



Academy on Participatory Democracy & Social Mediation as a complementary tool to Participatory Democracy

Overview of the 2023 Training and Focus Group under ‘Citizen participation: CRoLEV Sustainable Rule of Law and European Values in Europe’ Series

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The Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence for the Rule of Law and European Values (CRoLEV) at UCLan Cyprus together with the [Council of Europe, Directorate General II – Division of Elections and Participatory Democracy](#), offered the grounds for innovative work on sustainable Rule of Law, civic empowerment, and civic engagement via the Academy on Participatory Democracy in Cyprus held on 28th November 2023 (online) and on 1st and 2nd December 2023 at the UCLan Cyprus campus. A prominent tool for achieving this work has been the collaboration with the [Interdisciplinary Centre for Law, Alternative and Innovative Methods \(ICLAIM\)](#) acting as a facilitator during the Academy, based on the long-term UCLan Cyprus-ICLAIM programme on [Social Mediation](#), an informal, non-political, and non-legal format of dispute resolution, that can serve communities of all sizes, addressing day-to-day frictions or prolonged disputes. Social

Mediation is a tool of multiphasic nature, due to its ability to address a social conflict pre-emptively (to prevent its escalation), reactively (to enable its de-escalation), and on a long-term scale, by preventing its re-escalation. It additionally achieves direct civic empowerment, by encouraging individual citizens to apply it on a non-formal scale within their immediate environments.

There is a direct connection between Social Mediation and the Rule of Law. According to focus group discussions completed through the 2022 CRoLEV training and focus group on [“Citizen Empowerment: Sustainable Rule of Law and European Values in Europe Series”](#), Social Mediation can have a positive impact on the sustainability of the Rule of Law. More specifically, applying the Social Mediation tool across various scenarios of interpersonal, institutional, and community-based conflict can address phenomena of prejudice, stereotyping, miscommunication, and misconceptions that lead to fear and securitization. A society with lower levels of securitization and an increased level of community resilience can more effectively apply the Rule of Law, embracing and promoting equality and transparency.

The CRoLEV training and focus group series has given facilitators and participants alike the opportunity to progressively build on notions of Rule of Law, resilience and sustainability, and civic engagement, through a combination of diverse tools that complement and enhance previous efforts for citizen empowerment through Social Mediation. Along these lines, in November and December 2023, CRoLEV Director and ICLAIM Social Mediation facilitators joined forces with the Council of Europe, its experts and its [Academy on Participatory Democracy](#) to establish the overarching umbrella for its work on civic engagement and highlight the evident connections across the range of tools it employs. This umbrella is the concept of Participatory Democracy, understood as the creation of multiple communication channels between citizens and decision-making bodies, to achieve continuous and reciprocal feedback across all segments of society and public life.

Participatory democracy encompasses both broader notions of civic engagement in public dialogue, as well as specific digital tools that enable the quantification and processing of citizen input that adjust according to the citizen cohort’s size.

Through CRoLEV's partnership with the Council of Europe, the full training presented the following tools, which served as the basis for a number of activities including the focus group. It is important to note that this was not a 'train-the-trainers' session, but rather an overview of tools developed and made available with and through the Council of Europe.

- [Code of good practice for civil participation in the decision-making process](#)
- Civil participation in decision-making [toolkit](#) (CPT)
- "An easy-to-organize citizens' assembly" from the [Blue Centre for Democracy](#)
- [CivicLab](#), a toolkit for development, analysis, and forecasting decision options in decision-making
- [U-CHANGE Game](#) – Tool for teaching the fundamentals of public participation in a game format (SPB)
- [Public Space Planning](#)
- "School participatory budgeting" [toolkit](#)

The Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation is considered the starting point for the promotion of participatory democracy.

Participants that joined the Academy on Participatory Democracy had the opportunity to develop the literacy to run all of the above tools, based on the **four basic principles that underline participatory democracy**:

- (1) The provision of information,
- (2) Invitation to consultation,
- (3) Dialogue, which should be made as accessible as possible,
- (4) And the creation of partnerships.

These four principles also guide the sustainable application of Social Mediation, which can be effectively conceptualized as a tool that enables and fosters participatory democracy. In fact, one of the key findings that came out of the Academy training is that Social Mediation can be used as a complementary tool to the Council of Europe's Participatory Democracy tools in ways that can

eliminate deadlocks from disagreements or prevent the escalation of tensions when discussing difficult and contested issues. **Social Mediation can thus be seen, not only as a tool relevant to participatory democracy, but as a catalyst in making processes of participatory democracy more efficient.**

Focus Group Discussion:

Like in 2022, this training concluded with a focus group discussion, to collect feedback and ideas from participants. The discussion that ensued focused primarily on the relevance of local authorities and the central government to citizen concerns in Cyprus. The timing of the discussion is significant, since local authorities in Cyprus are currently going through major reform, expected to be completed following the next European parliamentary and local authority elections in June 2024.

Overall, the discussion identified as major obstacles to public engagement (i) the lack of culture of civic engagement, including public consultations, and (ii) the often-met lack of political will and transparency in decision-making processes for topics of particular concern to the general public. Participants agreed that among the Cypriot public there is an increasing number of citizens who are eager to state their views and have those views heard by the public authorities across all levels. This is essential for the building of trust among the public and for the promotion of civic engagement. Coordinating the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in decision-making processes was seen as a major challenge and a potential deterrent factor, both for the public and for the authorities. Among the stakeholders, the participants included lobbyists and those with an embedded private interest in the topic under public scrutiny.

The discussion led to three basic steps towards the building of an integrated structure for public engagement:

Step 1: Pre-consultation phase, and strategic stakeholder analysis

Step 2: Bottom-up public consultation. Exact method to be determined in Step 1.

Step 3: Employment of Social Mediation to resolve deadlocks among conflicting interests, in order to explore options and arrive to common ground.

Two points that are important to consider in the above process are that:

- (i) Formal consultations cannot take place without the approval of relevant authority/ies.
- (ii) The timing of any action for public consultation is fundamental, in order to achieve reliable and transparent results.

Relevance of Rule of Law & Steps Forward:

The Rule of Law principle was considered intrinsically linked to any public engagement process, to enable society to monitor any progress with implementation, and enable those directly affected by a decision to hold accountable any stakeholders and/or authorities if implementation of the agreed plan fails.

The focus group concluded that there is a strong need in Cyprus to map out the weaknesses and challenges in terms of adherence to the Rule of Law, as well as the political culture. This mapping process is already one of the [core objectives of CRoLEV](#).

In doing so, however, it is fundamental to focus separately on central authorities and local authorities, in view of the asymmetrical relationship these two levels of governance have at present. The ongoing reform leads to additional uncertainty in terms of the future strengthening of the relationship between authorities and the general public. Thus, the impact of the ongoing reform needs to also be considered in any efforts for improvement, in order to achieve any reliable and sustainable progress.

January 2024