



PROJECT NUMBER
101080161

Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from All Partners

Work Package 4



Co-funded by
the European Union

About the project

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has affected our lives in many ways and manifested itself in many undesirable forms, such as the negative impact of coronavirus on individual lives, it has caused many deaths, the negative impact has also been on the global economy and employment, and on the quality of life in society in the form of restrictions on social rights, such as the right to be protected from poverty and social exclusion, the right to housing and education, and restrictions on medical care. COVID-19 also has effects on the democratic debates and the enjoyment of fundamental rights in the different countries of Europe. The impact was even more pronounced from a gender perspective, because as the United Nations (2020) noted, "from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex". Given the mentioned situation, the European Commission has awarded the project partners with the project HEARD, which focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the democratic debate, the enjoyment of fundamental rights and the work and life of women through a gender perspective.

HEARD focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the democratic debate, the enjoyment of fundamental rights and the work and life of women through a gender perspective. The search for an adequate response to overcome the crisis that occurred during the pandemic of COVID-19 should be a result of the participation of the involvement of various social partners, civil society and decision-making bodies of a given state. By involving partners from 9 different European countries in all the phases of the project we aim to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of respect for the rule of law, democratic values and the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, with special attention to the social rights of citizens and residents of the given state.

The project HEARD consists of 11 Work packages. In this document - the Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from all partners - we summarise the following project results/ deliverables of Work package 4 (WP 4):

1. Event Description Sheet for the First Debate Panel (See Appendix 1),
2. Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from All Partners (See Appendix 2).

About the deliverables of Work package 4

Within the WP 4 the in-situ first debate panel on the topic how COVID-19 crisis had affected on the democratic debate was conducted by 10 project partners in 9 partner countries and with 313 residents and citizens of partner countries (**See Appendix 1: Event Description Sheet for the First Debate Panel**).

After the first debate panel the feedback of the participants was processed, the report in English language was prepared (**See Appendix 2: Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from All Partners**). During the implementation of the Work package 4 we faced some challenges. Due to the organizational issues stemming from a change in personnel, one of the partners could not implement the debate panel and prepare the report in the deadlines stated in the application form. We informed the EU Officer about the mentioned problem and together with our partners we found a solution. Thus, we completed the Work Package 4 a little later than how it was foreseen according to the application, but with this delay we made sure that the Work package 4 was carried out in a high quality and in full form as was foreseen in the project application.

The findings of the report will serve as guidelines in the next steps of the project.

Meet the partnership



Fakulteta za
organizacijske študije
Faculty of organisation studies



Associazione InCo



accompagne vos projets



CITTÀ DI VIMERCATE
MEDAGLIA D'ARGENTO
AL MERITO CIVILE



Ajuntament
de Mislata



Federação de Associações Juvenis | Distrito de Braga

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Appendix 1: Event Description Sheet for the First Debate Panel).

EVENT DESCRIPTION SHEET**For Debate panel 1 (Work package 4)**

PROJECT	
Participant:	01 - FAKULTETA ZA ORGANIZACIJSKE STUDIJE V NOVEM MESTU (FOS) 02 - Associazione InCo-Molfetta APS (InCo) 03 - INSTITUTO ANAPTIXIS EPICHEIRIMATIKOTITAS ASTIKI ETAIREIA (IED) 04 - CBE SUD LUBERON (CBE) 05 - Comune di Vimercate 06 - FONDATSIA ZA PREDPRIEMACHESTVO, KULTURA I OBRAZOVANIE - Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education 07 - NORDIC DIASPORA FORUM (NDF) 08 - AYUNTAMIENTO DE MISLATA 09 - Federação de Associações Juvenis do Distrito de Braga (FAJUB) 10 - CARDET CENTRE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY LIMITED (CARDET)
PIC number:	01 – 943692340 02 – 922855576 03 – 998069182 05 – 905191003 06 – 940414710 07 – 916641562 08 – 897272796 09 – 929027880 10 – 999738552
Project name and acronym:	The impact of COVID-19 crisis on diverse democratic perspectives through gender perspective - HEARD

EVENT DESCRIPTION	
Event number:	04
Event name:	Debate panel 1: How the COVID-19 has affected on the democratic debate
Type:	Debate panel
In situ/online:	In-situ
Location:	10 partners conducted event In-situ. 01 – In-situ in Slovenia, Novo mesto

	02 – In-situ in Italy, Molfetta 03 – In-situ in Greece, Larissa 04 – In-situ in France, Pertuis 05 – In-situ in Italy, Vimercate 06 – In-situ in Bulgaria, Varna 07 – In-situ in Sweden, Stockholm 08 – In-situ in Spain, Mislata 09 – In-situ in Portugal, Braga 10 – In-situ in Cyprus, Nicosia,	
Date(s):	01 - 16. 05. 2023 02 – 18. 05. 2023 03 - 20. 06. 2023 04 - 02. 11. 2023 05 - 16. 09. 2023 06 - 08. 09. 2023 07 - 14. 06. 2023 08 - 06. 06. 2023 09 - 16. 05. 2023 10 - 14. 09. 2023	
Website(s) (if any):	https://heard-project.eu/	
Participants		
Female:	186	
Male:	126	
Non-binary:	1	
From country 1 [Slovenia]:	35	
From country 2 [Italy]:	60	
From country 3 [Greece]:	42	
From country 4 [France]:	32	
From country 5 [Bulgaria]:	28	
From country 6 [Sweden]:	30	
From country 7 [Spain]:	33	
From country 8 [Portugal]:	30	
From country 9 [Cyprus]:	23	
Total number of participants:	313	From total number of countries: 9
Description		

Provide a short description of the event and its activities.

The first debate panel "How the COVID-19 has affected on the democratic debate" was the first project debate panel. It was organised and conducted within Work package 4 of the HEARD project in all project countries from all project partners.

The questions for the debate panels were prepared based on the results of the state-of-the-art analysis and the results of the quantitative research (survey) about the democratic debate, which was conducted in all project partner countries from November 2022 until the March 2023, which are gathered in the report of statistical analysis accordingly to all partner countries jointly and separately (so Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden). We identified the similarities and significant differences in all the mentioned partner countries.

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project, continued with the presentation of the topic of the project. We continued the debate panel with presenting the crucial starting points of the results of the survey, conducted in all the partner countries, focusing on the statistically significant findings. We also mentioned the findings of the state-of-the art analysis, conducted by the project partner countries. According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes (Government’s power, Trust in institutions and Public debate) and sub-themes.

The topics covered encouraged a lively debate among those present, especially the younger ones, who were particularly involved in sharing their opinion and point of view. All the questions posed and arisen during the debate have been discussed very lively by participants and conclusions were reached. The participants feedback and conclusions were gathered in »the Report of First Debate panel from partner.«

HISTORY OF CHANGES		
VERSION	PUBLICATION DATE	CHANGE
1.0	29.11.2023	Faculty of Organisation Studies in Novo mesto



Appendix 2: Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from All Partners



PROJECT NUMBER
101080161

Report of the Results of First Debate Panel from Partners

WP4: Debate panel 1



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Methodology

The questions for the debate panels were prepared based on the results of the state-of-the-art analysis and the results of the quantitative research (survey) about the democratic debate, which was conducted in all project partner countries from November 2022 until the March 2023, which are gathered in the report of statistical analysis accordingly to all partner countries jointly and separately (so Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden). We identified the similarities and significant differences in all the mentioned partner countries.

With the mixed methodology approach, we managed to extract 3 big themes of debate panels, that we divided in 2 sub-subjects. The first thematic was **Government's power**, where the first sub-subject was *The lack of transparency* and the second sub-subject was *The Governments of experts*. The second thematic was **Trust in institutions**, where the first sub-subject was *Politician's scandals*, and the second sub-subject was *Electoral process and campaign*. **The third thematic** was Public debate, where the first sub-subject was *Role of the medias* and the second sub-subject was *Social protest*.

1. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Slovenia by FOS)

In the Table 1 below, we can see the timetable of the Debate panel 1, which was executed on 16th of May 2023 at 16.00 pm CET on the Faculty of organisation studies in Novo mesto, Ulica talcev 3, 8000 Novo mesto, Slovenia.

Table 1. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
16:00	Greetings and introduction Dr Maja Pucelj, Assistant Professor
16:05	Presentation of the HEARD project
16:15	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points
16:20	Start of the discussion on the topic: THE POWER OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKERS
16:35	Start of discussion on the topic: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
16:45	Start of discussion - on the topic: PUBLIC DISCUSSION
17:00	EC satisfaction survey and conclusion thoughts

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project, continued with the presentation of the topic of the project, we presented also some facts from the covid-19 pandemic period to remind the participants about the challenges and the government reaction during mentioned period. We continued the debate panel with presenting the crucial starting points of the results of the survey, conducted in Slovenia and also in all the partner countries, focusing on the statistically significant findings. We also mentioned the findings of the state-of-the art analysis, conducted by the project partner countries.

According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

1. First key thematic: Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

At the debate panel, present participants responded to the topic with the following arguments:

- The participants noted opposite instructions for wearing masks in the health institutions (for example in health institution the mask was also after the end of declared epidemic/pandemic state declared as obligatory, which was not the case in hospitals), which were not reasonably justified.
- Participants stated that by their opinion the Covid-19 crisis did not an impact on the democratic debate after the end of the declared pandemic state.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

At the debate panel, those present responded to the question with the following arguments:

- The lack of transparency was not justified – participants also added that they think that lack of transparency is never actually justified. Meanwhile some of the participants stated that transparency can appear as a solution, or it could illustrate even greater fear among the crowd. It was emphasized that sometimes it is better if you don't know too much about a certain topic.
- The participants noted that the line between (non)transparency was blurred during the covid-19 pandemic and that they had a feeling that even the health and political experts did not know, what they were doing, which caused even greater insecurities among people. People got feeling that the mistakes, that occurred, tried to be hidden and that if the communication would be different, also the reaction of the people towards health or political experts would be different.
- The participants stated that the problem was that people were not able to obtain real information about the situation in the country.
- The participants also stated that the challenges, which they noted, was that the politicians, health and other experts did not have agreement on the topic of pandemic, which caused even bigger dissatisfaction among general people. They assessed that they could agree at least upon the general guidelines for people.

- Great concerns were also expressed regarding the participation of professionals and political experts. The policy also did not consider true and trustworthy experts from various fields.
- The participants expressed their second thoughts that there was a lot of corruption in pandemic period. They suggested that bigger control over the purchasing the medicine supplies for such extreme conditions.
- They also expressed their concerns about too frequent changing people on the leading positions, which were in charge of handling the pandemic, which lead to distrust among the people.
- The participants also pointed out that the politician should not be in charge of explaining professional topics, connected to pandemic situation, as it happened, as this lowered their credibility.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants pointed out that they did not note any restrictions, which would be pointed more towards one gender.

d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that and handling future pandemic situation

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants pointed out the fact that Slovenia had and has a very low trust in the institutions and politics compared to Sweden and mentioned also reflected in handling the politics.
- Slovenia would need a joint cooperation of bigger number of experts from different fields, which would be already now involved in the theme of planning the future outburst of pandemic situations.
- The military approach, that was implemented in Slovenia, has not been effective.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants were not satisfied with a large and rapid turnover of experts.

- They pointed out that they would be satisfied with more unambiguous communication.
- They also pointed out that they would like very direct and concise communication – that one expert or a group of experts would provide meaningful information.
- They also pointed out the need to have a slower adoption of legislation.
- The participants pointed out that the experts who were spokesmen during the epidemic had a lack of trust in their message and in themselves, what caused a lot of mistrust among people.
- They pointed out that the confusion was expected, due to the extreme state of the epidemic, but the military approach, which was taken over, turned out to be too aggressive.
- Low trust in institutions was and is visible in Slovenia and even increased during the pandemic times.
- The need to ensure collaboration between health professionals, psychologists, anthropologists, etc. was emphasized.
- The participants pointed out the need for the constant progress of experts, which are frontmen in the pandemic times, with various educations, certificates, work reviews, etc. Professors at colleges were given as an example.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants pointed out that at the beginning of the pandemic, they had trust in the experts, until they have started to being replaced during the pandemic situation.
- They also pointed out that they had a fear, as they could not know, what is the truth and what is not in connection to pandemic situation – they did not know, who to trust.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Politicians and experts should cooperate with each other. The experts would provide the information and the policy would take it on board and take it into account.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Slovenia (and also the countries which did not have such solutions) would need a joint cooperation of a bigger number of experts from different fields prior and during the pandemic situations (anthropologists, social scientists, psychologists, health experts, ...).
- The challenge of the excessive rigidity of the Slovenian administration was also highlighted, which made the whole process even more difficult, so in the future pandemic this situation should be better addressed.

