DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability"

Inclusive Accountability Toolbox

Deliverable 2.3 – Prototype of a Civic Accountability Mechanism

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Inclusive Accountability Toolbox

Concepts of Inclusive Accountability Mechanisms for Public Communication in the Digital Age

DIACOMET

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Executive Summary

The **Inclusive Accountability Toolbox** presents nine concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms developed to strengthen public communication in the digital age. Developed within the DIACOMET research project across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, the toolbox explores how citizens, media, and public institutions can engage in meaningful and accountable ways in today's evolving communication environment.

The toolbox is grounded in a **two-phase Delphi study** (177 experts in Round 1; 103 experts in Round 2) conducted across eight countries and at the EU level. Experts in education, communication, media, technology, and regulation identified five key challenges in public communication: (1) a decline of respectful dialogue; (2) limited transparency of public institutions and media; (3) a growing influence of platforms and AI; (4) a sense of disconnection between citizens, media, and public institutions; (5) and insufficient media and digital literacy. Across national contexts, **a shared problem definition** emerged: Citizens, journalists, and members of public institutions feel they are not being heard in public communication.

In this toolbox, inclusive accountability is based on the idea that **responsibility for meaningful and accountable public communication is shared by both institutional and public actors**. It goes beyond traditional profession-centered models of accountability by linking media accountability with civic accountability. Rather than a one-way process of oversight, inclusive accountability is a reciprocal approach in which all communication actors help shape the quality of public debate. The effectiveness of inclusive accountability depends on **four preconditions** that form its pillars:

1. **Inclusion**: Actively reaching out to underrepresented groups and sustaining their meaningful participation.
2. **Proximity**: Embedding inclusive accountability in accessible physical, digital, or hybrid spaces that connect directly to people's lived experiences.
3. **Reciprocity**: Ensuring public input is acknowledged, translated into collective outcomes, and visibly reflected in institutional responses.
4. **Adaptability**: Remaining flexible and responsive to changing social, political, and technological environments.

Through interdisciplinary Design Thinking sessions in the eight countries, citizens and experts co-created nine **concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms**. These include an accountability body for dialogic communication (Estonia), a community-embedded local media service (the Netherlands), a community-oriented code of conduct (Austria), a deliberative local forum (Hungary), a democracy game (Austria), an approach to Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning (Lithuania), a multi-purpose method for structured listening, a learning experience for decision-making processes (Slovenia), and a non-commercial multi-chamber online platform for participation (Finland).

Since these are not finalized prototypes, stakeholders will assess their feasibility and explore **how the toolbox can inform existing or new forms of accountability** in public communication in the project's final phase, contributing to dialogic communication across Europe.

Introduction

Public communication today takes place in complex, rapidly evolving environments. Digital platforms expand both the reach and speed of information, while traditional boundaries between communication and media professionals, institutions, and audiences are increasingly blurred. In this context, **responsibility for shaping the public debate** is no longer concentrated in a single actor or institution. Diverse perspectives influence how information is produced, shared, and received, and shape the credibility and legitimacy of communication processes.

At the same time, existing traditional instruments of media accountability – such as codes of ethics, press councils, or ombudspersons – operate alongside a public that is increasingly able to respond and engage. These dynamics create new possibilities for dialogue between the public, media, and public institutions but also require mechanisms that **connect professional standards with the experiences of those outside traditional media professions**.

This toolbox presents nine concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms: practical illustrations of how citizens, media, and public institutions can engage in meaningful and accountable ways. It shows how the preconditions of inclusive accountability can be translated into **tools that strengthen public debate** in the digital age.

Inclusive accountability aims to include all communication actors, promote engagement, and encourage shared responsibility in public communication. The concepts in this toolbox are presented as prototypes rather than established

practices, offering innovative approaches to support inclusive accountability in public communication.

The toolbox brings together three elements:

1. **Empirical foundation:** A background on the empirical findings of the two-phase Delphi study that preceded the development of the concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms.

2. **Preconditions for inclusive accountability:** A shared understanding of what inclusive accountability requires to function effectively in practice.

3. **Concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms:** Nine examples of concepts suggesting how the preconditions for inclusive accountability can be translated into actionable prototypes in diverse contexts.

The toolbox was developed within **DIACOMET**, a research collaboration across eight European countries: Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. This process commenced with a two-phase Delphi study, followed by interdisciplinary sessions using the Design Thinking method (for details, see methodology, p. 17).

The concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms were developed in **co-creation with citizens and experts** in education, communication and media, technology, and regulation. While these concepts provide an initial direction, they have not yet been fully developed and must consider national contexts and differences in political and media systems.

Contextual Foundation

To ground the development of inclusive accountability mechanisms in empirical evidence, this toolbox builds on the results of a two-phased Delphi study conducted in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and at the EU level. In the first phase, experts in education, communication, media, technology, and regulation identified key issues in public communication. In the second phase, they explored potential solution directions to these issues.

Despite differences in national contexts, political systems, and media landscapes, a set of shared concerns and solutions emerged. These insights formed the basis of the subsequent interdisciplinary sessions, which were guided by the Design Thinking method. Building on this common foundation, citizens and experts from each country co-developed a concept of inclusive accountability mechanisms tailored to their respective national contexts.

Key issues in Public Communication

Experts identified several overlapping challenges in public communication across the eight countries and at the EU level. A central issue was the **decline of respectful and constructive dialogue** in public discourse. Public debate is increasingly perceived as polarized, emotional, and sometimes aggressive – particularly online. Experts noted a lack of fact-based argumentation and insufficient mutual listening. Furthermore, communication between institutions and citizens is often experienced as one-directional and lacking reciprocity.

Another recurring theme was the **limited transparency and accountability of public institutions and media**.

Specifically, experts stressed that citizens are often not adequately informed about how information is produced and distributed, especially when AI tools are involved, which undermines trust in journalism and government communication.

The **growing influence of digital platforms and artificial intelligence** was identified as another significant challenge. Experts raised concerns about how these platforms and their algorithms shape public debate. This concern was especially strong in Hungary due to the government's control of much of the media, which it uses to spread disinformation and undermine independent journalism. At the EU level, experts emphasized the lack of knowledge regarding technological developments within institutions, leading to a lack of clear policies and coordination on this topic.

Experts also emphasized a **sense of disconnection between citizens, media, and public institutions**. Many citizens do not see themselves represented in public communication, and they lack opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue. Experts pointed out that current communication practices are often too top-down.

Many of the issues raised are reinforced by a **lack of media and digital literacy**. Experts stressed that it is becoming increasingly difficult for anyone to evaluate the reliability of information or understand the influence of digital platforms.

Approaches to Solutions

In response to issues in public communication, experts proposed a range of approaches. Despite national differences, the experts emphasized that any solution requires shared responsibility among the stakeholders

involved in public communication, including citizens, civil society organizations, public institutions, the media, and online platforms.

First, the experts identified the development of **formats for structured and inclusive dialogue** as a key priority. They proposed various initiatives, including forums, debates, and moderation. These formats were valued for providing spaces where diverse voices could be heard, and participation would have visible outcomes. In addition to creating spaces for dialogue, experts in all countries emphasized the importance of cultivating a culture of respectful and inclusive communication within these spaces.

Second, the experts identified **improving transparency and accountability** as another priority. They called for greater openness in how public institutions and the media make decisions and communicate with the public. This includes transparency regarding funding, ownership, and content production, especially regarding the use of AI. In addition, the experts emphasized the necessity of enforceable legal frameworks to ensure these standards are met.

Third, many experts advocated for **increased regulation and oversight of platforms**, especially at the EU level. They stressed that unregulated platforms undermine the quality of public debate, and that technical solutions must be paired with legal and institutional responses.

Finally, the experts emphasized the importance of **strengthening media and digital literacy** to promote critical thinking and respectful communication. Initial suggestions included providing early and lifelong education to help citizens critically engage with media content and understand how information is produced and disseminated.

Problem Definition

Based on the first two rounds of the Delphi study, identifying the key issues and solution approaches, researchers from the eight countries jointly reflected on the cross-country findings and formulated **a shared problem definition**. Although national contexts differ, a common foundational issue emerged that required further exploration in the next round:

"**Citizens, journalists, and members of public institutions feel they are not being heard** in public communication. This sense of not being heard is a foundational condition that shapes and amplifies other problems in public communication, such as being involved in decision making processes, or the hateful and polarized public debate. Despite many opportunities to participate, both offline and online, this remains a **persistent and fundamental issue** in public communication.

A **multi-stakeholder approach** is needed to address this problem, moving beyond the idea that citizens alone must adapt. Citizens, journalists, and public institutions together have a **responsibility to create spaces where all voices can genuinely be heard**."

