

Reinventing Engagement Through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

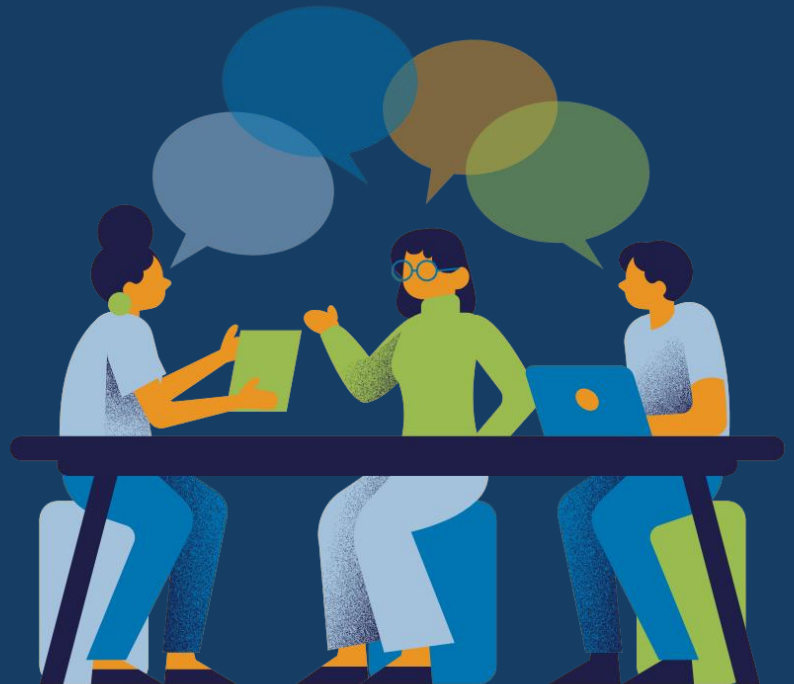
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STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY THROUGH CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN CROATIA AND THE EU

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INTRODUCTION

The REACH project – Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations – seeks to strengthen democratic culture by promoting meaningful citizen engagement in debates on key European policy issues. Against the backdrop of declining trust in representative institutions and limited participatory mechanisms, REACH fosters inclusive deliberation on three interconnected themes: the rule of law, the environment and the European Union. The project runs from July 2024 to December 2025 and is funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). It is implemented by a consortium of eight organisations: the European Policy Centre (CEP, project coordinator), European Policy Centre (EPC, Brussels), Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI BH), Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Notre Europe – Institut Jacques Delors (NE IJD), Association for Civil Society Development SMART (Croatia) and Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (EL).

In Croatia, the REACH project is implemented by the Association for Civil Society Development SMART, with a strong focus on creating opportunities for citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue on the rule of law, the environment and the European Union through both local and national consultations. Two local deliberative processes were conducted in Rijeka and Pazin, gathering a total of 65 participants, citizens from diverse backgrounds, as well as engaged experts and facilitators. These consultations provided a structured space for participants to explore and discuss topics such as climate change, democratic participation, trust in institutions and various EU policies and measures.

These local deliberative processes laid the groundwork for the national consultation in Zagreb and directly contributed to the co-creation of targeted policy recommendations. The national consultation brought together 27 participants, including citizen delegates from Rijeka and Pazin, as well as experts, institutional representatives and civil society stakeholders from diverse sectors ranging from European and national institutions to academia and civil society organisations. With expert input covering all three thematic areas and facilitation designed to foster inclusive dialogue, participants collaboratively formulated 33 draft measures, out of which 10 priority policy recommendations were selected by consensus. These recommendations reflect a strong citizen mandate for more transparent governance, improved environmental policies and deeper democratic engagement at both national and EU levels.

This consultative process was particularly important in the Croatian context for several reasons. First, it was implemented during a super-election year, which included parliamentary elections (April 17, 2024), European Parliament elections (June 9, 2024), presidential elections (December 22, 2024 and January 5, 2025) and nationwide local elections (May 4 and May 18, 2025). Across all of these elections, voter turnout remained low, reflecting deep-rooted trends of declining political engagement, civic apathy and public distrust in representative institutions. In this context, the REACH process offered a rare and timely space for structured, inclusive and respectful public deliberation, separate from partisan influence and electoral pressures.

Second, Croatia continues to face systemic challenges in the area of the rule of law, including widespread perceptions of corruption, selective law enforcement, weak institutional accountability and limited opportunities for citizen oversight.