2nd thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- There was discomfort and misunderstanding between people, the lack of trust was noted. Also, a lot of anger was noted among the participants, when pointing out this topic.

b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants pointed out that some restrictions were perceived as absurd.
- They also pointed out that of course that people would more easily follow the rules, if the politicians and those, who were identified as experts during the pandemic times, follow the given rules to the letter.

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants disagreed with the statement that their position could justify a difference in treatment.

d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants pointed out the presence of distrust – they were wondering what is happening the scene behind the pandemic.
- They would like to have the access to the things, that were vital for life and health (like covid-19 tests, masks etc., which were lacking during the pandemic, or their price increased all the time).
- They stated that the pandemic has shown that political system in Slovenia (and in many other countries) needs to be transformed.
- They also pointed out that the problem in Slovenia is that the decisions were made with time gap and after the scandals and that the politics are not prepared upfront, which needs to be improved.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

- a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?
- The participants noted the presence of the affect on the electoral process. They pointed out that the people were not satisfied with the way that the politics handled the pandemic situation (also due to the presence of corruption and too much pressure on the legislation and the frontmen of pandemic) and they decided that they wanted a new (changed) government.
- b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?
- The participants noted the effect of the crisis on the electoral campaign - mainly due to the restrictions of the movement.
- c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?
- The participants stated that the result would not be different, if the elections would be postponed.

3rd thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

- a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?
- The media were the main and the most important (negative) channel for obtaining information on current events/change of the legislation.
 - The media was shown as a negative element during this time, due to the presence of fake news etc.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

- They have noted the rise of fake news across all media, regardless of their political affiliations.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

- The participants expressed the thought, that they at the end did not believe in any news – we lived all in half-truth, everything was confused.
- People have been wondering what is true and what not, so there was a lot of confusion and conflicts.

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

- The participants stated that they obtained the sources from “safer” institutions such as: primary school, secondary school, official papers, employee organizations.
- There was mutual distrust between people, as certain people did not inform others that they had contracted Covid-19.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

- The participant pointed out that they would like to see an unambiguous, slowed-down communication and interpretation of implemented legislation.
- They would like to see professionals as the frontmen’s that they can trust.
- Implemented decisions made should be more explained and considered.
- The protests were consequence of the people not being heard or being taken into considerations.
- They also pointed out that they would like to see less division between people (vaccinated/unvaccinated).

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

- The participants pointed out that dissatisfaction could be expressed through online e-democracy.

- The main aspect of the problem is visible – it is the lack of listening or the inability of the professionals and politicians to listen to the people. The participants pointed out that the people expressed dissatisfaction but were not heard – mentioned dissatisfaction was expressed also in the extreme versions (protests).

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

- In terms of public safety, it would have made sense to ban protests.
- They also pointed out that the protest could be possible, if the participants would be notified to take different actions to prevent the spread of the virus.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

- The participants pointed out that people need a leader – they have been wondering if there is any cooperation between the crisis situation and participatory democracy.
- They pointed out that in order to better comply with the goals to prevent the spread of virus, it would be necessary to prepare and act on them now (so prior the pandemic spread).
- The participants also pointed out that the theory says that a participative management system is better - more heads know more.

Key findings

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

At the debate panel, participants agreed that during the covid-19 epidemic/pandemic, there was a lack of political transparency, which had a negative impact on democratic debate. Some participants felt that the lack of transparency was justified, as too much transparency was said to increase fear among people. The limitation of participation in democratic debates was no more evident for women than for men. Regarding the selection of experts who were at the centre of the decision-making process during covid-19, participants complained about frequent changes and a lack of clear communication.

MANAGEMENT OF DECISIONS BY POLITICIANS

Participants agreed that it is important for politicians and experts to work together to manage future epidemic/pandemic situations, considering diverse perspectives

and expertise. At the debate panel, the participants agreed that there was discomfort and misunderstanding among people when they learned that politicians did not respect the laws they had passed. Participants expressed the opinion that it would be easier for people to accept the restrictions if politicians strictly followed them. During the covid-19 epidemic/pandemic, the an abuse of power by politicians was noted by participants, which manifested in raised mistrust and doubts about the legitimacy of measures taken without parliamentary review.

SCANDALS BY POLITICIANS

The participants agreed that the covid-19 epidemic/pandemic affected the electoral process, as the politicization of certain aspects affected decision-making and the desire for quick change of ruling government could be noted. Restrictions on movement during the epidemic affected the election campaign, but participants did not support the idea of postponing the election, believing that the results would not be significantly different.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

At the debate panel, participants noted that the media played a key role in obtaining information about current events and legislation during the epidemic/pandemic. The media were also the target of criticism during this period, as fake news appeared, which had a negative impact on their image. The participants noted that the rise of fake news was not specific to specific types of media but was equally present in all media forms. Strategies for detecting fake news during an epidemic/pandemic have focused on checking official sources and more reliable institutions, but there has also been confusion and conflict over the veracity of information.

PROTESTS

Participants suggested several ways to better address social discontent during an epidemic/pandemic, including clearer communication and interpretation of legislation and trusted experts. There should be more respect for different points of view and less division between people regarding vaccination and other issues. The participants highlighted the possibilities of expressing dissatisfaction without demonstrations, such as the use of online platforms for e-democracy, which allow greater public participation in decision-making. The establishment of participatory democracy was proposed as a potential solution for better consideration of the demands and goals expressed in the protests, but the issue of leadership and cooperation in crisis situations was also raised.

2. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Italy by InCo)

On May 18th, 2023 in the Conference Room of the High School “l'I.I.S.S. Galileo Ferraris - L.S. OSA 'R. L. Montalcini” in Molfetta (Piazza R. Luxemburg) a Panel Debate event and round table has been organised, which focused on policy makers' handling of the pandemic, trust in frontline institutions and experts, and the role of public debate and social protest in this process.

Table 1. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
9:40	Institutional greetings
9:50	Presentation of the HEARD project
10:00	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points
10:10	Start of the discussion on the topic: THE POWER OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKERS
10:40	Start of discussion on the topic: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
11:10	Start of discussion - on the topic: PUBLIC DISCUSSION
11:40	Conclusion

The panel discussion commenced with greetings and an introduction to the project, followed by a presentation of the project's central topic. To provide context, we shared key facts from the COVID-19 pandemic, reminding participants of the challenges faced and the government responses during that period. Subsequently, we delved into the debate by highlighting the essential initial findings from the survey conducted in Italy and partner countries, focusing on statistically significant results. Additionally, we touched upon the outcomes of the state-of-the-art analysis conducted by project partner countries.

According to research findings from Work packages 1, 2 and 3, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

1st thematic : Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

Participants confirmed that the Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate after the end of the declared pandemic state.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified ?

It was agreed that information and news were not shared correctly from the political structures, and that was justified by politicians in order not to scare people. The acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19 crisis is a matter of concern. Transparency in governance is crucial for maintaining public trust, especially during times of crisis. It allows citizens to understand the decision-making processes, assess the actions taken by authorities, and hold them accountable for their choices. While there may be valid reasons for some degree of information control during a pandemic, such as preventing panic or ensuring the effectiveness of public health measures, it is essential to strike a balance between transparency and the need for public safety. However, justifying a lack of transparency solely based on the fear of scaring people can undermine democratic principles and lower the trust in institutions. Young people especially have felt news and information have been manipulated. In situations where information is not shared correctly from political structures, it can create an environment where misinformation and conspiracy theories thrive.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

Regarding the limitation of participation within democratic debates, it is unfortunate that the impact was more obvious for women than men during the COVID-19 crisis. This discrepancy could be attributed to pre-existing gender inequalities, social norms, and the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities that often fall on women.

d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that.

Compared to Swedish citizens, the general Italian population tends to have lower levels of trust in their institutions and exhibits a higher degree of skepticism and criticism toward decision-makers.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the center of the decision-making process?

Trusting the chosen experts depends on several factors. Generally, experts who have a strong track record of scientific research, relevant experience, and are recognized by reputable institutions or organizations in their field are more likely to be trusted. Transparency in the selection process and clear communication of the experts' qualifications can also contribute to building trust.

It was agreed by participants that expertise does not guarantee unanimity of opinions, because different experts may have differing views on specific aspects of a crisis, and this can lead to conflicting advice. In urgent situations like a pandemic, the expertise of scientists and public health professionals becomes particularly valuable.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

In the early phases of the COVID-19 crisis, experts and scientists garnered widespread trust from the general population owing to the extraordinary nature of the event and the demand for reliable information and guidance.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

In the Italian context, differing viewpoints have emerged regarding the extent to which experts or politicians should wield influence in times of urgency. Some have advocated for a more pronounced role for experts, especially during the initial phases of the COVID-19 crisis, emphasizing the necessity of data-driven decision-making to address the healthcare crisis. Meanwhile, others have asserted that Italian politicians should maintain an active role, representing the interests of society and weighing expert guidance against economic considerations. Achieving the right equilibrium between these roles has proven to be a multifaceted and evolving challenge in Italy, molded by its distinctive circumstances and political landscape.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

It was agreed by participants is that the best way to manage a future pandemic requires learning from past experiences, conducting comprehensive research, and engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration between experts from various fields and

at national and international level. It is essential to establish clear lines of communication and coordination between experts, policymakers, and the public.

It is important for individuals to critically evaluate information sources and rely on trusted and verified expertise.

2nd thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

The abuse of power by national politicians during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly if it is not proportionate to the goal of limiting the spread of the virus and raised concerns about the legitimacy of the measures taken. Participants have underlined that is important to have a transparent and democratic decision-making process, including parliamentary examination, to ensure that restrictions are justified and evidence-based. In any crisis, there is always a risk of some individuals or entities exploiting the situation for personal gain or economic goals. In summary, the disrespectful behavior of politicians towards the laws was not well seen by people.

a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws they passed themselves?

Participants affirm that this did not happened, and that they tended to trust politicians. Specially, in the initial stages, a majority of the Italian populace supported the government's imposed restrictions, finding themselves in an unprecedented situation. The challenge to accept these restrictions, which was not linked to the conduct of the politicians, paralleled the situation in Spain. It was the length of them.

b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

(This was not discussed).

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

People generally viewed the disrespectful behavior of politicians towards the laws unfavorably. This lack of respect for established legal frameworks eroded public trust and raised concerns about the integrity of the political system and its adherence to the rule of law, especially during COVID-19.

- d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 -Questioning on the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

(Discussed before).

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

- a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

It was well agreed that the pandemic has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the electoral process at national and international level. Governments and election authorities around the world had to adapt their procedures to ensure the safety of voters and election officials, leading to changes in voting methods, campaign strategies, and voter outreach.

- b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

Yes, the electoral campaign was similarly affected by the crisis, thus shaping the dynamics of the electoral process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, the pandemic has influenced the electoral process, making it less transparent due to the necessary adaptations and changes in campaigning methods.

- c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

Whether elections should have been postponed until after the pandemic is a complex question. For example, postponing elections can raise concerns about democratic continuity and the legitimacy of governments.

3rd thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

- a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

During the discussion it was highlighted that the role of the media during a pandemic differs in certain aspects compared to normal times. The media acts as a bridge between experts, policymakers, and the public, facilitating the flow of information and ensuring transparency.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

The pandemic has presented challenges regarding the spread of fake news and misinformation. The rapid dissemination of information through various digital platforms has made it easier for misleading or false information to circulate. Certain forms of media, particularly social media and online platforms, have been prone to the proliferation of fake news.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

To detect fake news during the pandemic, participants shared that they have relied on trusted sources of information. For example, they have searched news on official government websites and checked sources of information. Other trusted news sources were: official health organizations and government advisories for the most current and accurate information regarding the pandemic.

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

(See the previous response)

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

To better address social discontent during the pandemic, participants have suggested that governments should actively listen to the concerns and grievances of the population. This can be done through various means, such as engaging with citizen-led initiatives, creating channels for public feedback and dialogue, and incorporating diverse perspectives into decision-making processes.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

Another way to express discontent effectively without physical demonstrations is possible through digital platforms and online activism, as the internet provides a space for people to voice their concerns, share information, organize campaigns, and raise awareness about social issues. Participants have said during the discussion that they have used social media, live streaming, and online petitions for expressing discontent and demanding change.