This cross-country problem definition served as the starting point for the interdisciplinary Design Thinking sessions. The solution approaches identified in the first two rounds provided inspiration and direction for the concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms, which were developed through co-creation in each country in the final round.

Preconditions for Inclusive Accountability

Inclusive accountability builds on the premise that **responsibility for public communication is shared and involves both institutional and public actors**. It moves beyond traditional profession-centered models of accountability by connecting media accountability at the organizational level with civic accountability at the level of citizens.

Rather than treating accountability as a one-way process of oversight or complaints, inclusive accountability is a process in which **citizens, media, and public institutions** all play a role in shaping the quality of public debate in the digital age.

To function in practice, inclusive accountability requires a **set of preconditions** to be in place. These preconditions describe the key aspects that inclusive accountability mechanisms must fulfill to be meaningful and effective. Together, they can be understood as the four pillars for inclusive accountability.

The **concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms** presented in this toolbox can be understood as illustrative ways of responding to these preconditions and operationalizing them in specific contexts. Although the concepts take diverse forms, they all relate to the four preconditions of inclusive accountability.

Inclusive Accountability

1. Inclusion
2. Proximity
3. Reciprocity
4. Adaptability

1. Inclusion as a Continuous Effort

Inclusive accountability actively incorporates diverse voices and perspectives, starting from those who often feel unheard. Inclusion is not just about opening participation to anyone – it begins with deliberately reaching out to underrepresented or marginalized groups and continues as an ongoing effort to sustain their engagement.

In practice, this means inclusive accountability mechanisms can focus on:
- Removing procedural barriers to ensure broader participation, like **Pupils Shaping School Decisions** (Slovenia, p. 15).
- Moving beyond one-directional communication models by encouraging constructive dialogue over top-down messaging, which is suggested in the **Community-Oriented Code of Conduct** (Austria, p. 10).

The inclusive accountability mechanisms in this toolbox are designed with this precondition in mind: reaching those who feel unheard and maintaining a continuous effort to ensure these voices are listened to and represented in collective outcomes. Inclusion is thus both a starting principle and a continuous practice.

2. Proximity to Everyday Life

Inclusive accountability depends on being grounded in the realities of people's everyday lives. It requires a tangible connection between citizens, media, and public institutions. This connection ensures that inclusive accountability is not experienced as abstract or distant, but as something that relates directly to people's experiences and concerns.

In practice, this may involve:
- Physical spaces for face-to-face interaction, such as a **Deliberative Local Forum** (Hungary, p. 11) and **Community Connect Media** (the Netherlands, p. 9).
- Digital and hybrid formats that allow flexible engagement, like **VaikutaSuomi.fi [InfluenceFinland.fi]** (Finland, p. 16).

Regardless of format, the precondition remains the same: inclusive accountability must create proximity. This means ensuring that engagement with authorities, institutions, media, and their representatives is accessible and recognizable, and that the lived experiences of the public are meaningfully connected to their communication practices.

3. Reciprocity in Engagement

Inclusive accountability becomes meaningful when participants feel their voices are genuinely heard. While many citizens can express their views and voice their opinions, expression alone is often insufficient. Their experiences must be acknowledged, acted upon, and reflected in institutional responses or decision-making processes.

Examples of reciprocal engagement include:
- Listening to individual views and translating them into collective insights for institutions to accurately act upon, as in *Listening Loop: Framework for Inclusive Accountability* (Switzerland, p. 14).
- Providing transparent feedback, as with the *Accountability Body for Dialogic Communication* (Estonia, p. 8), which evaluates communication and reports back to participants.

Central to this precondition is reciprocity. Reciprocity as part of dialogic communication ethics (conceptualized in D1.1 within DIACOMET) refers to the commitment to negotiation and dialogue between citizens, media, and public institutions, which may have diverse or even conflicting motives and interests. Inclusive accountability depends on such reciprocal exchange: institutions respond transparently to input from the public, and citizens can see the effects of their engagement, reinforcing a continuous cycle of mutual accountability.

4. Adaptability to Context

Inclusive accountability means being flexible and responsive to changing social, political, and technological contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all model. How inclusive accountability is organized must be able to adapt to different environments while maintaining a connection to people's everyday lives.

Adaptability includes:
- Transferring skills and practices across different sectors, as in the *Forum for Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning* (Lithuania, p. 13), where dialogic communication skills are translated to multiple contexts.
- Responding flexibly manner to existing infrastructure and partnerships with local authorities and organizations, such as the *Democracy Game: From Democratic Duty to Democratic Desire* (Austria, p. 12).