Third, the process directly addressed the issue of civic disengagement, particularly among younger generations and underrepresented groups. Through inclusive recruitment and deliberative facilitation, the consultations helped reconnect people to public life, linking local lived experiences to European-level debates on democracy, sustainability and integration. By demonstrating that participation can lead to tangible outcomes, REACH fostered both competence and confidence among participants.

Fourth, the process gained additional relevance in light of broader global challenges, including the war in Ukraine, the conflict in Gaza and rising migration flows through the Western Balkans. These developments have had a direct impact on EU policy, public opinion and social/societal priorities. In Croatia, they coincided with the introduction of the euro which triggered widespread concern over inflation, economic uncertainty and declining purchasing power. Citizens also

expressed growing frustration over the complexity, inefficiency and perceived unfairness in the use of EU funds, pointing to opaque procedures and limited local impact.

Moreover, the consultations surfaced concerns about institutional tensions between Croatian and EU-level prosecutorial bodies, particularly regarding the prosecution of corruption and misuse of EU funds—highlighting unclear mandates and fragmented accountability mechanisms in cross-border legal processes. In this complex and often polarized environment, the REACH process provided a space for citizens to critically examine how these global and systemic pressures shape their everyday lives and to contribute to a more grounded, participatory and future-oriented policy agenda.

FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL CONSULTATIONS – KEY INSIGHTS

As part of the REACH project, a total of three deliberative consultations were organised in Croatia: two local consultations in Rijeka (February 8, 2025) and Pazin (February 22, 2025), followed by a national consultation in Zagreb (June 6, 2025). Each consultation was designed as a mini-public, inspired by the Citizens' Assembly model, combining structured small-group discussions, expert inputs and plenary deliberation, with the goal of producing informed and citizen-driven recommendations on three interrelated themes: the rule of law, the environment and the European Union.

Participants in local consultations were selected through open public calls, with the aim of achieving balanced representation in terms of age, gender, geographic origin and background with the emphasis on diversity and inclusion, while particular attention was paid to the inclusion of young people and gender balance. Each local consultation included introductory expert inputs, followed by thematic group discussions, open debate and plenary reflection. The discussions were moderated by trained facilitators and informed by customised background materials. The methodology promoted horizontal dialogue, allowing citizens to voice their concerns, reflect critically and identify key challenges and synergies across the three policy areas.

Although the structure and topics were identical, the local contexts shaped the tone and focus of discussions. In Rijeka, a larger urban setting, discussions placed stronger emphasis on housing, inflation, youth disengagement and waste management challenges in densely populated areas. Participants were more familiar with EU funding mechanisms, but also more sceptical about transparency and local implementation. In Pazin, a small town in central Istria (south-west of Croatia), participants focused more on institutional trust, access to public services, illegal construction and the environmental impact of tourism and urbanization. The consultation also highlighted a stronger desire for community-based solutions and more locally responsive governance. Both consultations benefited from the presence of local experts who contextualized the issues and helped participants link their experiences to broader EU-level debates. Their contribution was particularly helpful in translating abstract concepts (e.g. the rule of law, subsidiarity) into locally relevant narratives.

The national consultation in Zagreb (held on June 6, 2025) gathered 27 participants, including 11 citizen delegates selected from the local consultations and representatives of institutions, academia and civil society. The goal was to build on the insights from local discussions and, with the support of experts, co-create a set of policy recommendations reflecting shared priorities and addressing key trade-offs. Compared to the local events, the national consultation placed greater emphasis on connecting citizen perspectives with institutional realities, facilitating exchange between citizens and decision-makers. In sum, the three consultations formed a coherent deliberative sequence, from local grounding to national synthesis, anchored in meaningful participation, expert support and a focus on real-world policy challenges.

The local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin were designed to create space for citizens to reflect on their lived experiences, articulate concerns and explore synergies between the European Union, the rule of law and the environment. These events focused on bottom-up deliberation, using expert input primarily for framing and contextualisation, while citizens led the discussion and issue identification.

In contrast, the national consultation in Zagreb served as a bridge between grassroots insights and institutional policymaking. It brought together a diverse group of actors, citizen delegates, experts and institutional representatives, to co-develop policy recommendations. Here, experts played a more active role: not only by presenting thematic overviews, but also by working directly with citizens in small groups to refine their initial ideas, ensure feasibility and add legal or policy-related nuance. Their engagement was crucial in translating citizen concerns into structured, actionable proposals.