On the other hand, it has been shared by participants the feeling that citizens were not involved actively in decision-making processes. However, unequal access to technology led to an exclusion of the most marginalized voices in the participation of certain groups. In conclusion, governments should actively listen to the concerns of the population and create spaces for dialogue and feedback.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protest were forbidden?

The prohibition of protests during the pandemic has elicited mixed reactions. Some citizens supported the decision to restrict or ban protests, citing concerns about public health and the potential for virus transmission. They stressed the importance of controlling the spread of COVID-19 and protecting the population, viewing these restrictions as essential to preventing large gatherings and reducing the risk of infections. On the other hand, there were those who felt that curbing protests impinged on their democratic rights and freedom of expression. They argued that peaceful demonstrations are a fundamental means for citizens to voice their concerns, exercise their democratic rights, and hold the government accountable, even in times of crisis. Some believed that while protests should have been allowed, specific measures could have been implemented to mitigate risks, such as enforcing physical distancing and mask mandates.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

Employing a participative democracy as a solution to effectively address social protests offers the opportunity for a more direct and inclusive relationship between the government and its citizens. By integrating mechanisms that encourage citizen participation in decision-making processes, this approach allows individuals to voice their concerns and aspirations, ultimately ensuring that policy decisions are informed by a broader spectrum of perspectives. Nevertheless, turning this concept into a practical reality can be a formidable task, particularly in a country as densely populated as Italy.

3. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Greece by IED)

Below there is a detailed presentation of the agenda and the proceedings of the event and also a reporting of the key takeaways and the conclusions extracted by the discussions with the participants. In Table 1 there is the detailed agenda of the event for Debate panel 1, which was executed on 20th of June 2023 at 16.00 pm CET on the premises of JOIST Innovation Park (iED offices are also hosted there) in Valtetsiou & Tripoleos, 41336, Larissa, Greece.

Table 1. Agenda of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
16:00	Welcome and introduction
16:05	Presentation of the HEARD project
16:20	Presentation of the results of the primary research and Q&A
16:30	Start of the discussion on the topic: THE POWER OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKERS
17:10	Start of discussion on the topic: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
17:50	Start of discussion - on the topic: PUBLIC DISCUSSION
18:30	EC satisfaction survey and conclusion thoughts

The debate panel started with the presentation of the project “HEARD” and the scope, methodology, context, and conclusions of the primary research that was implemented in the framework of the project. The audience was familiarized with the consortium’s mission and activities and the research findings and conclusions in the participating countries.

Before the starting of the discussion around the agreed by the consortium topics, the moderators provoked a Q&A, to make sure that all information presented regarding the project and its research activities are clear.

Following the topics and agenda agreed by the consortium partners, the moderators initiated discussion around the 3 themes and sub-themes that are presented below:

First key thematic: Government’s power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

There were opposing arguments and opinions in the audience regarding the impact on the democratic debate and the main perspectives are the following:

-Some participants believe that the democratic debate in Greece was in crisis before the pandemic, and citizens were not expressed freely and directly, or their opinion was not successfully reaching the government or the responsible authorities. In line with this opinion, after the pandemic it is considered that there was a more aggravation of this phenomenon and deliberation on important decisions for peoples' lives has stopped on behalf of the government and responsible authorities. People in the audience supporting this opinion highlighted the need for people to start organizing themselves in teams, communities ect with the aim to express themselves and have the chance to interact with other people and explore other perspectives. This will make them stronger and will lead to adopting active citizenship and expressing themselves.

-Some participants expressed the opinion that democratic debate became a lot worse after the outburst of the pandemic that has brought all the changes and restrictions in peoples' lives, and it was not something that pre-existed as a phenomenon. People expressing this opinion agreed that the situation remains problematic as people are expressed less and the responsible authorities are not promoting deliberation.

-There were very few people that did not support the opinion that there were restrictions in free expression and the same people declared that they were satisfied from the government's handling of the situation. One argument supporting this perspective was that due to the emergency of the situation the government had to take immediate action and there was not time for further deliberation. After the declared pandemic state things returned to their normal condition.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

The lack of political transparency was at some point acknowledged by all the people in the audience but there were different aspects to which each of them was focusing. The main aspects to which the participants were identifying the lack of political transparency are the following:

- the decisions concerning the public health, mostly supply chain and resource allocation
- the guidelines and framework for vaccination
- the transitional framework at work and the working environment
- in communication, as there was inconsistent messaging from political leaders and health authorities
- financial accountability

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

There were several opinions and arguments in the audience regarding this conclusion.

- For a very few participants this conclusion/assumption is false and there is not any significant difference or lack of representation noticed for any gender
- Women are underrepresented at the systemic level and in democratic dialogue processes both before and after COVID -19
- Women were more burdened during COVID-19, experienced a more difficult daily life and were given more responsibilities, which led to a greater psychological burden. Consequently, it has been more difficult to engage in democratic processes and dialogue due to lack of time, energy and willingness.
- The only huge difference was noticed in women who are also mothers, as in this case their burden has been more intense during periods of pandemic, lockdowns, etc.

d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that and handling future pandemic situation

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Greece and Sweden adopted very different approaches to handling the COVID-19 situation. The two countries have huge differences in their healthcare systems, population density, societal norms, and the severity of the pandemic.
- Greece's healthcare system has faced challenges in recent years, including budget constraints and infrastructure issues. This may have limited Greece's capacity to handle a large surge in COVID-19 cases without overwhelming the healthcare system, as Sweden aimed to do.
- Sweden has a lower population density compared to Greece. Greece is more densely populated, particularly in urban areas like Athens and Thessaloniki. Higher

population density can lead to a more rapid spread of the virus, making a different approach necessary.

-Sweden has a culture of trust in government and institutions, and its approach relied heavily on voluntary compliance with recommendations, which may not have been as effective in Greece.

-Greece's economy is heavily reliant on tourism, which was severely impacted by the pandemic. Also, its economy is not stable and reliable as Sweden's. The economic consequences of a less restrictive approach may have been particularly severe for Greece, influencing its decision to implement stricter measures.

-The very fast and immediate response of Greece in the pandemic was following the strategy and plan adopted in other EU countries and some participants referred particularly to France. Both Greece and France implemented early measures to curb the spread of the virus, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the closure of non-essential businesses. The participants mentioned also that they find similarities in the vaccination strategies of the two countries.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants in the discussion exhibited a notable division on this matter. A portion of them expressed their appreciation for the inclusion of experts in the decision-making process, citing a limited trust in politicians as the rationale behind their stance. Conversely, another segment of participants declared that, initially, they placed trust in experts, but subsequently discovered that the information provided was unreliable, and experts were not operating independently from politicians. It is not clear which of these two arguments are more prevailing. Also, participants mentioned that the discrepancy within the medical community combined with the constant dissemination of false or unsubstantiated news has led to the questioning of the validity of government-appointed experts.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

As it was described in the previous question the discussion around the involvement of the experts in government's decisions and strategy for the protection of public health has been dividing. On one side some participants said that they felt more safe being informed by the appointed experts while others felt that the appointed experts were unreliable or there was lack of transparency on their choice.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-The nature of urgency can vary. In some situations, immediate action may be necessary, and politicians must make rapid decisions based on available information and the best interests of their citizens. In other cases, careful deliberation and expert input are essential to avoid hasty or irresponsible decisions. For instance, COVID-19 was a novel virus with uncertain effects on humans, and there was limited data available on various patient demographics such as age, blood type, and more. This scarcity of data hindered the government's ability to make reliable assumptions, develop scenarios, and manage risks.

-The most effective approach is a collaborative one. Experts can provide input and recommendations, while politicians should use their judgment to synthesize this information and make decisions that align with the best interests of the public. Operational readiness is essential, but it should not come at the expense of strategic thinking, which is equally important for long-term planning and policy development.

-Politicians bear the responsibility of maintaining equilibrium in every decision they make, even when influenced by expert consultations. They must also ensure that the rights and freedoms of citizens are upheld in accordance with the constitution.

-Participants agreed that an ideal approach involves a balance between expert input and political judgment, with an emphasis on flexibility and adaptability to handle both urgent situations and long-term strategic planning effectively. Collaboration between experts and politicians can lead to more well-rounded and informed decision-making processes.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-Improve healthcare system

- Raise awareness about the importance of hygiene, vaccination, and social distancing during a pandemic but having less restrictions than during COVID-19

- Diversify supply chains for essential medical and pharmaceutical products to reduce dependence on a single source

-Better coordination and operational capacity from the government

-Increased mental health support

-Ensure readiness of the education (all levels) to support online learning mode at any time

Second key thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-All participants agreed that there were several incidents in Greece of politicians and breaking the rules such as lockdown violations, travel restrictions violation, mask and social distancing non-compliance, illegal gatherings and parties ect

-The majority of them were expressing anger and declared very unsatisfied by the politicians during the period of the pandemic. Some people even took the floor and started mentioning specific incidents.

-Few participants expressed the opinion that even if politicians were breaking the rules or not respecting the restrictions, people should not focus on that and should consider if these rules are needed according to their critical thinking. They believe that the intense preoccupation of society and the media with these phenomena distracted public opinion from other important things.

b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-Participants said that it would not make a huge different if politicians were compliant to these restrictions as they are not role models to them and in general they are not considered as such in Greece. A lot of people from the audience said that they would be mostly influenced by their doctor's opinions and advise on that issue.

-In their majority, participants said that the restrictions were not reasonable at some point

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-The majority of the participants disagreed with the statement that anyone's position could justify a difference in treatment.

-Some participants highlighted that most of the incidents, scandals ect that were observed were not connected with the with the official duties of politicians but mainly with their personal lives and their leisure time.

- d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The majority of participants expressed the view that not all measures and decisions taken under the state of emergency are justified
- Many argued that Greek politicians used this pretext to legislate on issues not directly related to the management of the pandemic and the protection of public health
- The legitimacy of the decisions is questioned and people said they would not want this management in a similar situation

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

- a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- In Greece the national elections were planned after the pandemic and we did not have any elections in the period of the major pandemic outbreak or severe restrictions
- Participants stressed that even if there was great dissatisfaction about the government's handling of the emergency situation and its follow-up, on the national elections of 2023 people voted for the same government. Therefore, it is considered that the pandemic did not have a significant impact on the electoral process in Greece.

- b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- No, as the electoral process was not during the crisis. In terms of content participants said that the pandemic crisis and its handling were not prominent in the election campaigns of the major political parties

- c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- There was no electoral process during the pandemic in Greece, neither planned or postponed.

Third key thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The media should have a more important and stronger role during a pandemic. Since individuals have a more limited sociability and a great need for information, the media are considered to have an increased responsibility to serve this need.
- In Greece, briefings by the government and the expert team were broadcast live on television daily during periods of high COVID-19 outbreaks and during lockdowns.
- The majority of participants expressed their disappointment with the level and quality of information and many said they did not trust the media
- There was a very large spread of fake news in general, but this was not limited even by the high profile media that reported this fake news.
- In the debate on the role of the media and the quality of information in Greece in normal times, the majority of the public expressed clear dissatisfaction

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- It was more pronounced on online platforms, websites and social media where the volume of data and news is very high, there is anonymous deposition of information and there is no cross-checking of data and information.
- The spread of fake news in high profile television media, newspapers etc. was more limited but had been observed there as well.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Most participants said that they had a picture of the situation and were critical of all the news they saw. Some also mentioned the following as means of doubting the validity of the information they were receiving:
- Consulting Health Experts
- Cross-Referencing Multiple Sources
- Fact-Checking Websites and Tools

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Participants mentioned media, internet and social media but highlighted that they were conscious about the invalidity of the information circulated.
- A lot of people mentioned their personal doctor or health expert as a trustful resource for all the health-related information.
- Regarding the operational things, the measures and restrictions, the impact of the crisis in economy ect these were topics for which there was not one single source of information that they considered as reliable.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Most of the participants expressed the view that the Greek government did not want to listen to the citizens and that this is an attitude that it continues to have after the crisis.
- Some argued that the dissatisfaction of society was not so important as the priority was to protect public health.
- There was disagreement about possible ways of protest which were mentioned during the debate. Some people believe that the protest should be escalated, while others believe that the great suppression of similar protests in Greece should lead us to alternative tactics.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants were uncomfortable with this part of the discussion. It was very difficult for everyone to think of alternative ways of protesting. They also reported that many people use social media to protest and make complaints, and while this is a relief, it has no substantial institutional basis and no results. Some ways to express discontent effectively without a demonstration that participants came with are the following:
 - Engage in Dialogue in debate panels or community forums
 - Contact elected representatives
 - Send letters or emails addressed to relevant authorities.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-Participants were divided also on this topic. Some supported this measure as it was necessary to protect the public health and since all kind of gatherings were forbidden, it made sense not to allow also this. Other participants were insisting that this served government in the sense that dissatisfaction within the society was less visible.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

-The participants pointed out that there are various means of consultation which could be used more widely. An example mentioned was the Municipal Youth Council. Most people agreed that it is the personal and social responsibility of individuals to give life and meaning to the processes that shape the kind and quality of democracy.