This precondition ensures that inclusive accountability remains relevant over time. By allowing formats and practices to evolve while maintaining committed to the other preconditions, adaptability enables inclusive accountability to be responsive to the rapidly changing communication environment.

Concepts of Inclusive Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability Body for Dialogic Communication | *Estonia*

The 'Accountability Body for Dialogic Communication' is an independent advisory board that provides guidance, advice, and recommendations on the quality of public communication and public debate by creating a shared dialogic communication culture.

Why?
The independent body monitors public communication culture and contributes to public discourse in a responsible and reflective manner, helping to create a safe and reflective space for discussion of difficult topics. It supports the development of shared standards of dialogic communication by clarifying what is acceptable for constructive public communication. It also strengthens accountability in communication through its role in evaluating how the state communicates with its citizens.

Who?
The 'Accountability Body for Dialogic Communication' is aimed at society-at-large, with particular attention to groups and individuals who are underrepresented or hesitant to engage in public discussion

The body itself consists of politically neutral members with various backgrounds:
- Public communication professionals (e.g., journalists, editors)
- Respected public figures (e.g., writers, linguists, cultural figures)
- Academics and researchers
- Experts from related fields such as law, human rights, and conflict resolution
- Representatives of politically neutral institutions

How?
The 'Accountability Body for Dialogic Communication' proactively monitors public discourse and assesses the quality of communication in public debates. It takes a case-based, example-driven approach that uses concrete instances of public communication to make abstract principles of good dialogue understandable and applicable. Through the analysis, the board identifies patterns, challenges, and opportunities for improving communication practices.

Rather than acting as a regulatory or punitive body, and without addressing individual disputes or taking sides in ongoing conflicts, the board emphasizes learning and guidance.

Membership in the board is rotating, and participation is voluntary, ensuring independence and freedom of institutional or political influence.

"Change is best pursued through kindness – not by saying what you did wrong, but by suggesting a better way and leaving the choice to individuals in a democratic society."

Community Connect Media | *The Netherlands*

'**Community Connect Media' is a public, community-based local media service that combines journalism with direct civic engagement. It has a permanent, walk-in newsroom in the local community, where residents can meet journalists to ask questions, and discuss local issues with each other, and with other residents, local politicians or entrepreneurs. In addition, it operates a mobile media unit that travels to different locations to reach different types of audiences and encourages diverse conversations.**

Why?
The local media service 'Community Connect Media' reduces the perceived distance between journalists and citizens. By having a visible and accessible physical presence within the community, journalists become more approachable, and residents gain a better understanding of journalistic practices.

For journalists, this creates ongoing dialogue that goes beyond collecting insights for news production, helping them understand what truly matters to residents and strengthening their role as representatives of public concerns.

The mobile element ensures a broader range of voices is heard. By moving into different neighborhoods and social contexts, the service reaches groups that are often overlooked, thereby increasing the diversity of perspectives reflected in journalism.

"As a journalist, to find and connect with people, you must be mobile – be present where things are happening. That's how you build a social network."

Who?
- Journalists
- Citizens from the local community
- Local politicians, entrepreneurs, and civil society organizations

How?
Accessibility is central to 'Community Connect Media.' The local media service is in an open, everyday public place, such as a library, train station or community center, allowing people to easily walk in and engage with journalists. While conducting editorial work in public spaces involves certain risks, the approach is rooted in trust: trusting society helps build trust in return.

To address existing gaps and a lack of trust between journalists and citizens, strong editorial independence is essential. The service should not be funded by the state or municipalities to avoid dependencies and potential conflicts of interest. Instead, it could be supported through a local public broadcasting contribution.

Finally, meaningful relationships and dialogue cannot be built overnight. A long-term presence and continuity are crucial for building lasting connections in the community.

Community-Oriented Code of Conduct | *Austria*

The 'Community-Oriented Code of Conduct' is a publicly available set of rules for trustworthy, credible, and respectful communication in public life, jointly developed by key actors in public communication. It defines concrete ethical standards for public communication for different actors, reflecting their distinct roles and responsibilities. The code also functions as a visible seal of approval, allowing the public to identify actors who show a concrete commitment to these standards.

Why?

By establishing shared standards, the code helps rebuild the credibility of the media and public institutions by responding to media exclusion and declining trust in institutions and public figures. It also challenges one-directional communication models.

