt also advocates for the strengthening of Europe's diverse cultural landscape in order to safeguard the pluralism that underlies the European project as a whole.

## 1. Ensure media pluralism

- **Encourage the treatment of quality journalism as a public good, not a commodity.**<sup>5</sup> While public broadcasting institutions in many European countries are expressions of an understanding of quality journalism as a public good, the quality media landscape also depends on a range of private actors. The vast majority of these actors struggle significantly to finance their endeavors with the tools available to them under free market criteria (i.e. advertising). In the digital realm, users often access news via social media, where non-transparent algorithms often cannot distinguish between quality and misleading media, and users expect to consume journalistic content for free. Some actors have moved their top quality content behind paywalls, excluding non-paying users. Others, like The Guardian, have so far refrained from doing so, relying instead on readers' subscriptions and a foundation model to keep their product accessible to all. Volt strongly encourages the exploration of innovative funding mechanisms to ensure the provision of quality journalism as a public good, safeguarding its non-excludable and non-rivalrous nature, all across Europe.
- **Work to ensure freedom of information and freedom of expression.** An engaged citizenry is not possible without the freedoms of information and expression.<sup>6</sup> These freedoms must be upheld on the Internet as well as offline.<sup>7</sup> Volt will work to ensure that relevant actions are taken to uphold freedom of

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Allern, Sigurd and Pollack, Ester, Journalism as a Public Good: A Scandinavian Perspective, available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320306842\\_Journalism\\_as\\_a\\_public\\_good\\_A\\_Scandinavian\\_perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320306842_Journalism_as_a_public_good_A_Scandinavian_perspective); ResearchGate, Journalism as a public good: A Scandinavian perspective, available at <http://niemanreports.org/articles/news-is-a-public-good/>

<sup>6</sup> "1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. 2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected." See Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, article 11, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf); The European Commission regards freedom of information and freedom of expression as fundamental pillars of democracy. See European Commission, Freedom of Expression, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/human-rights-and-democratic-governance/democracy/freedom-expression\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/human-rights-and-democratic-governance/democracy/freedom-expression_en); Official Journal of the European Union, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on media freedom and pluralism in the digital environment 2014/C 32/04, available at [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204\(02\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204(02)&from=EN)

<sup>7</sup> For more details see [Smart State, Guarantee digital rights and freedoms, Digital rights.](#)

information and expression in Europe, particularly in places where these freedoms are in danger. Volt therefore calls on the Commission and the Member States to fully support and strengthen the tools already developed with regard to the promotion and protection of the rights and freedoms enshrined in Art. 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, such as the Media Pluralism Monitor and the Council of Europe Platform for the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists.<sup>8</sup>

- **Ensure the safety and security of journalists.** The safety and security of journalists is fundamentally important for a pluralistic media landscape. Volt will support a range of measures to ensure journalists in Europe are safe and have secure working environments, e.g. by calling on the Member States to fully support the initiative launched by Reporters Without Borders for the creation of a Special Representative to the United Nations Secretary-General for the safety of journalists.<sup>9</sup>
- **Demand transparency of media ownership and influence.**<sup>10</sup> In order to be able to make informed decisions, consumers of media must be able to understand whose interests a medium serves. States are invited to ensure the independence of their audiovisual regulatory authorities, and to take appropriate measures to achieve genuine transparency of media ownership and funding sources, safeguard the right of journalists to protect their sources and to protect journalists from undue influence, and, depending on their national context, to prevent possible negative effects of excessive concentration of media ownership.<sup>11</sup>
- **Foster education on media literacy.**<sup>12</sup> Media literacy includes all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a person to access the media, to have a critical understanding of the media, and to interact with it.<sup>13</sup> In

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<sup>8</sup> European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union (2017/2209(INI)), available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2018-0204+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The Media Pluralism Monitor regularly publishes its findings on the risks concerning market plurality in the media sector. Media Pluralism Monitor, 2017 Report, available at <http://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2017-2/>

<sup>11</sup> Official Journal of the European Union, Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on media freedom and pluralism in the digital environment, 2014/C 32/04, available at [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204\(02\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52014XG0204(02)&from=EN)

<sup>12</sup> For more details see [Smart State, Build an enabling education system for the future, Curriculum reform.](#)