Key findings

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

The participants unanimously agreed that issues of transparency should be raised in all matters and decisions related to the pandemic. This concerns politicians, journalists, pharmaceutical companies, and health agencies. Participants mentioned all these groups and with minor disagreements on specific examples, stated that all should be under consideration now the pandemic crisis is over.

MANAGEMENT OF DECISIONS BY POLITICIANS

The way politicians took decisions during the pandemic was criticized by some people, while by others it was justified in the context of the emergency. However, there was no great satisfaction with the decisions taken and the management method chosen, nor was it suggested that they be adopted in a similar future crisis.

SCANDALS BY POLITICIANS

Politicians' scandals have been a controversial topic of discussion. While most people agreed on the existence of political scandals, the disagreement was about whether these scandals actually affect the lives of citizens or disorient them from more important issues.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The role of the media has eroded in Greece, and it seems that there is dissatisfaction and lack of trust towards them. There were no suggestions for improving the quality

and validity of the media, but there was unanimous support of the opinion that people should raise awareness about the strong impact of media (especially with their current characteristics) to the society.

PROTESTS

The issue of social protest was one in which participants were unable to provide very specific alternatives for more peaceful expression. In Greece there is a big issue that often comes up in protest marches, the role and tactics of the police. Police brutality and repression has turned a large part of the world away from this type of protest; however it seems that alternative solutions with possibly greater effectiveness have not been found and so many people do not know how to express their discontent.

4. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in France by CBE Sud Luberon)

We organised the debate on the 2nd November 2023, between 17:30 and 18:10 [CET]. The debate took place at a coworking space, LE 20/35. We reunited 32 people to discuss the different subjects (see the attendance list).

We started by presenting the projects and the expected results. We explained how the questions were defined. We assured them that their answers were free, and that they could really give their opinion without fear of being judged, as long as it was done with respect for others and everyone's words.

1st theme : Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

For the majority of the people at the debate, the Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate. Some of them find that it was more visible after the end of the declared pandemic state. Some others find that this kind of emergency state has always had an impact on the democratic debate but it is justified.

A person finds that he was not aware of all the ins and outs of the crisis and so he couldn't participate in the debate in an informed way. Some are feeling that debates are becoming less and less audible and more and more extreme, with a more pronounced closed-mindedness than before, in the media and in the private sphere too. Overall, there is a feeling that there is less consideration for people's opinions, and that more decisions have been taken without widespread consultation.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

Again, the assembly is divided. Some of them think that there is a huge lack of transparency during the crisis because people were not aware of what happened in the high spheres of power, and were kept in the dark. For others, the government did what he could and tried to inform us everyday, especially during the daily press conferences.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

It could have been seen in some families that it was always the men who could get outside for shopping during the lockdown, and they had more opportunities to meet other people. Women were more at home with children, and some of them did not go out of the house for some weeks. But someone highlighted the fact that the jobs which were essential during the lockdown were largely occupied by women (cashiers, nurses, school teachers...). This could be seen in two ways : again they were very occupied at work so they did not have time to inform themselves and to participate in within the democratic debates, but in the same time they were on the front line and they could have discuss with people because they knew what it was to stay stand in order for the society to continue to life.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

A majority of participants agreed that experts were legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process. But two or three people thought that experts were not elected by us and so they did not have legitimacy.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

Again, here some people thought that because they were experts they knew the ins and outs of this kind of emergency, especially doctors who can explain and predict the best way of dealing with sick people and the spread of the virus. But, for others, the fact that they were chosen by the political people led some people to think that there was a bias because the government chose only the experts thinking the same way. The other experts with a different opinion had not been consulted.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

The huge majority of the audience thought that it was necessary to privilege experts efficiently in the health and crisis management fields, rather than elected politicians.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

Some opinions:

- a huge need to invest in the healthcare system, because emergency services are always underwater, even during "normal" periods.
- more prevention and simple precautions from the beginning
- more seriousness about the situation, long before the outbreak of the sick/dead people
- Reconciling experts and politicians within permanent bodies
- more cooperation with others countries

2nd theme: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

The majority of the assembly faced pejorative feelings : injustice, disgust, anger, incomprehension. One person said that it was one more drop in an already full vase. But a certain number of people were not surprised.

b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

Again, some politicians think that they are untouchables. But in the same way, some ordinary people thought the same and behaved that way. We do not have to accept or not the restrictions, we just obey them. But it is true that during the last weeks of the lockdown it was becoming more and more difficult to accept them while seeing politicians organising parties. To nuance, a man said that it was also important not to fall into a logic of all rotten, because some politicians had been real examples during this pandemic.

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

It was unanimous that politicians, because they are politicians, are not given preferential treatment; on the contrary, they must be exemplary.

d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

In France, there is an article of the constitution called "49-3" which enables the government to engage its responsibility in front of the National Assembly, in case the Assembly would not vote on a text that the government wants to see voted without compromise. Most of the time, the Assembly gives its trust to the government because the government has the majority, and the text is voted without debate. This article is used for important texts but it is more and more used these last few years than before. Some people during the debate thought that the emergency state of Covid-19 crisis has an impact today on the fact that this article is used more easily than before, and so that the legitimacy of the parliamentary exam has been questioned during the lockdown.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

In France, the municipal elections were planned during one of the first Sundays of the lockdown. The first round of elections was held but a lot of people did not turn up to vote, and the results were very controversial. The second round was reported in June 2020 but a lot of small towns saw their mayors elected even though a majority of the inhabitants did not attend. Some people in the assembly were feeling that their right of vote had been denied just because they wanted to protect their health and their relatives'.

b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

The electoral campaign has been affected because people could not go to meetings, and a majority of them did not vote. Moreover, some people could have preferred to see how their mayors would manage the crisis situation in their cities before having to vote for them.

c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

A majority of the assembly agreed to say that, yes, the elections should have been postponed until after the pandemic.

3rd theme: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the media in normal time and during a pandemic?

During the pandemic, the media was the only way for a lot of people to keep a link with the rest of the world. They were the only way for having the information of the global situation, and for receiving news and news rules from the governments. But they also had an anxiety-provoking role because the Covid crisis was the only subject and it was very stressful for a lot of people who finally preferred to avoid the media.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the media?

The media with a low control on the news posted has been more subject to fake news. Social media, because people can post everything, faces a huge challenge to control all the information. People had to be aware of the dangers of these fake news and did additional work to verify the news on social media. The all-news channels were also sometimes victims of fake news because the fact that the news changed constantly, something said the morning was becoming false the evening.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

Some strategies proposed during the debate :

- focus on traditional media (newspaper, radio and le 20h, the evening TV news)
- try to verify the news by finding other sources of information that confirmed

- discuss with relatives to try to know the true and the false, and share information
- look for the source of the information

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

Some answers :

- Evening TV-news
- newspapers
- twitter
- other social media
- online school lessons
- online conversations with friends/relatives
- radio

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

The global thought was that the social discontent should have been more taken into consideration but actually it was complicated to do so. Maybe governments would have more relied on the Parliament to give legitimacy to their decisions, because it was complicated to consult people directly.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

The thought was shared between yes and no. Some ways to express discontent without demonstration :

- through social media
- complaint at the police, at a global stage
- petitions
- by soliciting experts

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

A lot of people thought it was a violation of their fundamental rights. But at the same time, some of them understood the fact that it was necessary to limit contact between people to avoid the spread of the virus. Some participants said that they understood that protests were forbidden during the lockdown, but they found that

the prohibition of protests could have been long before the decision was really taken.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

The assembly thought that indeed a participative democracy could be a good solution in case of future pandemics. Some instruments, such as official surveys, could be used to collect the opinion of the public, and people could better accept the decision because they are included.

5. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Italy by Vimercate City)

In the Table 1 below, we can see the timetable of the Debate panel 1, which was executed on 16th of September 2023 at 10.30 pm CET at Auditorium 'Falcone e Borsellino', at the Civic Library of Vimercate.

Table 2. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
10:30	Institutional Greetings, Riccardo Corti, Gianluca Pinnelli (Municipality of Vimercate) and Nadia Di Iulio, Elena Fuerler (ALDA+)
10:40	Presentation of the HEARD project
10:50	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points
11:00	Start of the discussion on the topic: THE POWER OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKERS
11:30	Start of discussion on the topic: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
12:00	Start of discussion - on the topic: PUBLIC DISCUSSION
12:30	Conclusion

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project, continued with the presentation of the topic of the project, we presented also some facts from the covid-19 pandemic period to remind the participants about the challenges and the government reaction during mentioned period. We continued the debate panel with presenting the crucial starting points of the results of the survey, conducted in Italy and also in all the partner countries, focusing on the statistically significant findings. We also mentioned the findings of the state-of-the art analysis, conducted by the project partner countries.

According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

First key thematic: Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

- a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

Participants stated that by their opinion the Covid-19 crisis did not an impact on the democratic debate after the end of the declared pandemic state.

- b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

The context allowed for mistakes to be made easily and inevitably. The mistakes that were made were not archived as a starting point for a future situation. The government took necessary drastic measures, but too little critical thinking was communicated. The institutions did not let the lack of certainty shine through. Uncertainties have been hidden.

- c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

The participants stressed that they did not detect any gender-related constraints or prejudices impeding the democratic debates. It is worth noting that in a country like Italy, where women's perspectives are not consistently taken into account, the perceived limitations on them were more pronounced compared to men.

- d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that and handling future pandemic situation

The general Italian population has less trust in the institutions and are more critical towards the decision-makers in comparison to Swedish citizens.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

- a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

During the COVID-19 crisis in Italy starting with the Conte's government, experts played a crucial role in advising and guiding the government's response to the pandemic. Epidemiologists, virologists, public health specialists, and other relevant experts were extensively involved in analyzing data, tracking the spread of the virus, and offering recommendations to policymakers. Their input helped in shaping public health strategies, influencing decisions on lockdowns, social distancing measures, testing and contact tracing policies, and the allocation of healthcare resources. These experts were pivotal in providing evidence-based insights that

were instrumental in managing and mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the population.

Moreover, Italy's government frequently engaged with scientific and medical experts through various advisory committees and task forces. These experts were called upon to provide expertise and recommendations, contributing to informed policy decisions. The collaboration between the government and these experts was critical in enhancing the understanding of the novel virus, shaping public health policies, and ensuring a unified approach in tackling the crisis. This multidisciplinary approach underscored the importance of expert advice in navigating a public health emergency of such magnitude, highlighting the necessity of a synergistic relationship between policymakers and experts for effective crisis management.

Furthermore, in February 2021, due to the fall of the government led by Giuseppe Conte, a technical government led by Mario Draghi, former President of the European Central Bank, appointed directly by the President of the Republic, took office. In this phase experts and technicians were, even more, at the centre of the political decision-making processes.

In conclusion, it can be said that the experts were legitimated to be at the centre of the decision-making process all throughout the pandemic.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

Being the COVID-19 crisis a complete unexpected event the experts were trusted by the general population, especially at the beginning of the pandemic.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

Experts and politicians should be able to cooperate in urgent situations as well as in "normal" times to be able to compensate for the shortcomings of both sides and have a government ready to support citizens in any situation.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

First thing is to learn from the previous mistakes.

-We must become learning communities, carry on what we learn. Solidarity, nothing has changed since before the pandemic, in fact we are more individualistic. What we experience now with war and crisis makes us realise that we are small, nature can destroy us in a second. Nature challenges us, we are nothing. Energy and environmental challenges that are happening now highlight bad governance.

Pandemic: open a consciousness about our weakness

- We had different rules per country. We are the ones who decided not to give Europe competence and there was no more talk of that. Some macro issues, don't

they work by giving them to the European level? Give more power at local level, but also at European level.
- Need to start a conversation about the changes needed in Health and Educational systems

Second key thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

Questions were raised regarding the legitimacy of the implemented measures, all of which adhered to the regulations outlined in the Italian Constitution. However, there was no perception of politicians showing disrespect for the enacted laws.

b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

In the initial stages, a majority of the Italian populace supported the government's imposed restrictions as they found themselves in an unprecedented situation. The challenge to accept these restrictions came with their prolonged duration and was not linked to the conduct of the politicians.