The 'Community-Oriented Code of Conduct' encourages constructive dialogue over top-down messaging, making public communication more interactive, participatory, and inclusive.

Who?

The code brings together all key actors in public communication, including:
- Journalists
- Communication and PR professionals
- Influencers
- Policymakers
- Citizens and audiences

How?

The 'Community-Oriented Code of Conduct' functions as a binding accountability framework and a seal of approval. Journalists, communication professionals, and policymakers publicly commit to complying with these standards, making their adherence visible and open to public evaluation.

It is developed and maintained through a collaborative, iterative, and ongoing process:
- All stakeholders, including citizens, participate in defining the rules, ensuring that the standards reflect public expectations.
- The code is implemented as a living document, with ongoing reviews and updates.
- A permanent independent council of experts, consisting of representatives of key actors in public communication, monitors the development and application of the code and oversees revisions.

"The idea behind it is that we simply agree, at a fundamental level, on what kind of communication we want to have, and what kind of communication we trust."

Deliberative Local Forum | *Hungary*

The 'Deliberative Local Forum' is a physical public meeting space where citizens aged 16 and over come together to discuss local issues in a structured and inclusive setting. Its purpose is to bring diverse societal perspectives into public debate, foster consensus on shared concerns, and feed these outcomes into formal decision-making processes. Ultimately, the forum actively empowers citizens to participate in democratic public life.

Why?

Participation in public discussion and decision-making helps reduce feelings of exclusion and not being heard. When citizens are meaningfully involved in addressing local issues, they gain a stronger sense of agency and trust that their perspectives can lead to real outcomes.

In addition, by bringing together people with different backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints in a structured dialogue, the 'Deliberative Local Forum' helps counter social polarization. It shifts public debate away from opposition and toward mutual understanding, collective problem-solving, and consensus within local communities.

Who?

- Citizens aged 16 and over from the local community
- Independent facilitator who guides the deliberative process
- Policymakers who receive and act upon the forum's outcomes

"Inclusive civic accountability mechanisms must be built on safe and authentic spaces where parties can connect meaningfully, not just formally."

How?

A diverse group of participants is selected by lottery, with participation in principle mandatory to ensure broad and representative involvement. Compensation is provided to lower barriers to participation and support inclusivity.

Participants meet in a physical location within the local community. Discussions are moderated by an independent facilitator, who ensures respectful communication, balanced participation, and constructive dialogue.

Individual viewpoints are brought together through deliberation to develop shared agreements on local issues. Because the process is open-ended and not limited to predefined responses, creativity and innovation play an important role, increasing both the legitimacy and acceptance of the jointly developed outcomes. These outcomes are then formally fed into municipal decision-making processes.

Initially, the 'Deliberative Local Forum' focusses on local issues at the municipal level, with the potential to expand over time to address regional or national issues. The forums can also be broadcasted via traditional and social media, extending their reach to engage citizens who do not take part in the forum's day-to-day functioning.

Democracy Game: From Democratic Duty to Democratic Desire | *Austria*

The 'Democracy Game: From Democratic Duty to Democratic Desire' is a participatory concept that reframes democratic engagement from a formal obligation into an activity people actively want to engage in. By using playful, game-based elements, it stimulates intrinsic motivation to participate in democratic processes and public debate.

Why?

(Local) democracy faces persistent structural participation gaps. Many citizens feel disconnected from political decision-making, experiencing it as distant, irrelevant, or inaccessible. This leads to frustration, low participation rates, and declining trust in democratic institutions.

The 'Democracy Game: From Democratic Duty to Democratic Desire': addresses these challenges by making democratic participation more visible, rewarding, and meaningful.

Who?

The concept is designed for implementation at the regional and municipal levels, with a particular focus on:
- Regions with low voter turnout
- Underrepresented groups
- Citizens who feel politically dissatisfied, disengaged, or excluded

How?

Participation is structured as a democracy-oriented game that uses incentives and gamification strategies to encourage engagement. Participants take part in the 'Democracy Game' through playful challenges, facilitated discussions, or civic activities and may receive institutional support, such as time off work, to lower participation barriers. Active and engaged participants can later qualify as democracy mentors, supporting others in future rounds of the game.

Local authorities and civil society organizations provide the necessary infrastructure and organizational support. While the game is political in nature, it strictly avoids party-political alignment.