<sup>13</sup> This is the definition of the EU Media Literacy Expert Group (MLEG). The European Commission brings together stakeholders in media literacy in an Expert Group on Media Literacy which meets annually to identify, document and extend good practices in the field of media literacy, facilitate networking between different stakeholders, with the aim of cross-fertilisation, explore synergies

today's news and media landscape, it becomes ever more important to be able to distinguish between credible and *fake news* sources and content. Volt will seek to support educational measures undertaken by educational institutions such as schools, as well as aim to strengthen the role of civil society, public institutions and academia in this area.<sup>14</sup> As also mentioned in our Smart State chapter, Volt supports efforts to teach "critical thinking" in schools, not only in relation to media, but also with regard to information disseminated by individuals (e.g. politicians) and institutions (e.g. NGOs, civil society organizations, think tanks, political parties).

- **Push the EU to safeguard the democratic public sphere necessary for the functioning of a European democracy.**<sup>15</sup> In order for public spheres to be conducive to a functioning democracy, they need to be places where open and free deliberation amongst a variety of actors - citizens, civil society organizations, political actors, media, etc. - can take place. Volt will strengthen the ability of the EU to uphold its citizens' fundamental rights and to intervene effectively in cases where media freedom and pluralism are threatened in EU member states.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Volt calls on the Commission to propose an Anti-SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) Directive that will protect independent media from vexatious lawsuits intended to silence or intimidate them.<sup>17</sup> Volt will explore the introduction of further mechanisms that allow for the effective oversight of media independence at the European level, which would be conducted by a politically independent body.
- **Create a truly pan-European public sphere.** Volt shall encourage the EU to act where common rules in the Single Market may be necessary to prevent distortions in the functioning of the media arising from divergent Member State

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between different EU policies and support programmes and media literacy initiatives. For more information, see European Commission, Meeting of the Media Literacy Expert Group, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/meetings-media-literacy-expert-group>

<sup>14</sup> A survey conducted by the EU Media Literacy Expert Group in 2016 found that out of the main media literacy stakeholders, over a third were categorised as civil society, followed by public authorities and academia. More than two-thirds of all stakeholders did not have a statutory responsibility in this area but based their engagement on other motivations. For more information, see European Audiovisual Observatory, Mapping of Media Literacy Practices and Actions in EU-28, p. 3, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/document.cfm?doc\\_id=43878](http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/document.cfm?doc_id=43878)

<sup>15</sup> The Report of the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/sites/digital-agenda/files/HLG%20Final%20Report.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> For instance, by working to increase the effectiveness of the current procedure after Art. 7 TEU. For more information, see European Parliament, Rule of Law Concerns in Poland: How the Article 7 Procedure Would Work, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20180222STO98434/rule-of-law-concerns-in-poland-how-the-article-7-procedure-would-work>

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union (2017/2209(INI)), available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2018-0204+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

laws, especially with regard to online news and public media.<sup>18</sup> Volt will advocate for the creation of pan-European media outlets and for the dissemination of media content throughout the EU, in order to support the emergence of a transnational political public space and democracy, advocate for the cross-border accessibility of national public broadcasting content throughout the EU, and call for an increase of EU support and funding for training of journalists, as well as for quality and investigative journalism in the EU.

- **Incentivise greater media coverage of EU affairs.** Volt will encourage live coverage of national and European parliamentary gatherings by public media as a contribution to fostering the emergence of a pan-European public sphere. It will call for practical measures at the EU and member state levels to incentivize more general media coverage of EU affairs. At the EU institutional level, this might include encouraging regular interviews of Presidents of EU institutions with panels of national media outlets from across the EU.<sup>19</sup> The goal would be to promote a deeper general understanding of the European dimensions of various national policies.<sup>20</sup>
- **Support the standards put forth by the Council of Europe to ensure media pluralism in Europe.**<sup>21</sup>

## 2. Fight to ensure that strong and independent public media exists in the member states

- **Ensure sustainable funding for public media.** Encourage member states to grant public funding to media organizations only on the basis of non-discriminatory, objective, and transparent criteria. Work to ensure that a funding provision exists for media which are essential for pluralism (including geographical, linguistic, cultural and political pluralism), but are not commercially viable. Ensure that the EU has the ability to intervene in cases where state budget cuts to media actors endanger media freedom and pluralism. Specify that any EU funding is contingent on the adherence to core EU values as specified in Art. 2 TEU.
- **Ensure media's independence from government interference.** Ensure that public media in the EU member states are free from government interference. Ensure that public media are overseen by independent bodies, such as media