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

Given that both the speakers and the audience did not perceive a stark difference in behavior between citizens and politicians, the question seemed less pertinent. It was unanimously acknowledged that during the COVID-19 situation, regardless of being a politician or an ordinary citizen, adherence to the rules without any preferential treatment was essential.

d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

As mentioned earlier, there was a lesser perception of power abuse by national politicians compared to some other European countries. While the concentration of power in the Prime Minister's role, sidelining the Parliament, was a subject of concern for many, it's important to note that these decisions were primarily rationalized due to the extraordinary circumstances presented by the unprecedented situation.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

Given that Italy did not hold any elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is evident that the global health crisis significantly influenced the electoral processes at both national and international levels. Governments and electoral bodies had to modify their protocols to prioritize the well-being of voters and election personnel. This led to alterations in voting methodologies, campaign approaches, and engagement strategies with voters.

b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

The electoral campaign was affected by the crisis.

c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

As previously noted, Italy did not conduct national elections during the crisis, making it challenging to determine if postponing the elections would have been a favorable or effective decision given the country's circumstances.

Third key thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

The media played a central role in pandemic discussions, significantly more so than in the past, acting as a bridge between policymakers and citizens. Additionally, the pandemic brought to light the heightened influence of social media as an immediate information source, particularly among the younger demographic. However, this also led to the dissemination of misleading or inaccurate information.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

The rise of fake news is a complex issue and is not limited to specific forms of media. It is a phenomenon that pervades various mediums, including traditional print, broadcast, online news platforms, and social media. Misinformation and disinformation can be disseminated through sensational headlines, biased reporting, misleading images, and viral posts. Social media platforms, due to their

rapid and widespread reach, were mainly at the center of the discussion. Traditional media also grapple with challenges like the pressure to publish quickly, political influences, and the need to capture audience attention.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

Identifying fake news was a significant challenge, as a multitude of perspectives even existed among experts. Many individuals sought insights from reputable sources, such as official government websites and health organizations, to cross-verify information and ensure its accuracy or specific channel they trusted

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

By checking official government websites and health organizations, to cross-verify information and ensure its accuracy or specific channel they trusted.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

The social discontent could have been better taken into consideration through a more effective and precise communication focusing on including all social strata and balancing health and social concerns.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, digital platforms and online activism offered a powerful means to articulate dissatisfaction. The internet became a vital arena allowing individuals to voice grievances, disseminate information, coordinate advocacy efforts, and shed light on societal challenges. Utilizing tools like social media, live streaming, and online petitions proved effective in expressing discontent and advocating for necessary changes.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

Some citizens endorsed the decision to limit or prohibit protests during the pandemic, citing apprehensions about public health and the potential virus transmission. They emphasized the necessity to curb the spread of COVID-19 and safeguard the populace, viewing these restrictions as vital in preventing large gatherings and reducing infection risks. On the flip side, others felt that restricting protests encroached upon their democratic rights and freedom of expression. They contended that peaceful demonstrations constitute a fundamental avenue for

citizens to voice their grievances, exercise democratic entitlements, and hold the government accountable, even in times of crisis. Others believed that while protests should have been permitted, specific measures could have been adopted to mitigate risks, such as ensuring physical distancing, mandating masks, or organizing alternative forms of protest that align with health guidelines.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

Incorporating mechanisms for citizen engagement and participation in decision-making processes, a participative democracy fosters a more direct and inclusive relationship between the government and its citizens. It enables citizens to voice their concerns, opinions, and aspirations, ensuring that policymaking is reflective of the diverse perspectives within society. This active involvement not only allows for a deeper understanding of social protests but also promotes collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility. Of course, these processes as helpful and needed are very difficult to develop, implement and monitoring bearing in mind that Italy has 60 million inhabitants. it sounds great on paper but difficult to bring in real life action.

6. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Bulgaria by FECE)

Table 1 below presents the timetable of Debate Panel 1, which was executed on 8 September 2023 at 3.00 p.m. EET in the Bulgarian Red Cross, Varna, Bulgaria.

Table 3. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
15:00	Greetings and introduction Dr Nevena Dobрева
15:05	Presentation of the HEARD project
15:15	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points Dr Zornitsa Draganova
15:25	Start of the discussion on the topic: THE POWER OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKERS
15:45	Start of discussion on the topic: TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
16:05	Start of discussion - on the topic: PUBLIC DISCUSSION
16:20	EC satisfaction survey and conclusion thoughts

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project and continued with the presentation of the topic. Dr Zornitsa Draganova presented the findings of the state-of-the-art analysis and some facts from the COVID-19 pandemic to remind the participants about the challenges and the government's reaction during the mentioned period. We continued the debate panel by showing the crucial starting points of the survey results conducted in Bulgaria and all the partner countries, focusing on the statistically significant findings.

According to the mentioned research findings, we formulated three themes and sub-themes as stated below:

First key theme: Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

- a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Despite the significant impact of the pandemic, many people avoid discussing it openly. After the official end of the pandemic, people are trying to ignore what happened and instead focus on spending quality time with friends and family.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- During the pandemic, the state took the most appropriate measures even though there was a lack of information. With restrictions on gathering a lot of people in one place, live debates were not feasible, though offline debates did take place. However, people were not looking to debate at the time due to the stress caused by the pandemic.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The society had to relinquish some of its rights to protect vulnerable groups. Many people demonstrated an unwillingness to compromise on the health and well-being of these groups. Therefore, our society needs a public consensus on how to preserve the safety of these individuals, regardless of personal beliefs. Rights are difficult to obtain (especially for women), and COVID-19 has shown that they can be taken away easily.
- Although people were isolated, it wasn't just the vulnerable groups but also ordinary people. Staff in social services were locked in with elderly to take care of them. The priority was to protect lives, and the measures taken were quite adequate. Naturally, some unhappy people wanted to leave or have their relatives visit them. In such a crisis, the state must take even stricter measures than just our compliance. For instance, in social services (homes for elderly), there were some months when relatives did not look for their loved ones, but during the pandemic, they suddenly claimed they were not allowed to visit them.

d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that and handling future pandemic situation

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- During the pandemic, Bulgarian institutions took the right measures giving the lack of information on the virus and its consequences. There is no space to comparison with particular countries but following the good examples of certain measures and actions.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Unfortunately, even experts spread questionable information, and institutions were focused only on dead statistics.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- During the peak of the pandemic, doctors had to make decisions quickly due to the immense pressure they faced on the front lines. With a lack of trustworthy information, discussions on the topic were impossible. No one was prepared for the pandemic. Doctors were not equipped to handle this situation, so everything was chaotic, following a trial-and-error approach.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Experts expressed controversial opinions on the governmental measures and actions. This created misunderstandings among front-line servants (as caregivers) and general population.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- If a new pandemic emerges with different characteristics, we would experience a similar scenario as the previous one. We will need to develop new solutions. Criticizing and blaming others are not a constructive approach. We kept the government informed of the sick and their conditions via daily reports.
- Additionally, I was impressed by the widespread distribution of disinfectants. Despite the surge in people, we promptly established additional electronic connections, which we still use today. This was an excellent practice, beneficial for any future pandemics.

Second key theme: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

- a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The politicians did not follow their own measures as they insisted on the regular people. For instance, they did not apply the restriction of presenting COVID-19 certificate to access the parliament building, as it was imposed for all public building.

- b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Although legislators create laws, they must lead by example and follow the same rules as everyone else. The Bulgarian Red Cross Director-General had taken on the role of overseeing the vaccination effort and even personally administered a vaccine in public.
- While we ask that the public wear masks for safety, some politicians have chosen not to wear them in parliament.
- In times of crisis, it is important for everyone, including politicians, health professionals, and social workers, to follow safety measures. Wearing masks is a cultural norm in some places like Japan with smog.
- As a social worker, it was disheartening to see individuals, such as homeless people, with dirty masks or without masks. We made sure those in need to wear masks as soon as we had them available.

- c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- If members of parliament fail to wear masks, it is likely that the public will become aware of this.

- d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- The participants disagreed with the statement. They did not question the legitimacy of the measures.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

- The global COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected electoral procedures across the world. In Bulgaria, the voting system was modified to minimise the risk of virus transmission by introducing machine voting. However, this confused some elderly voters who needed help from registration staff. Furthermore, certain sections experienced machine issues, and the menu was unclear for some voters. Consequently, some individuals inadvertently cast votes for only parliamentary elections while missing the presidential election by accidentally pressing the same button twice.

b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

- The opinion of young people is that even if they wanted to be active, no one would pay attention to them, so there is no point. That is why voter turnout is low, because there is no point in voting.
- Voting is a crucial responsibility for all citizens. It is disheartening that up to 60-70% of people may not participate in the process. While transparency may be an issue in remote areas and districts, it was better in the city centre.

c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

- In Bulgaria, we entered constantly from election to election, and it was normal to speculate about them. It was impossible to postpone elections forever because of the situation. The national budget was not accepted. Without an available budget, all governmental institutions were about to be frozen.

Third key theme: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

- During the pandemic, the media's role changed significantly due to the unique challenges and responsibilities that arise during the health crisis. In normal situations, the media provides information and news on different topics, such

as politics, economics, culture, and entertainment. It aims to inform, educate, and entertain the public while holding institutions and individuals accountable. However, during the pandemic, the media's primary focus shifted to disseminating critical and timely information on the outbreak. This includes updates on infection rates, safety guidelines, vaccine distribution, and other pandemic-related developments. Accuracy and credibility become even more crucial, as misinformation and panic can spread easily during a health crisis.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

- The rise of fake news after the end of the pandemic led to a loss of respect for media sources and authorities due to a mass of misinformation and disinformation.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

- Many groups in the society couldn't orient themselves in the pool of controversial opinions and disinformation. Even among highly educated people conspiracy theories and non-logical reasoning was observed.

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

- The official information in the first months of the crisis was not enough to create a safe environment for the front-line staff (as medical doctors, caregivers, etc.). Even on global scale the information was not enough and as a society, we needed more time to create clear procedure for treatment of patients and vulnerable groups (such as elderly, homeless people, people in intuitions).

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

- The lack of straight forwarding campaign about the vaccination created social discontent and unrest among certain groups of population. In general, the public institution could do more on informing the population and prevent the social dissatisfaction with some measures related to vaccination.

- b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?
- People were quite active in social media but this created even more disinformation among the masses. Some groups started public demonstrations even during the restrictions on public gathering.
- c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?
- Following the safety measures many people preferred to stay at home while others went out and participated in protests in the big cities. This created tensions among the police and protesters.
- d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?
- The lack of information on the virus, its spread and needed actions created difficulties in handling the situation. However, many conspiracy theories, fake news and disagreements were evident among the population. Some populist parties took advantage by exploiting the general confusion about the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequences of this are still evident on the political scene.
 - During the pandemic five-rounds of parliamentary elections had brought lower trust in institution and unwillingness to vote among general population (as less than 40% of the voters participated in the elections).

Key findings

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

At the debate panel, participants agreed that the measures and action taken by the government were adequate given the situation. The lack of information on the nature of the virus, created fear among the society. The government chose to take more restrict measures to guarantee the safety of general population and vulnerable groups in particular. Hence, the public debate was not on the table when we did not have the expertise to deal with the situation.

MANAGEMENT OF DECISIONS BY POLITICIANS

Participants in the debate were disappointed that some politicians and even experts (as medical doctors) did not give their personal example of following measures and recommendation for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even some populist politicians used the uncertainty to gain voters on the elections, which created even more tensions within the society.

SCANDALS BY POLITICIANS

Covid-19 effected the electoral process. However, the elections couldn't be postponed for better times as the public instructions could be paralyzed with a parliament responsible for the legislations.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The participants in the debate noted that the media focussed too much on dead statistics during the pandemic. The number of affected and deaths was the leading news for months which created more stress to general population and gave space for conspiracy theories and the rise of populist parties in the country.

PROTESTS

For many people, protests were inevitable but not quite effective. As many people protested against the measures while others were busy to safe lives. Hence, some of the reason for the protests were the lack of good informative campaigns especially on vaccination. In result, populist parties took over some protests and contributed to the spread of disinformation.

7. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Sweden by NDF)

Debate Panel 1, which was executed on the 14th of June 2023 at 9:00 AM in Stockholm, Sweden.

The core of the panel discussion revolved around the presentation of the project's central topic. We emphasised the relevance and importance of the chosen subject matter, underscoring how it directly impacts not only Sweden but also our partner countries. The intent was to set the stage for a substantive and informed conversation.