To ensure tangible impact, clear incentives and obligations are also required for decision-makers. This includes ongoing dialogue with participants and the active use of public input in decision-making processes.

"The needs that are addressed? I am a fan of motivation — it has to be there. And the values are that democracy is something positive; we want it to become so ingrained in people's minds that participating in it is a desire, not a chore."

Forum for Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning | *Lithuania*

The 'Forum for Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning' is a practical educational and policy-oriented approach that treats dialogue as an ongoing process of lifelong learning. Its aim is to strengthen tolerance, enhance critical thinking, and improve the quality of public debate by embedding respectful and reflective dialogue as a core democratic skill.

Why?
Currently, in many public arenas, there is limited space for respectful, reflective, and constructive engagement. The 'Forum for Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning' responds to a declining quality of public debate, increasing polarization, and growing social disconnection. By promoting continuous learning in dialogic communication skills, such as active listening, this framework seeks to counter social exclusion, reduce polarization, and foster more tolerant and reflective public discourse.

Who?
Because the goal is to improve public dialogue at a systemic level, the approach primarily targets societal actors with significant influence on public debate, including:
- Policymakers
- Political actors
- Journalists
- Influencers
- Educators
- Cultural institutions

"Speaking is learned quite quickly but listening – active listening – has to be learned throughout one's entire life."

How?
The 'Forum for Dialogue-Driven Lifelong Learning' starts with a shared policy-level vision that recognizes dialogic communication as essential for democracy and defines clear, actionable guidelines for good public communication. Governments provide strategic direction and resources, while allowing different sectors and institutions the flexibility and freedom to adapt and apply these guidelines within their specific contexts.

Implementation takes place through professional education, training programs across fields such as media, education, and cultural institutions, translating the guidelines into everyday professional practice.

The process functions as a societal agreement rather than a one-off intervention: a continuous shared commitment across institutions and professions to value, learn, and practice dialogic communication as a core democratic skill.

Listening Loop: Framework for Inclusive Accountability | *Switzerland*

'**Listening Loop: Framework for Inclusive Accountability' is a multi-purpose, learning-by-doing method that guides citizens through five structured and progressive stages to discuss concrete topics and ensure that they feel heard and taken seriously. The method connects individual views to collective outcomes that can be communicated to institutions. It is flexible and adaptable, and can be applied in educational, civic, and organizational settings.**

Why?
Individual expressions are often fragmented or lost within digital and institutional dynamics, preventing meaningful engagement with institutions and leaving citizens feeling unheard. 'Listening Loop' addresses this challenge by offering a clear and structured process through which isolated views on a specific topic are gathered and transformed into collective input that institutions can respond to. As a result, this method stimulates mutual understanding and reciprocal accountability.

Who?
The concept is designed for implementation at the regional and municipal levels, with a particular focus on:
- Regions with low voter turnout
- Underrepresented groups
- Citizens who feel politically dissatisfied, disengaged, or excluded

"If I want to be heard, I need to organize together with others and produce a structured contribution."

How?
In the concept, listening is defined as a structured practice that operates through five progressive stages:
1. Individual expression: Participants share opinions and experiences related to a concrete topic.
2. Aggregation in collective spaces: Individual voices are brought together in discussion groups, classrooms, or workplace settings, creating a space for exchange.
3. Interpretation and discussion: Through facilitated discussions, individual contributions are reflected upon and transformed into shared insights.
4. Circulation toward institutions: The outcomes of collective deliberation are collected and made understandable for relevant institutions.
5. Feedback loops: Institutions respond to collective input through explanation or justification. The responses are fed back to participants to enable discussion and reinforce accountability.

The method prioritizes applied and experiential learning over abstract instruction, ensuring relevance and engagement. Facilitators support participants throughout the process by encouraging reflection, guiding dialogue, and helping participants understand how their contributions can influence outcomes. This structured process ensures that individual expressions are not only heard but translated into collective input for institutions to respond to and act upon.

Pupils Shaping School Decisions | *Slovenia*

'**Pupils Shaping School Decisions'** actively involves pupils in school-level decisions by giving them influence over everyday matters. It can be applied to a wide range of topics, such as school lunches or the use of mobile phones in school, allowing pupils to directly shape policies, influence their environment, and be involved in decisions that affect their daily experiences.

Why?
Many citizens, including young people, lack a clear understanding of how decision-making processes work, which can lead to frustration and unrealistic expectations about political and civic participation and the time it takes for outcomes to materialize. 'Pupils Shaping School Decisions' provides pupils with hands-on experience of democratic processes, showing them how decisions are made, how different viewpoints are negotiated, and how consensus is reached.