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<sup>18</sup> The Report of The High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/sites/digital-agenda/files/HLG%20Final%20Report.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Council of Europe, Recommendations and declarations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in the field of media and information society, available at <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680645b44>



councils, that are composed of a politically and culturally diverse membership.<sup>22</sup>

- **Work to ensure a healthy balance between public and private media journalism.** Public non-profit media have a special role to play in maintaining pluralism and democratic values; were media to only follow free-market principles, cultural and linguistic diversity in Europe would be imperiled. However, in some countries, concerns exist regarding the risk of unfair competition. Recognizing the different legal and organizational contexts in the Member States, Volt will advocate for the strengthening or implementation of relevant control mechanisms, such as the introduction of independent media councils or media ombudspersons, to ensure that a healthy balance between public non-profit and private media exists.
- **Push for the exploration and establishment of innovative mechanisms to involve citizens in public media's programme selection.**
- **Promote the creation of a European media space.** Call for an increase of EU support and funding for the training of journalists as well as for quality investigative journalism in the EU.

### **3. Create a European Public Broadcasting Platform**

- **Work towards the establishment of a common European Broadcasting platform<sup>23</sup>** in order to supply EU citizens with an effective means of receiving information about the political situation in the various member states. Encourage the European Broadcast to serve as a platform for translated content from the national services, with content being made available through multiple channels (radio, television, and internet). The French-German channel Arte<sup>24</sup> may serve as an example.

### **4. Support strong and dynamic cultural and creative industry sectors**

- **Stress the importance of the cultural and creative industry sectors for vibrant democracies.** Cultural and creative industries are vital to vibrant, pluralistic, and accessible public spheres, as they complement the media in processing information and cultural content in any society. Politically relevant debates are often the subject of literature, music, or theater productions.

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<sup>22</sup> The Report of the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, A free and pluralistic media to sustain European democracy, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/sites/digital-agenda/files/HLG%20Final%20Report.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 3 May 2018 on media pluralism and media freedom in the European Union (2017/2209(INI)), consideration 62, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2018-0204+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

<sup>24</sup> ARTE, Home, available at <https://www.arte.tv/de/>

Furthermore, culture and creativity play an important role in strengthening the unique identity of places. They can also be important drivers and enablers for innovation and entrepreneurship. Culture also has an important role to play in promoting social inclusion.<sup>25</sup> Europe's shared cultural heritage has served as a unifying force ever since the commencement of European integration after the Second World War, contributing to a shared sense of belonging across the EU. Volt fully supports the European Union's "unity in diversity" motto and stresses the importance of the cultural and creative industry sectors in fostering constructive dialogues within Europe's democracies.

- **Call for an increase in EU funding for transnational cultural cooperation in Europe.** EU funding for culture, through the Erasmus+ programme, supports programmes for Europeans to study, train, gain experience, and volunteer abroad,<sup>26</sup> thus contributing to exchange among Europeans and fostering the emergence of a shared European identity. Funding for the audiovisual, cultural, and creative sector is provided through the Creative Europe programme.<sup>27</sup> The EU also supports projects promoting conservation and research in the area of Europe's cultural heritage.<sup>28</sup> Volt advocates for an increase in EU funding for transnational cultural cooperation.
- **Decrease the administrative burden to receive funding.** EU funding is often associated with an extremely high administrative burden for applicants, requiring a sizeable investment of time and coordination. This makes it disproportionately difficult for small actors and civil society organizations to apply for funding. At the same time, external funding is of existential importance for many of these smaller actors, with EU funding playing a significant role with regard to their potential to engage in cross-border collaborations. Volt advocates for a decrease in this administrative burden while ensuring that necessary transparency and accountability criteria are upheld.
- **Foster measures to reach the goals of the UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.**<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> European Commission, Culture, available at

[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/themes/culture/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/themes/culture/)

<sup>26</sup> European Commission, Erasmus+, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/>

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, Creative Europe, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/>

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, Cultural Heritage, available at

<https://ec.europa.eu/research/environment/index.cfm?pg=cultural>

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO, Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005, available at [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=31038&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