Throughout the panel debate, our objective was to encourage an open and constructive exchange of ideas and perspectives. By structuring the discussion in this manner, we sought to ensure that the participants gained a deeper understanding of the project, its context, and the research that underpinned it, ultimately fostering a more informed and engaging debate.

According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

First key theme: Government's power

1st sub-subject : The lack of transparency

a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the

topic:

➤ Supporting the Impact on Democratic Debate: Participants stated that the increase of distant voting and virtual engagement in legislative procedures was one of the most important consequences. The pandemic increased public awareness of healthcare, social safety nets, and the role of government in times of crisis in addition to the procedural improvements.

➤ Participants who were opposed to the impact on the democratic debate stated that some effects were transient because remote voting and virtual participation were primarily viewed as temporary countermeasures to the pandemic. Many governments returned to their customary methods of debating when the crisis was over. In reality, the dynamic nature of political discourse overshadows the pandemic's effect on democratic debates.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- During the discussion participants agreed that it was highly troubling and unjustified that there was no political transparency during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- This lack of openness hampered the worldwide pandemic response and might have had fatal consequences. Additionally, it fostered a climate that was ideal for the propagation of false information and conspiracies.
- While others contend that governments must control fear, good communication is longer-lasting. Citizens can better comprehend the issue, take the necessary measures, and hold their leaders accountable when there is transparency.
- However, several participants claimed that there were instances where it was acceptable. Governments may have had good reasons for delaying the release of all facts since managing a crisis of this magnitude is a complicated task.
- The virus, its propagation, and its effects were all quite unclear in the early phases of the epidemic. Governments may have kept information from the public in order to minimize unwarranted alarm or to avert a lack of vital goods.

Some nations may have also been reluctant to share the scope of their readiness or any flaws in their healthcare systems.

- According to others it is crucial to keep in mind though that transparency doesn't necessarily have to be all or nothing. Governments may have been more selective in the data they released while still upholding a level of openness that encourages public participation.

c) The limitation of participation within democratic debates was more obvious for women than men.

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- The debate ultimately involved participants presenting data and making compelling arguments to support their claims, with some participants emphasizing the gender-based barriers that prevent women from participating in democratic debates and others emphasizing the advancements and individual differences in such barriers.
- Participants inclined to believe that there is proof of sexism, pointed out that to the underrepresentation of women in political leadership roles and among candidates for public office.
- According to supporters of the declaration, women frequently experience gender-based prejudices and biases, which can damage their credibility in political discussions.
- Further stressing the reality that additional characteristics including color, ethnicity, financial class, and sexual orientation frequently exacerbate the restrictions placed on women.
- Participants also stated that there is a tendency toward gender equality in democratic debates as more women are vying for and winning political office.
- Female candidates and participants in democratic discussions are increasingly accepted and supported as societal opinions of women in politics change.
- They can mention the numerous policy initiatives that have been put in place to address gender imbalances and promote women's participation in democratic processes, such as affirmative action for women in politics.

d) Comparison to Sweden

Participants lauded Sweden through highlighting the value of adaptation, data-driven decision-making, and the delicate balancing act between public health and economic factors is Sweden's response to the COVID-19 epidemic.

- Further stating that in future pandemic responses should prioritize international cooperation and public trust-building while also taking these lessons into account.
- Sweden relied on voluntary guidelines, placing an emphasis on individual responsibility and avoiding tight limitations on enterprises and public life, while the majority of other nations enforced lockdowns to varying degrees.
- The Swedish strategy mainly relied on public acceptance of government suggestions and voluntary adherence to rules like social distance and mask wearing.

- Sweden's approach was often associated with the idea of achieving herd immunity through natural infection. The government argued that allowing the virus to spread among the population, primarily affecting healthier individuals, would eventually build immunity and protect vulnerable groups.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the center of the decision-making process?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- Due to the complexity of issues, particularly those involving public health, economics, and science, some participants emphasized that specialists were absolutely legitimate to be at the center of the decision-making process; it is critical to rely on persons with the greatest levels of competence.
- Participants agreed that an inclusive decision-making process is critical, but that does not mean specialists should be ignored. Experts serve as advisors, making evidence-based recommendations that can guide policymakers and assist them in making more informed decisions.
- Participants who disagreed stated that putting experts in such a position can lead to a situation in which a small group of people with biases or limited perspectives hold disproportionate power, potentially undermining democratic decision-making principles that rely on input from a diverse range of stakeholders.
- Furthermore, having experts in such roles may provide them with the legitimacy to place them at the center of decision-making depending on the context. Experts may have conflicts of interest, be influenced by political or economic forces, or just make mistakes in some situations.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- Participants who disagreed stated that putting experts in such a position could result in a situation in which a small group of people with biases or limited

perspectives wield disproportionate power, potentially undermining democratic decision-making principles that rely on input from a diverse range of stakeholders.

- Furthermore, depending on the setting, having specialists in such jobs may give them the legitimacy to place them at the center of decision-making. In some cases, experts may have conflicts of interest, be swayed by political or economic influences, or just make mistakes.
- Participants, on the other hand, expressed concern about completely believing the chosen experts due to inconsistencies that raised questions about whether the experts had a thorough understanding of the virus.
- Some claimed that their recommendations had a political influence on some of the recommendations given. There were times when choices appeared to be in line with the political objective of the ruling party.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants noted that due to the specialized knowledge and experience, experts are more efficient in dealing with urgent problems, however politicians should avoid wielding undue influence in such instances.

While politicians' influence is vital in developing legislation and providing resources, it should not eclipse the knowledge required to make critical decisions under duress. To achieve the best results during an emergency, we must emphasize the advice of specialists who can act objectively and quickly based on their domain-specific knowledge.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Sweden's approach was met with diverse reactions both domestically and abroad. Critics claimed that the country has a greater per capita COVID-19 death rate than neighboring countries with better controls. Supporters of Sweden's strategy emphasized potential long-term benefits such as reduced economic impact and possibly population immunity.

When it comes to "finding the best way to manage a future pandemic," it's important to remember that the COVID-19 situation was highly fluid, and different countries chose different solutions based on their specific circumstances, healthcare systems, and political considerations. The effectiveness of any strategy is determined by a variety of factors, including the nature of the virus, public compliance, and the capability of the healthcare system.

Lessons from prior pandemics, like as COVID-19, can help shape future responses. Furthermore, pandemic preparedness strategies should be constantly updated and enhanced in response to changing scientific understanding and real-world experiences.

Early discovery and prompt reaction, robust testing and contact tracing, vaccination programs, public health education, and international cooperation are likely to be the best ways to manage future pandemics.

Second theme: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

- a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants expressed dissatisfaction because most politicians were disrespectful of the laws they passed, noting that this erodes public trust in our political system and undermines the very foundation of our society, which is based on a social contract in which we obey the laws in exchange for protection and order. Participants noted that it is only reasonable for politicians to be held accountable when they disregard the laws they have created by demanding openness, ethical behavior, and repercussions for those who break the trust.

- b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants pointed out that when it comes to following limits and requirements, politicians should be held to the same standards as the general public. This not only

ensures public trust and compliance, but also a more equitable and effective response to any crisis or disaster.

c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants noted that position should not justify a difference in treatment and prioritization of equity and fairness in the distribution of resources and protection. Everyone, regardless of their position, should have access to the same level of care and protection. In deferment participants can be a justification for a difference in treatment between leaders and the public when it comes to treatment considering Leaders often play a crucial role in managing a crisis and making critical decisions that affect the entire population.

Other participants noted that ultimately, the difference in treatment between leaders and the public should be based on a clear assessment of risk and necessity. It's about ensuring that our leaders can continue to make informed decisions and manage the crisis effectively. However, this should be done in a way that upholds principles of fairness and transparency to maintain public trust.

d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants pointed out that the legitimacy of actions made without parliamentary review is a complicated matter, while there are good reasons to move quickly in an emergency or when the security of the country is at jeopardy, it is crucial that these decisions are responsible, transparent, and subject to review. Finding a balance between the need for quick action and the values that our society places on democratic governance is the key.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants with affirmation that the pandemic had a profound impact on the electoral process. It forced us to adapt and implement numerous changes to ensure the safety of voters and election workers.

Through the electoral process there were exposed disparities in access to voting, with some communities facing greater obstacles to participate in elections, such as limited access to mail-in voting or early voting locations.

Other participants pointed out that there was uncertainty and fear, false information about voting procedures, the safety of voting in person, and the integrity of the electoral process spread quickly.

b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Some participants believed that the electoral campaign has been significantly affected by the crisis; it often leads to a de-emphasis on traditional campaign issues, and candidates are forced to adapt their messaging to address the crisis at hand.

c) • Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants indicated that the primary concern during a pandemic should have been public health and safety. Holding elections during such a crisis put voters, poll workers, and candidates at risk. Others believed that democracy must continue to function even during challenging times. Elections are a fundamental part of our democratic process, and delaying them could set a dangerous precedent.

Third theme: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the media in normal time and during a pandemic?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants pointed out that during a pandemic, the media's role was very different from how it is during normal times. For example, during a pandemic, the stakes are much higher, and it is crucial to provide accurate and timely information while preventing panic.

b) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants noted some strategies primarily involving verifying information from multiple reliable sources, curated social media feeds to include reputable sources and experts in the field strategies revolved around verification, diverse sourcing, and critical thinking.

c) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

Participants stated that they gathered knowledge by integrating it from reliable news organizations, credible government agencies, and academic and medical literature.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- Participants noted that governments and institutions should have proactively engaged with the public, providing clear, transparent, and timely information about the crisis and the measures being taken to mitigate it.
- They stated that inclusivity in decision-making is vital as it ensures that the

voices of those most affected by the crisis are heard and taken into account.

- Investing in mental health and social support systems is crucial.
- Fostering a culture of resilience and preparedness can mitigate social discontent during crises. Governments and organizations should invest in long-term planning, education, and infrastructure that make societies more resilient to future shocks.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- Participants remarked that while protests have their role in expressing unhappiness, they are not the sole viable option. Alternatives include open communication, media involvement, legal options, community organizing, and artistic expression. In fact, by using these techniques in addition to demonstrations, the message can be strengthened and made more convincing.
- Participants noted that to ensure that the discontent is acknowledged and properly addressed in a democratic and civil society, it is critical that we investigate and make use of these various instruments.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- While keeping the public safe and in order is obviously important, outright banning protests should only be used as a last resort.
- Participants noted that demonstrations will put in check democratic principles and freedom of speech are to the right to protest.
- There should be concentrating on finding solutions to facilitate peaceful protests while addressing concerns related to violence and destruction rather than suppressing this fundamental freedom.
- Participants further stated protests are an essential tool for making sure that our opinions are heard since a vibrant democracy depends on the active engagement of its citizens.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

The following arguments were used by participants in the discussion to answer to the topic:

- Participants claimed that participatory democracy offers a useful and practical way to improve how social demonstrations are taken into account.
- It can help resolve issues, lessen the need for disruptive protests, and promote a more inclusive and responsive government by actively incorporating citizens in the decision-making process.
- Although it may not completely stop social protest, it undoubtedly offers a more effective way to address the reasons for such protests. It is a step in the direction of a society where all citizens' voices are valued and heard and where there is greater justice and equity.

Key findings

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Participants concluded that the lack of transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic had significant consequences, both positive and negative, on democratic processes and public perception. The increase in distant voting and virtual engagement in legislative procedures brought about important procedural improvements and raised public awareness about critical issues such as healthcare, social safety nets, and the government's role in times of crisis. However, those who opposed these changes argued that some of these effects were temporary, as remote voting and virtual participation were primarily seen as emergency measures. Many governments reverted to their traditional methods of conducting debates once the immediate crisis subsided. Ultimately, the dynamic nature of political discourse tends to overshadow the pandemic's impact on democratic debates. While it did spur some positive changes, the transience of certain measures and the return to established norms highlight the need for ongoing efforts to ensure transparency, accountability, and public engagement in government decision-making, both during and beyond times of crisis. It underscores the importance of striking a balance between adapting to emergencies and maintaining the core principles of a transparent and participatory democracy.