The concept also allows them to see tangible results of their contributions, supporting civic engagement from an early age, so they learn how to participate in social and political life.

Who?
- Pupils in primary and secondary schools
- Teachers and educators who guide the process
- External experts to provide specialized knowledge (such as on health, nutrition, or sustainability)

How?
'Pupils Shaping School Decisions' is based on practical participation in decision-making around everyday experiences in schools, and consists of three steps:
1. Pupils express their preferences, concerns, and ideas.
2. Pupils engage in structured discussions, moderated by teachers or educators, to ensure constructive, inclusive dialogue.
3. Optional external experts provide additional knowledge to inform decisions, which are ultimately shaped through compromise.

A key condition for success is the competence and facilitation skills of teachers and educators. Effective participation depends on their ability to guide discussion, balance differing viewpoints, and ensure the process is meaningful and actionable.

"People can first be connected in small groups or micro-communities, and if they learn to communicate more constructively or gain insight into decision-making processes, it may become easier for them to understand such processes at the national level."

VaikutaSuomi.fi [InfluenceFinland.fi] | *Finland*

'**Vaikutasuomi.fi' is a publicly run, non-commercial online platform designed for participation and learning. Rather than providing a one-size-fits-all forum, this platform comprises three "chambers," each with specific functions and rules for discussion, where people can discuss, deliberate, and be heard on issues that affect their everyday lives, while also actively developing democratic and dialogical skills.**

Why?
There are multiple reasons for citizens' reluctance to public participation. Some are hesitant to speak about problems that they regard too private to be shared with others, others feel wary of the provocative and polarizing tone in online commentaries, while some are concerned about the lack of public impact of their contributions. 'VaikutaSuomi.fi' addresses these issues by launching three separate domains with distinct functionalities for public participation.

Who?
The concept is aimed at a broad target group, but explicitly designed for:
- Citizens who do not recognize themselves in the public debate and who are hesitant to participate
- Citizens who feel frustrated by current discussions on online platforms
- Institutional actors such as decision-makers, public authorities, and journalists who are seeking input from citizens for policies or news coverage

"I was thinking about journalists, and how I could be useful to them. It would be nice, if I could appoint myself as an expert on a specific field, and based on that information journalists would have an opportunity to contact me with their questions."

How?
'Vaikutasuomi.fi' offers three levels of online participation spaces, each with their own clearly defined rules and moderation:
- Protected safer spaces: Highly moderated, low-visibility areas for discussing personal challenges or sensitive societal topics. The focus is on emotional safety, care, and mutual support rather than debate.
- Structured dialogue spaces: Moderated forums for constructive disagreement, where participants practice listening, expressing differing views respectfully, and reflecting their own reactions.
- Civic Hub: A space for discussion focused on local public-interest issues. Citizens, politicians, journalists, researchers, and public authorities meet to explore current issues and policies. Provocative campaigning and electioneering are not allowed.

Participation typically starts with a personalized "My issues" interface. Based on self-reported background information (such as location, life situation and interests) and usage patterns, the platform highlights relevant local issues and suggests discussions where the user's perspective may be especially valuable.

Users are authenticated during registration, ensuring accountability, while public participation can occur under pseudonyms to protect privacy.

Next Steps

During the final phase of the DIACOMET project, **the Inclusive Accountability Toolbox will be tested with relevant stakeholders** in Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

In this context, testing does not involve the implementation of inclusive accountability mechanisms, as this falls beyond the scope of this research project. Instead, implementation lies with stakeholders who are willing and positioned to take such initiatives forward within their respective national and organizational contexts. The purpose of this phase is to present the toolbox to policymakers, media professionals, educators, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders, and facilitate discussions about **how this toolbox could inform existing or new forms of inclusive accountability** in public communication.

This process serves several functions. First, stakeholders can critically **assess the four preconditions** (inclusion, proximity, reciprocity, and adaptability) and determine how to strengthen them within existing accountability mechanisms. Second, it encourages stakeholders to **identify relevant elements of the proposed concepts** in the toolbox that can complement or enhance existing initiatives, institutional practices, or regulatory frameworks. Third, it allows for **contextual refinement** by recognizing that inclusive accountability must respond flexibly to different political systems, media landscapes, and technological developments.