The Convention has been ratified by the European Union. See UNESCO, Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, available at

<http://www.unesco.org/eri/la/convention.asp?KO=31038&language=E&order=alpha>

## B. Open public data

Digitalisation, increased connectivity, openness and transparency are leading to changes in citizen expectations with regard to communicating with, and accessing the data of, public authorities. Open data - data collected by public institutions which is shared with the public - provides an ideal and effective gateway for citizen empowerment. It can provide an objective basis for analysis, debate, and education, as well as empower citizens to make innovative use of the data available to them. It can also be used to foster trust in government institutions, as public authorities have the opportunity to become more effective and efficient, and citizens have the ability to verify political realities. In order for this to happen, however, citizens need the ability and skills to interpret this data. Our call to open public data on the one hand entails a strong commitment to the protection of private data on the other hand, as well as a call to foster educative measures with regard to data interpretation literacy.

- **Strongly advocate for the public availability and openness of public data.** Advocate for understanding open data as a public good, meaning it is non-excludable (everyone has access to it) and non-rivalrous (usage by one person does not reduce the availability to others). Encourage the sharing of public data under an open license and in an open format. Specifically, insist on open-source character of publicly funded research.
- **Insist on the protection of private data and ensure that published public data does not compromise privacy.** Insist on the protection of citizens' privacy with regard to the possibility of aggregating large amounts of data collected by government actors and private authorities. Ensure that no data may be linked to citizens' personal information such as name, identification number, address, etc. Call for an increase in research about measures to safeguard the privacy of citizens, as data about them is collected by public (and private) authorities over a prolonged period of time.<sup>30</sup>
- **Advocate for a general increase in government transparency.**<sup>31</sup> Encourage making government data, priorities, and findings regularly accessible to citizens in a way that is easily understood, e.g. by regularly publishing "user friendly" budget reports and by shedding light on legislative processes. Encourage the sharing of data and services between administrations in order to trigger savings and efficiencies.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Practical Approaches to Big Data Privacy Over Time, available at <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2018/03/BigDataPrivacy>

<sup>31</sup> For more details see [Smart State, Administrative effectiveness to reduce waste and improve service quality, Glass State](#), and [Smart State, Administrative effectiveness to reduce waste and improve service quality, Digital revolution, in e-Governance](#).

<sup>32</sup> Estonia is using this model effectively with X-Road. For more information see E-estonia, Interoperability Services, available at <https://e-estonia.com/solutions/interoperability-services/x-road/>

- **Stress the potential positive effects of open data** with regard to knowledge building, citizen engagement, and innovation.
- **Make sure that all EU member states and their local authorities comply with the Open Data Charter by 2020.**<sup>33</sup> Data should be (1) open by default (i.e. all data gathered by public institutions is published automatically, unless governments can justify keeping it undisclosed), (2) published in a timely and comprehensible manner, (3) accessible and usable (machine readable and under an open license - this ensures that not only companies with highly paid staff can access it, but also ordinary people like high school students or interested retirees), (4) comparable and interoperable, (5) used for improved governance and citizen engagement, and (6) used for inclusive development and innovation.

## II. Strengthen the ability of citizens to influence politics

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees for all people “the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives”. The functioning of the European Union itself is “founded on representative democracy” as well as participatory democracy,<sup>34</sup> with a wealth of different variations of democracy at local, national and transnational levels. Everywhere throughout Europe, citizens choose their representatives through the act of elections. Yet electoral democracy is complemented, and can be further strengthened, via elements of participatory democracy. Political innovation in general, and digital technologies in particular, have given rise to a variety of tools and processes that make it possible for citizens to more actively take part in democratic civic life beyond elections alone.

Through widespread public participation in civic affairs and the use of democratic tools, citizens can help assure that their individual and collective interests are being heard and responded to by governments that are held accountable by citizens. Volt advocates for a strengthening of EU democracy and its member states’ democracies through the creation of additional accountability mechanisms. Starting locally, citizens are encouraged to elevate issues to the European level by collaborating across borders using both existing tools - such as freedom of information requests or complaints to the European Commission and EU Ombudsman - and new channels for citizen participation, such as European Citizens’ Initiatives. Volt will engage in a range of capacity-building activities with the goal of enabling meaningful citizen engagement, allowing citizens, governmental institutions, and other actors to enter into a

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<sup>33</sup> The Open Data Charter, available at <https://opendatacharter.net/>

<sup>34</sup> Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, article 10, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:115:0013:0045:en:PDF>

meaningful exchange. In doing so, Volt will strengthen citizens' ability to influence politics beyond elections alone.