MANAGEMENT OF DECISIONS BY POLITICIANS

In conclusion, the topic was of significant concern and debate among participants. The consensus was that the lack of political transparency during this crisis was deeply troubling and difficult to justify. This opacity hindered the global response to the pandemic and potentially had dire consequences. Moreover, it created an environment ripe for the spread of false information and conspiracy theories. While some argued that governments may have needed to control fear, the prevailing view was that good communication, rooted in transparency, was more effective in the long run. Transparency enables citizens to better understand the situation, take necessary precautions, and hold their leaders accountable. However, it was acknowledged that there were instances where withholding information might have been deemed acceptable. Managing a crisis of this magnitude was an intricate task, especially in the early stages when the virus, its transmission, and its impact were poorly understood. Governments may have kept certain information from the public to prevent unwarranted panic or to secure vital resources. Additionally, some nations might have been hesitant to disclose the full extent of their preparedness or any weaknesses in their healthcare systems.

SCANDALS BY POLITICIANS

Participants noted its profound impact on the electoral process, leading to the politicization of key aspects and influencing decision-making. During this period also witnessed a growing desire for a swift change in the ruling government. Despite the challenges posed by restrictions on movement and limitations on traditional election campaigns, the participants unanimously rejected the idea of postponing the election, expressing confidence that the election results would not substantially differ. This underscores the resilience of democratic processes even in the face of unprecedented challenges, highlighting the commitment to upholding the principles of democracy and the importance of the electoral process in the governance of nations.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In summary participants stated that the role of the media during the pandemic could not be overstated. It has been both a lifeline and a source of concern, reflecting the immense power and responsibility that comes with the dissemination of information in a connected world. Moving forward, it is incumbent upon media professionals, governments, and civil society to work collaboratively to ensure that the media continues to serve as a force for good, informing and uniting the public

during times of crisis and beyond. We thank our distinguished panellists for their insights and our attentive audience for their engagement in this important discourse. Let us take the lessons learned today and apply them to build a more resilient, responsible, and informed media landscape for a brighter, more united future.

PROTESTS

In conclusion, the insights shared by participants underscore the delicate balance between maintaining public safety and upholding democratic values, particularly in the context of protests. While it is essential to ensure order and protect the well-being of citizens, an outright ban on protests should be considered a last resort.

8. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Spain by Ayto. Mislata)

In the Table 1 below, we can see the timetable of the Debate panel 1, which was executed on 6th of June 2023 at 10.00 pm CET at “Centro Social La Fábrica” of Mislata.

Table 4. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
10:00	Presentation of the HEARD Project
10:10	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points
10:20	Start of the discussion on the topic: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the democratic debate.
11:20	Conclusion

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project, continued with the presentation of the topic of the project, we presented also some facts from the covid-19 pandemic period to remind the participants about the challenges and the government reaction during mentioned period. We continued the debate panel with presenting the crucial starting points of the results of the survey, conducted in Spain and in all the partner countries, focusing on the statistically significant findings. We also mentioned the findings of the state-of-the art analysis, conducted by the project partner countries.

According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

First key thematic: Government’s power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

- a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

-The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the democratic debate had repercussions beyond the pandemic. There was a long period after the end of the pandemic in

which the health crisis continued to have repercussions on the political and democratic scene in the country, according to the participants.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

- The lack of transparency during the pandemic in Spain had several aspects. On the one hand, the data on deaths was controversial because many people claimed that it was a lie. On the other hand, the economic data, contagion data and other figures were also controversial because a field of doubts began to be sown about them. In any case, there is little justification for a lack of transparency in such a scenario.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

It is not possible to say that women were limited in their participation in democratic debates. However, if we talk about the effects of the crisis and its subsequent consequences, it is possible to talk about this limitation on the part of women.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

In Spain, experts played a crucial role in advising the government during the pandemic. A number of experts in fields such as epidemics, viruses, health specialists and others took command of the situation, monitored the spread of the virus, and made relevant recommendations to provide policy makers with a road map. Their help was invaluable in monitoring the situation throughout the years of the health emergency.

In addition, the Spanish government has frequently collaborated with scientific and medical experts through various advisory committees and working groups. That both experts and policy makers had this close collaboration was crucial. Although it must also be said that it was not always fruitful at the political level, the first disagreements between experts and politicians and between the different political parties over the management of the health emergency appeared. A situation took all levels of society by surprise, so being prepared for something like this was presumed to be impossible to foresee. Therefore, at the beginning the response and the unity between experts and politicians was very strong. Both groups understood that the only way out of the situation was to fight together. This multidisciplinary approach highlighted the importance of expert advice in dealing

with a public health emergency of this magnitude, underlining the need for a synergistic relationship between policy makers and experts for effective crisis management.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

Given the crisis we had to face at the beginning, we joined forces and there was total confidence in the experts, both health, scientific and political. Nevertheless, as the crisis spread over time this trust was eroded and doubts, fatigue and scepticism began to emerge among the population.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

As a rule and on paper, both politicians in managing and experts in guiding should be equally effective in each area. However, the reality is that situations like these, for which no one is prepared, give rise to doubts, lack of cooperation, friction and friction between all the actors involved. This causes management to deteriorate over time.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

To be able to manage a future pandemic, the first thing to do is to look back and see what mistakes were that hurt the previous pandemic.

We must focus attention on the potential risks, especially health and climate risks that may be at the heart of a crisis of the magnitude of COVID-19.

Then we must reflect internally as a society together and individually so as not to repeat the attitudes and behaviours that led us to discover our more selfish and individualistic side.

Another of the most important points is that, since we are part of the European Union, we perceive that there was quite a lot of incoordination at the European level in the management and response to the measures. That is why having a joint response, logically adapted to the needs of each country, but led from Brussels, seems essential.

Finally, the promotion of new technologies to manage future scenarios of this kind would also be a very important element. In addition, teaching the population how to deal with it. Because in Spain there is still a technology gap that acts as a barrier for older people.

2nd thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

- a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

Questions were raised about the legitimacy of the measures taken, which were all in line with the provisions of the Spanish constitution. However, there was no sense that politicians were not respecting the laws that had been enacted.

In the end, the courts did have to act and ruled to annul several states of alarm that were issued during the pandemic, following complaints from opposition parties.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

- a) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

Spain did not hold elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, inevitably, the pandemic caused great political turmoil and friction between the different parties and it is clear that the global health crisis had a significant influence on the electoral processes both nationally and internationally. Nevertheless, inevitably, there was a disengagement during the pandemic years that affected the central government in the elections that took place in July 2023.

- b) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

Not because elections were not held during the time of the pandemic. It was 3 years after the pandemic.

- c) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

As noted above, Spain did not hold national elections during the crisis, so it is difficult to hypothesise.

3rd thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

- a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

The media were central to the reporting of the pandemic. The wide variety of newspapers, radio, television and social media all played their part. Some opted for

more rigorous and truthful information, while others focused on disinformation, yellowing and social alarm.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

It is a phenomenon that affects several media, such as the traditional press, radio and television, online news platforms and social media. Above all, social networks such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook, as well as certain forums, are the main catalysts of this fake news. Because of the lack of tools and verification, as well as the rapid spread and lack of control of the material received, this information is often passed off as true. Governments and society itself face a major problem if this trend continues to grow. Even more so in events of the magnitude of a health crisis such as COVID-19.

c) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

In most cases, TV channels, radio and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook were the channels most chosen by people.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

It could have been taken more into account at the political level by making a more concise study of the situation in each autonomous community, since in many cases the indicators of contagion tended to be disparate between them. But in many cases joint measures were applied for the whole state, and that made people misunderstand the situation.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

The possible answers fall into two main categories. Politics, at the ballot box, and social media. These two forms of activism mobilise the masses without the need for demonstrations.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

In Spain, because of the state of alarm decree, protests as well as any act involving the attendance of large numbers of people were totally banned for health reasons. The general perception was one of acceptance at first because the reasons were understood. But as time went on and the situation in which we were living was

accepted, people began to perceive the pandemic as a simple flu and that is why they did not understand why such restrictive measures were maintained in the country.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

The perception is that more than establishing democratic participation, it is to improve the existing one, to make it more effective and to make citizens feel that they are really participating. Nevertheless, citizens also have to do their part. Through associations, for example in the neighbourhoods, platforms can be set up where citizens can be the main actors of democratic participation and lead the changes they feel are necessary at the local level. On a national scale, democratic participation can be diffused, but it can still be effective with the necessary organisation.

9. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Portugal by FAJUB)

The first debate panel organized took place on May 16th, 2023 starting at 18:00 in the Auditorium of the Braga Youth Center. The Debate Panel focused on policy makers' handling of the pandemic, trust in frontline institutions and experts, and the role of public debate and social protest in this process. The aim of this panel debate was to understand how the democratic debate was restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Debate Panel was based on the results of the scientific monograph for the 1st survey, by the identification of similarities and significant differences in the different countries. It focused on the statistics to have a concrete presentation of the situation and finding a common thread within the different subjects suggested, based on figures and we extracted 3 big thematics, that we divided in 2 sub-subjects. The topics covered encouraged a lively debate among those present, especially the younger ones, who were particularly involved in sharing their opinion and point of view. The three themes which have been the focus of the debate were the following: Government's power, the Governments of experts, trust in institutions. All the questions posed and arisen during the debate have been discussed very lively by participants and conclusions were reached.

1st thematic : Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

- a) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

The Covid-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on various aspects of Portuguese society, including the democratic process and public discourse.

The pandemic brought to the forefront numerous political and social issues, including public health policies, economic recovery plans, and social inequality. These issues sparked intense debates and discussions, shaping the political landscape even after the declared end of the pandemic. The impact of Covid-19 on healthcare systems, the economy, and public trust in institutions continued to

influence the democratic debate as societies grappled with the aftermath and sought to address the long-term consequences.

b) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified ?

The challenges posed by the pandemic were unprecedented, and governments had to make quick and difficult decisions to protect public health. In some cases, certain measures were taken that could be seen as limiting transparency, such as the introduction of emergency powers, restrictions on the flow of information, or expedited decision-making processes.

However, it is also crucial to consider the context in which these actions were taken. Governments were dealing with rapidly evolving situations, incomplete information, and the need to balance public health concerns with socio-economic implications. In some cases, the lack of transparency might have been a result of the urgency and complexity of the situation rather than a deliberate attempt to withhold information.

c) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had differential effects on different segments of society, and women have been disproportionately affected in various ways. When it comes to democratic debates, the pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities and created additional challenges for women's participation.

One significant factor is the unequal burden of caregiving and household responsibilities that often falls on women. With the closure of schools, and daycare centres, and the increased need for care of sick family members, women have faced increased demands on their time and energy. This limited their ability to engage in political debates and public discourse, as they had to juggle multiple responsibilities.

The shift towards virtual platforms for political discussions and decision-making during the pandemic has presented its own set of challenges. Women faced barriers to accessing technology, internet connectivity, or private spaces for participation. They also encountered online harassment and gender-based discrimination, which can deter their active engagement in democratic debates.

d) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that.

Portuguese citizens, in comparison with Swedish citizens, trust less in their decision-makers and in the transparency of their decisions, due to the existence of corruption politics, which is not at the same level in Sweden.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

a) Were the experts legitimate to be at the center of the decision-making process?

Some citizens believe that experts, such as epidemiologists, virologists, and public health specialists, possess the necessary knowledge and experience to guide decision-making during a health crisis. They argued that scientific expertise should be at the forefront of policy decisions, as it is based on evidence, research, and best practices.

While recognizing the importance of expert advice, some citizens also emphasized the need to balance expert recommendations with other considerations, such as social, economic, and psychological impacts. They believe that decisions should have taken into account a range of factors beyond scientific expertise to find a more comprehensive and balanced approach.

b) Did you trust the chosen experts?

Yes, we trust healthcare personnel more, particularly prestigious personalities in the healthcare field, such as doctors, epidemiologists, or the director of the WHO. These sources of information are considered more trustworthy than the media or government authorities, both at the national (government and Directorate-General for Health) and local levels.

c) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

Yes, experts are more efficient because it is their field of action and because they do not have any other political reasons behind it.

d) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

It is crucial to learn from past experiences, to enhance an international response, collaboration and coordination, to be prepared to give an early response and to ensure trustworthy information for the citizens.

2nd thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

- a) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws they passed themselves?

Disappointment

Anger and frustration

Distrust and scepticism

Diminished faith in the political system

- b) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

Yes, because they would have led us by example, gave trust and credibility and a sense of fairness.

- c) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

Definitely not, mainly because of the public perception and lack of trust equality and fairness.

- d) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 -Questioning on the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

They were somehow motivated by the urgency that the decisions needed to be taken in order to ensure public health, which became a priority.

3rd thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

- a) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the media in providing accurate and up-to-date information about the virus, preventive measures, and government guidelines becomes even more crucial. The media was expected to play a role in

disseminating essential public health information to keep the population informed about the pandemic.

They were expected to provide accurate information, verify claims, and counteract the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19.