Rather than prescribing uniform solutions, this phase promotes informed exchange and mutual learning across sectors and countries. Ultimately, this approach is intended to stimulate sustainable developments that lead to **more dialogic communication between citizens, media, and public institutions**.

Annex 1. Methodology

The toolbox was co-created with citizens and experts from eight European countries – Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the Netherlands – through an iterative **two-phase Delphi study and interdisciplinary sessions guided by the Design Thinking method**. The study built on earlier phases of DIACOMET, which established a theoretical foundation and generated empirical insights through content analysis, focus groups, and the Q-method.

Delphi Method
The Delphi method is a qualitative research method for gathering expert opinions and reaching consensus on complex issues (Landeta et al., 2011). It follows a **structured iterative multi-round process** in which experts initially provide input through (semi-)open questions, then review and comment on summarized group responses, and finally revise their views to achieve a shared understanding or consensus (Brady, 2015).

Within DIACOMET, the Delphi method was used to gather **expert perspectives on key issues in public communication and potential solutions** for these issues. The shared insights and common understanding on the key issues and possible solution directions achieved through the first two rounds provided the foundation for the third round. In this final round, we used the Design Thinking approach to co-create concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms.

Participant Selection
The selection of experts is a critical component of the Delphi method, as it relies on a **purposive sample of individuals with specific knowledge and expertise** (Grisham, 2009; Linstone & Turoff, 2022). For this study, we adopted a purposive sampling strategy guided by four categories of expertise to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives:
1. Experts in education, media, and digital literacy.
2. Experts in (social) media, journalism, and (corporate) communication.
3. Experts in technology, data, and artificial intelligence.
4. Experts in regulation, media law, legal frameworks, and ethical standards.

The **recruitment of experts** followed a systematic yet adaptable strategy across all eight countries. This process started with compiling lists of experts using a combination of personal networks, institutional contacts, online research, and public directories. Then, personalized invitations were sent to explain the purpose of the Delphi study and why the recipient's expertise was relevant. In addition, reminders and follow-ups via email, phone, or online platforms played a key role in increasing response rates.

Data collection
Between February and September 2025, the first two rounds of the Delphi study were conducted in eight participating countries and at EU level. Both rounds consisted of **qualitative online surveys with open-ended questions**, which were adapted and translated to the national contexts.

In **the first round**, 177 experts reflected on the key issues in public communication. They were asked which issues they consider most important and why, which existing instruments or initiatives they know of that attempt to address these issues, and which elements

they believe are crucial for solutions to be effective in practice. In a joint workshop with the researchers, the findings were discussed and synthesized to ensure consistency and to inform the next round.

In **the second round**, 103 experts further developed and refined potential solutions for the issues in public communication. Afterwards, the researchers came together to discuss the findings and identify a shared problem definition and the overarching solution directions.

The two-phase Delphi study was followed by eight **interdisciplinary sessions guided by the Design Thinking method** between November and December 2025. In all countries, a group of citizens and experts from the Delphi study was selected to co-create a concept of inclusive accountability mechanisms. In the case of Austria, the group was split into two due to the high number of participants, resulting in two different concepts. Overall, 42 experts and ten citizens participated in this final round.

The Design Thinking method is used to solve complex challenges through an iterative, creative approach that encourages participants to **think beyond conventional solutions and experiment with new ideas** (Brown, 2008). Within DIACOMET, we used this method to translate the outcomes of the two-phase Delphi study into concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms.

Each interdisciplinary session started with a guiding question based on shared problem definition: 'How can we ensure that citizens, journalists, and representatives of public institutions all feel genuinely heard in public communication?' To identify possible solutions for the guiding question, the participants were given creative and interactive assignments, such as brainstorming, sketching, and making paper prototypes. The aim was to **create concepts of inclusive accountability mechanisms** that genuinely reflect the needs of the diverse stakeholders engaged throughout DIACOMET. In the case of Austria

Data Analysis
The data collected in the first two rounds of the Delphi study were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Each country team conducted open coding of responses to **identify recurring themes and proposed solution directions**. To ensure analytical consistency across countries, the coding process and emerging themes were discussed in joint workshops. Through iterative comparison and refinement, overarching solution directions and a shared problem definition was developed.

After the final round, the interdisciplinary co-creation session, each country produced a report with a summary of the outcomes, a detailed description of the developed concept, and analysis of its preconditions. The final synthesis involved **cross-country comparison of the developed concepts and identification of the overarching preconditions**.

Annex 2. References

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