## **A. Improve accessibility of elections at European, national and local levels<sup>35</sup>**

- **Ensure that all European citizens have the ability to vote in free and fair elections.** The right to vote is one of the fundamental rights of European citizens. However, several groups of people - such as the disabled, elderly or sick - are currently experiencing difficulties exercising their right to vote due to a lack of accessibility of elections.<sup>36</sup> Volt will push for the removal of current barriers to participation in elections, such as restrictions on legal capacity, lack of access to information and polling stations, and a general lack of awareness among affected groups.<sup>37</sup> Ensure that organization and scheduling of elections encourage high voter participation.
- **Encourage EU citizens to exercise their rights to vote in the member state in which they live.** Remove barriers currently hindering EU nationals living in another EU Member State from voting in elections in which they have the right to vote. Encourage Member States to make it easier for mobile EU citizens to register to vote and ease the administrative burden.<sup>38</sup>
- **Promote measures to incentivize mobile EU citizens to take advantage of their rights and opportunities to participate in their home country's civic and political life.**
- **Explore e-voting.**<sup>39</sup> Advocate for the further development and implementation of e-voting, once security concerns have been successfully addressed. Encourage further research around the issue of e-voting, with the goal of providing all European citizens with a secure, anonymous, verifiable, and accessible electronic vote.

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<sup>35</sup> For more details see [EU Reform, Institutional Reform and Governance, The legislative branch](#) and [EU Reform, Institutional Reform and Governance, The executive branch](#)

<sup>36</sup> Inclusion Europe, Recommendations for Accessible Elections in Europe, available at [http://inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Policy\\_Recommendations\\_EN.pdf](http://inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Policy_Recommendations_EN.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Inclusion Europe, Accessible Elections, available at <http://www.inclusion-europe.eu/accessible-elections-2/>

<sup>38</sup> European Citizen Action Service, Obstacles to Political Rights of EU Citizens: Survey Report, available at <http://ecas.org/obstacles-political-rights-eu-citizens/>

<sup>39</sup> E-voting is an aspect of e-democracy. ECAS, 2019, Digital Democracy Report, available at [https://ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/DDD2019-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://ecas.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/DDD2019-Report_Final.pdf)

## **B. Strengthen the ability of citizens to influence politics beyond elections**

Volt is strongly engaged in democratising Europe at every level - locally, nationally and transnationally - with a specific focus on giving Europeans a voice regardless of whether they live in their home country or not. Importantly, Volt actively works towards democratizing Europe by treating the European Union as a unique political space for action. Furthermore, Volt is deeply convinced that citizens can provide valuable information, opinions, innovation, leadership, and action, which can contribute to solving local, national, European, and global challenges. In today's fast-paced environment, in order to counteract estrangement between citizens and their political representatives, more productive interaction is needed between them.

The goal is to empower citizens and make them active participants in the political process, creating an environment more conducive for citizens to voice their concerns, offer their ideas, take initiative, and hold governments and their representatives accountable. Government officials and politicians, on the other hand, will be empowered to be closer to their constituencies, able to better understand their challenges, and able to tap into and build on the capacity of their community in order to solve identified challenges more effectively and collaboratively. Citizen engagement shall be promoted as a key factor in shaping the future of European democracy.

### **1. Strengthen transnational European democracy**

- **Utilize and promote the European Union as a unique transnational democratic space.** Volt recognizes the EU as a unique political space that can and should be used for citizens to articulate and organize their political demands. This may happen through coordinated action using established tools at the European level (such as European Citizens' Initiatives, public consultations and petitions) and informal, innovative actions. Volt will enable citizens and civil society organizations to share their challenges and solutions across borders, and learn from each other's best practices. Many regions and local communities across Europe can identify similar challenges. Volt encourages citizens and civil society organizations to organize together around these challenges to find solutions, and bring their challenges to the attention of the relevant institutions and politicians, if necessary.
- **Diminish the threshold to file a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI).** The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) allows EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies by allowing them to call on the European Commission to make a legislative proposal on matters where the EU has a competence to legislate.<sup>40</sup> However, a citizens' initiative currently has to be

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<sup>40</sup> The rules and procedures governing the citizens' initiative are detailed in Regulation (EU) 2019/788 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the European citizens' initiative

backed by at least one million EU citizens from at least 7 member states, with a minimum number of signatories<sup>41</sup> required in each of these 7 member states.<sup>42</sup> Volt wants to lower the threshold necessary for a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) by cutting the minimum number of signatories in half, to 500,000.