The media also played a part in scrutinizing decision-making processes, reporting on public health strategies, and raising questions on behalf of the public.

They provided a space for discussing challenges, sharing experiences, and engaging with public opinion on matters related to the pandemic.

b) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

Yes, social media is the easiest channels to disseminate fake news.

c) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

Relying on trusted sources

Fact-checking

Consulting official guidelines

d) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

Health authorities

Government sources

Media outlets

Online platforms and social media

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

Clear and consistent communication

Collaboration and inclusiveness

Targeted support and assistance

Balancing health and socio-economic concerns

Accountability and transparency

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

Online platforms and social media

Public letters and open statements

Contacting representatives

Engaging with civil society organizations

c) What do you think about the fact that the protest were forbidden?

Some individuals supported the decision to restrict or forbid protests during the pandemic due to concerns about public health and the potential spread of the virus. They prioritized the need to control the transmission of COVID-19 and protect the well-being of the population, viewing the restrictions as necessary to prevent large gatherings and minimize the risk of infections.

On the other hand, some individuals held the view that restrictions on protests infringe upon their democratic rights and freedom of expression. They argued that peaceful demonstrations are an essential means for citizens to voice their concerns, exercise their democratic rights, and hold the government accountable, even during times of crisis.

There were also individuals who held nuanced perspectives, recognizing the importance of both public health and democratic rights. They believe that while protests should have been allowed, certain measures could have been implemented to mitigate the risks, such as ensuring physical distancing, wearing masks, or organizing alternative forms of protest that comply with health guidelines.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

Some citizens believe that implementing participatory democracy measures, such as citizen consultations, deliberative forums, or participatory budgeting, could enhance democratic practices and ensure a more inclusive decision-making process. They may argue that such mechanisms would provide opportunities for citizens to express their concerns and contribute to shaping policies, including those related to social protests during the pandemic.

Participatory democracy is seen by some as a way to ensure that a broader range of voices and perspectives are considered. This might have addressed the concerns of citizens who feel that their concerns and needs are not adequately reflected in traditional decision-making structures. By allowing for greater citizen involvement,

participatory democracy could have helped to create a more representative and inclusive policy framework.

Some citizens perceive participatory democracy as a means to strike a balance between public health concerns and the right to protest. Through participatory processes, guidelines and protocols for protests during the pandemic could have been developed collaboratively, taking into account both the need to protect public health and the importance of democratic expression.

Others are sceptical about the feasibility and effectiveness of participatory democracy during a crisis. They may point out challenges related to time constraints, logistical considerations, and the complexity of decision-making processes. Implementing participatory democracy requires resources, infrastructure, and a robust framework, which might be difficult to establish and operationalize quickly during a rapidly evolving situation like a pandemic.

10. Report for the Debate panel 1 (WP 4) in the project HEARD (conducted in Cyprus by CARDET)

In the Table 1 below, we can see the timetable of the Debate panel 1, which was executed on 14th of September 2023 at 18.00 pm EEST on the Headquarters of CARDET, in 29 Lykavitou, Engomi, Nicosia, Cyprus.

Table 5. Timetable of the Debate panel 1

TIME	TOPIC
18:00	Greetings and introduction
18:05	Presentation of the HEARD project
18:15	Presentation of the topic and crucial starting points
18:40	Start of the discussion on the topic: Government's Power
19:15	Start of discussion on the topic: Trust in institutions
19:45	Start of discussion - on the topic: Public debate
20:00	Discussion

The panel debate started with the greetings and introduction of the project, continued with the presentation of the topic of the project, we continued the debate panel with presenting the crucial starting points of the results of the survey.

According to mentioned research findings, we formulated 3 themes and sub-themes as stated below:

2. First key thematic: Government's power

1st sub-subject: The lack of transparency

e) Covid-19 crisis had an impact on the democratic debate even after the end of the declared pandemic state.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

At the debate panel, present participants responded to the topic with the following arguments:

- Participants stated that, in their opinion, the COVID-19 crisis had an indirect impact on the democratic debate after the end of the declared pandemic state.
- People in the country experience democracy on a different level, and that led to a change of mindset for many people towards politicians. Also, during the pandemic, there were island phenomena that did not take place in the past, such as big protests.
- The impact of COVID-19 on democratic debate is not necessarily negative; on the contrary, we can see that it has created a mentality among citizens to demand transparency at the political level.

f) What do you think about the acknowledged lack of political transparency during the COVID-19? Do you think this lack of transparency was justified?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

At the debate panel, those present responded to the question with the following arguments:

- Panel participants discuss the lack of transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic, stating that it was not justified. People were scared during the pandemic because of the lack of political transparency and the misinformation they constantly received from media etc.
- Cyprus is known to have the largest Facebook users per capita in Europe. Spread of disinformation appeared in Cyprus during COVID-19. Issues of high salience were harder to manage due to the misinformation that was spread regarding this topic.

g) The limitation of the participation within democratic debates in was more obvious for women than men.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Some participants pointed out that there is no difference in the representation of either gender.
- Others expressed that some women had limited time to participate in democratic discussions.

h) Comparison to Sweden and talk about that and handling future pandemic situation.

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Cyprus had different approach on COVID-19 comparing to Sweden such as healthcare system, media disinformation and trust to institutions. The participants pointed out that one important aspect of democracy is the role of media and some ways to achieve the democratic debate are:
 - Critical Thinking
 - Educating from Home/School
 - Events such as this panel
 - Strengthening the resilience of citizens against disinformation phenomena
 - Education on critical thinking
 - Media literacy
 - Development of tools for fact checking
 - Government strategic planning.

2nd sub-subject: The Governments of experts

e) Were the experts legitimate to be at the centre of the decision-making process?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants believed that during the pandemic the experts were the ones that reassured the public by being in the decision-making process. One of the issues during that time was the lack of communication skills by both experts, politicians and the media.

After the end of the pandemic, we can see that it was correct to include them in the decision-making, but the nature of the pandemic was an unfamiliar situation for everyone.

f) Did you trust the chosen experts?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants pointed out that at the beginning of the pandemic they trusted the experts.

g) Differences of perceptions: experts more efficient in urgent situations or politicians should not be influenced?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

The two different groups, experts and politicians, have different approaches and understanding of the public sphere. Cooperation between the two on different aspects of COVID-19 and decision making could lead to decisions that have a

combination of proposals from the experts and politicians can align their decisions based on the proposals.

h) Finding the best way to manage a future pandemic

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants report the following:

- The healthcare system needs to be improved,
- Campaign against fake news/disinformation,
- Public education,
- Policies for the government on how to effectively deal with future pandemics.

2nd thematic: Trust in institutions

1st sub-subject: Politician's scandals

e) What have you felt when you have learnt that politicians were disrespectful of the laws, they passed themselves?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants agreed that these incidents reduced trust in decision makers and increased the sense of disrespect to the public. In addition, different treatment of citizens was visible. Some were able to move easily due to their social status, while a large proportion of citizens did not.

f) Do you think you could have accepted the restrictions more easily if the politicians had followed them to the letter?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

Participants indicated that it would be easier for citizens to follow the restrictions if politicians were a role model, but, even if they were not disrespectful of COVID-19 measures, the public would have difficulty in that direction because of the unreasonable nature of some of the restrictions.

g) Do you think their position can justify a difference in treatment?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

The participants disagreed with the statement that their position could justify a difference in treatment.

h) The abuse of power by national politicians was present during COVID-19 crisis, which was not proportionate to the expected goal of limiting the spread of COVID-19 - Questioning the legitimacy of the measures taken without parliamentary exam?

POINT OF VIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE DEBATE:

- Participants pointed out that some of the measures were justified and some were not.
- Some had been adopted by other countries and were trying to be implemented in the Cyprus context, such as the measures of the Greek government.

2nd sub-subject: Electoral process and campaign

d) Do you think the pandemic had a significant impact on the electoral process?

Elections during the pandemic were held (without any delay) in 2021, people were able to travel and vote. However, the results were not positive for many people who believe that representation of the various parties was not achieved. Instead, far-right parties had more members in parliament by the end of the election and other (non-government) parties lost many parliamentary seats.

e) Do you think the electoral campaign has been affected by the crisis?

Participants indicated that many of the protests that took place due to the COVID-19 measures and some incidents of violence during these protests were presented to the public as a way to move from political scandals to elections and that this may influence the elections.

f) Would you have preferred the elections to be postponed until after the pandemic?

No elections were held on the island in 2020 and the first elections were held in May 2021. Participants stated that the outcome would not be different if the elections were postponed.

3rd thematic: Public debate

1st sub-subject: Role of the medias

e) How do you consider the differences in the role of the medias in normal time and during a pandemic?

Participants mention a survey that the Cypriot Union of Journalists conducted in 2022, following the conclusion of the epidemic. 36 percent of respondents said they had no trust in the media, compared to 46 percent who said they had faith in Cyprus's media. Participants also indicated that 31% of respondents do not trust journalists, compared to 51% of respondents who do. Most of the respondents' information comes from television. According to the upcoming 2023 study, there is a decline in media trust.

The panel also touched upon the psychological manipulation of journalists. Reporting on delicate subjects like the Cypriot Issue Negotiations is often challenging for journalists. In order to safeguard Cyprus's general credibility and image, journalists refrain from covering the mistakes and improper conduct of the negotiating process. That can be seen in the COVID-19 case and the way many scandals were suppressed by the media (not all of them).

f) Do you think the rising of fake news concerns more certain forms of the medias?

The pandemic could require a more significant media role, as false news distribution is widespread, and participants express dissatisfaction with information quality and trust in the media.

g) What were your strategies to detect fake news during the pandemic?

- A Facebook page was created named "Fact Check Cyprus" and published different fake news articles raised during the pandemic.
- In general, fake news is presently punishable for up to two (2) years of imprisonment. There is presently a discussion on criminalizing of fake news. Lots of considerations regarding this topic. In North Cyprus (May 2022) tried to penalize fake news but that was also rejected by citizens and journalists.

h) How did you inform yourself on the crisis during the pandemic?

The participants stated that they obtained the sources from: official papers, employee organizations or non-local media.

2nd sub-subject: Social protest

a) How do you think that the social discontent could have been better taken into consideration during the crisis?

Most of the participants expressed the view that the Cypriot government did not want to listen to the citizens and that the various scandals were hidden under the excuse of a pandemic. Some of the protests were directed against the media and concerned the vaccination campaigns, while other protests were about the scandals reported by Al Jazeera about the Cypriot government at the time and the government's handling of the pandemic.

b) Do you think (and how) it is possible to express discontent effectively without a demonstration?

Some of the participants pointed out that a different way of express discontent can be through social media platforms. However, most of the people were disagree and believed that the only way to have an effective demonstration is by attending protests.

c) What do you think about the fact that the protests were forbidden?

Participants' views were divided, with some believing that it is reasonable to ban protest and other participants stating that protesting is a civil right and that at the time people were not involved in the decisions and could not be heard in a different way, and therefore had not the opportunity to participate in any protest. Also, some of the participants believed that the government maintained this measure not to protect people from the spread of the virus, but as a way to protect itself because of the Al-Jazeera scandal.

d) Do you think that setting up a participative democracy could be a solution for a better consideration of social protest?

Participants pointed out that a participatory democracy would be a way for people to actively engage and be heard.

Key findings

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

Participants agreed that during the covid-19 pandemic, there was a lack of political transparency, which had a negative impact on democratic debate. The limitation of

participation in democratic debates could appear in some cases for who were not able to engage in democratic dialogue due to limited time.

MANAGEMENT OF DECISIONS BY POLITICIANS

Participants agreed that it is important for politicians and experts to work together. Participants expressed the opinion that it would be easier for people to accept the restrictions if politicians strictly followed them, but not necessary.

SCANDALS BY POLITICIANS

Participants agreed that the covid-19 pandemic did not affect the electoral process as much as other countries, due to the fact that the toughest measures were no longer applied by the time of the elections. The events surrounding the pandemic, such as the protests, etc. were able to influence people and distract people from the scandals of the government and play a role in who the public would ultimately vote for.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In the panel discussion, participants noted that the media play a key role in informing about current events. The media was also a target of criticism during this period, as fake news appeared, which had a negative impact.

PROTESTS

Participants suggested several ways to better address social discontent during an epidemic, including clearer communication. There should be more respect for different points of view and less division between people regarding vaccination and other issues. The participants highlighted the possibilities of expressing dissatisfaction without demonstrations, such as the use of social media, but mentioned the use of protests as a civil right.

Meet the partnership



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