- **Promote the establishment of a pan-European discussion platform for European citizens.** Europeans everywhere are faced by similar challenges, yet, currently, there is a lack of spaces beyond social media (which pose privacy problems and the algorithms of which are not conducive to substantial debate) where issues can be discussed not only across language barriers but also with relevant stakeholders. A pan-European moderated discussion platform should aim to identify issues Europeans care about in order to then facilitate a moderated exchange beyond party lines among citizens and politicians, political institutions, civil society organizations, and other relevant interest groups. Discussions and exchanges should be moderated by an independent, multi-stakeholder entity adhering to a clear set of principles and values. Facilitation should involve a strong commitment to clear (n)etiquette and a bridging of party lines.

## **2. Strengthen tools for direct citizen engagement in politics**

- **Introduce digital platforms to communicate with administrations.** Administrations shall be incentivised to introduce open digital platforms through which citizens can actively participate in relevant political discussions and decision-making processes.<sup>43</sup> Subjects discussed on these kinds of platforms might include local infrastructure proposals or plans for restructuring public spaces. Deliberative processes taking place on such platforms should be transparent, respectful, and take existing administrative rules, frameworks and procedures into account. Participation should be free to all interested persons affected by a particular measure. The online deliberative efforts taking place on the digital platform should be complemented by face-to-face consultations. The highest privacy and security standards should be implemented on the digital platform.
- **Encourage the introduction of citizen assemblies.** Citizen assemblies are an innovative tool to allow citizens to deliberate complex political issues. They can

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available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1558082143592&uri=CELEX%3A32019R0788>

<sup>41</sup> The number of signatories varies from country to country. See European Commission, The European Citizens' Initiative: Minimum number of signatories per member state, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/signatories>

<sup>42</sup> Since its inception in 2012 only 4 European initiatives have met these requirements. See European Commission, The European Citizen's Initiative: basic facts, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/basic-facts>

<sup>43</sup> An excellent example is the platform meinberlin, which is the citizen engagement platform of the city of Berlin, Germany. See Berlin.de, meinberlin, available at <https://mein.berlin.de>

increase the quality and legitimacy of political decisions, especially when the results of citizen assemblies directly influence policy or spending of local funds.<sup>44</sup> Citizen assemblies should be constructed in such a way that diverse groups of citizens are randomly represented, so that the diversity of the populace is mirrored in the composition of the assembly; this diverse group of people then meets in order to tackle a specific issue. A clear process - involving comprehensive briefings and independent expert input - should enable these citizens to shape informed opinions. These can then be debated in a group, in order to reach a shared output. Respective politicians should be held to account for the implementation of the citizen assemblies' output; for this reason it is important to secure the commitment and support of local politicians from the very beginning. Volt advocates for the implementation of clear mechanisms to trigger a citizen assembly, such as requiring a quorum of signatures to be reached within a particular time frame.

- **Promote participatory budgeting.** Participatory budgeting allows citizens to directly influence and allocate government investments, provided that political buy-in and a respective budget exist.<sup>45</sup> The process of allocating the budget collectively entails a process of deliberation and learning, with the goal of allocating budgets in such a way as to serve the public interest. The set-up of participants should reflect the diversity of the community affected by the budgeting measure. Training and capacity-building for citizens should be provided. Lastly, it needs to be ensured that the process is linked to assemblies or councils that have the power to supervise implementation by the administration.<sup>46</sup> Thus constructed, participatory budgeting may strengthen citizens' democratic experience and impact. Implementation of participatory budgeting at European level should also be explored.
- **Explore further political innovations for implementation.** All over Europe, innovative ideas regarding the topic of how best to involve citizens in deliberative and political decision-making processes arise all the time. Volt shall

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<sup>44</sup> Best practices in this area are Ireland, see The Citizens' Assembly, available at <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/>; and the city of Gdansk, Poland, see How the Poles are making democracy work again, available at <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2017-11-22/solutions-how-the-poles-are-making-democracy-work-again-in-gdansk/>

<sup>45</sup> Best practices of participatory budgeting are Madrid, Paris, Antwerp, and the Netherlands. For example, in Madrid, 100 million EUR are distributed each year via digital citizen deliberation, See Decide Madrid, Decide qué proyectos hará el Ayuntamiento con 100 millones, available at <https://decide.madrid.es/>; For Paris, France, see [https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/plugins/download/PB\\_in\\_Paris.pdf](https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/plugins/download/PB_in_Paris.pdf); In Antwerp, Belgium, a citizen budget also exists, see <https://www.antwerpen.be/nl/overzicht/burgerbegroting-district-antwerpen/nieuws> (in Flemish Dutch); For the Netherlands, see <http://democraticchallenge.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/We-zijn-begonnen.-Burgerbegroting-in-Nederland-Joop-Hofman-publicatie.pdf> (in Dutch); In Paris, France, see <https://participedia.net/en/cases/participatory-budgeting-paris-france>

<sup>46</sup> Yves Sintomer, Carsten Herzberg, Anja Röcke, From Porto Alegre to Europe: Potentials and Limitations of Participatory Budgeting, available at <http://www.eukn.eu/fileadmin/Lib/files/EUKN/2013/From-Porto-Alegre%20to%20Europe.pdf>.



continuously explore such novel ideas and approaches. For instance, diverse citizen juries could be involved in shaping the debate around complex and highly politicized European decisions. Citizen audits could complement already-existing checks and balances on EU institutions.<sup>47</sup>

### **3. Empower citizens and governments to take concrete action**

- **Enable and empower citizen and government actors to utilize citizen engagement techniques.** Volt advocates for a new way of doing politics, one where citizens feel empowered to actively participate in democratic life and feel their voice makes a difference. Citizens shall be enabled to organize in their communities around issues that are important to them and to act upon their values; they shall also be enabled to hold their government and politicians accountable. Government officials, institutions, and politicians everywhere, on the other hand, should be more responsive to, and might even encourage, citizen action. If citizens are at the centre of political decision-making, and government actors know how to respond to such engagement, democracy will be strengthened.
  - **Enable and empower *citizens* to utilize citizen engagement techniques and tools.** Volt strongly advocates for an increase in funding for citizen engagement projects throughout the European civil society sector. Volt also advocates for the introduction of citizen engagement techniques, strategies and tools into educational programmes at the high school and university levels. Such educational measures might be achieved by adding citizen engagement to existing curricula, or they might take the shape of additional (one day or several days) civic engagement classes. Moreover, community organizing and leadership development trainings shall be conducted in local communities, with the goal of actively educating citizens on how to organize and exercise their rights. Volt will also aim to empower citizens through community organizing campaigns, where citizens select the campaign issue and receive training in campaigning and leadership. Volt will thus create and foster the emergence of new community leaders.
  - **Enable and empower *government institutions* to be responsive to citizen engagement.** Volt advocates for the training of government officials and civil servants in the basics of citizen engagement, also with regard to fostering a supportive institutional and organisational culture of respecting and supporting citizen initiatives throughout government. This effort will be helped by the creation of online platforms that enable interactions between citizens and institutions on a local, national, and European level. Institutions shall be enabled to include more or stronger deliberative elements to their decision-making processes, encouraging

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<sup>47</sup> Following an example of a citizens' audit on a local scale in the Netherlands. See XI Update, Citizen Audit Mobilizes Citizen's Insights, available at [http://jeroenvanurk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/10\\_Citizen-Audit-Mobilizes-Citizens-Insights\\_IIMC-Region-X-Newsletter\\_aug2015-1-1.pdf](http://jeroenvanurk.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/10_Citizen-Audit-Mobilizes-Citizens-Insights_IIMC-Region-X-Newsletter_aug2015-1-1.pdf).

well-structured public discussions using analogue forums as well as relevant technology.

- **Enable and empower *politicians* to be responsive to citizen engagement.** Volt will also encourage trainings on community organizing and other citizen engagement frameworks to different political actors, in order to contribute to a general change in culture within the political landscape.