Across all three consultations, citizens identified overlapping challenges in the three policy areas:

- **Rule of Law:** Widespread perception of corruption, selective law enforcement, lack of accountability and limited public trust in institutions. Some participants also raised concerns about tensions between national and EU-level prosecutorial competences, particularly in addressing misuse of EU funds.
- **European Union:** Citizens expressed ambivalence recognising the EU's role in funding and policy, but criticising bureaucratic complexity, poor communication and the perceived distance of EU institutions from local realities. The introduction of the euro and its impact on inflation emerged as a prominent concern.
- **Environment:** Strong dissatisfaction with waste management, urban overdevelopment and low enforcement of environmental regulations. Citizens in both cities emphasised the urgency of addressing local consequences of global environmental pressures, from illegal dumping to the impact of mass tourism.

During the consultations, citizens consistently viewed the three thematic areas, the rule of law, the European Union, and the environment, not as isolated domains, but as deeply interconnected aspects of governance and everyday life. Discussions revealed a shared understanding that progress in one area often hinges on improvements in the others, while failures in any one domain can undermine trust in the system as a whole.

A strong connection emerged between the rule of law and environmental protection. Participants emphasized that issues such as illegal construction, environmental degradation and poor waste management were not merely technical or regulatory challenges, but symptoms of systemic weaknesses in law enforcement, political patronage and lack of institutional accountability. Environmental legislation, they argued, loses credibility in the absence of a functioning and impartial judiciary.

Another key link was drawn between the EU and the rule of law. While some citizens saw the EU as a guardian of democratic standards, others expressed frustration that EU pressure on national institutions had not led to meaningful reforms. Concerns were also raised about the misuse of EU funds, with participants pointing to weak domestic oversight and unclear lines of accountability between national and EU-level prosecutorial bodies.

The third axis, EU policies and environmental sustainability, was marked by both synergies and tensions. Participants recognized the potential of EU frameworks and funding to support green transition goals, but they also criticized the bureaucratic complexity of accessing such resources, the disconnect between EU ambitions and local capacity and the risk of greenwashing in projects that lack real community impact.

Several policy trade-offs were highlighted across discussions:

- Economic growth vs. environmental protection, especially in tourism-dependent regions;
- Efficiency vs. participation, where meaningful citizen involvement is seen as time-consuming;
- EU conditionality vs. national autonomy, with some citizens welcoming reform incentives, while others resisted perceived top-down impositions.

Despite these tensions, there was broad agreement on core priorities: transparent governance, consistent rule enforcement and inclusive policy development. Most of the ten final policy recommendations adopted at the national consultation received strong cross-sectoral support, particularly those related to civic education, rewarding sustainable

behaviour and improving communication between institutions and citizens. In the context of the debate on how to increase voter turnout, several proposals sparked notable discussion, for example, mandatory voting and digital voting mechanisms were seen by some participants as promising democratic innovations, while others considered them problematic or premature; similarly, the idea of lowering the voting age to 16 generated both enthusiasm and scepticism, and was ultimately excluded from the final list of priority recommendations.

PRESENTING TEN POLICY PROPOSALS

The participants of the national consultations, building on insights from Rijeka and Pazin, adopted ten key policy recommendations. These reflect a citizen-driven vision for more transparent governance, inclusive participation and sustainable development. The table below displays all ten policy proposals, and the following paragraphs explore them in more detail.

#	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Develop and improve direct communication with citizens in person, adapting language and format	European Union
2	Explain the benefits of EU membership in a simple and accessible way	European Union
3	Develop a system of small financial grants to improve quality of life in smaller communities	European Union
4	Promote and popularise existing tools for democratic oversight and public participation	Rule of Law
5	Integrate principles of civic participation into formal and informal education from an early age	Rule of Law
6	Continuously support CSO initiatives that strengthen youth civic competencies and update civic education content	Rule of Law
7	Introduce mandatory voting over a two-day period, including one working day	Rule of Law
8	Introduce reward measures for citizens who reduce waste and use sustainable packaging	Environment
9	Improve communication about the effectiveness of waste systems to counter public demotivation	Environment
10	Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models	Environment

1. Develop and improve direct communication with citizens in person, adapting language and format

One of the ten recommendations adopted at the national consultation was to strengthen direct, in-person communication between institutions and citizens, especially on topics related to the European Union. Citizens expressed that current communication is often too formal, abstract and disconnected from everyday life, relying heavily on written formats, technical language, and centralised messaging that fails to resonate with local communities.

This recommendation emerged clearly during the local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin, where participants across different age and education groups described the EU as “distant” or “invisible.” Although many recognised the value of EU membership, they struggled to identify concrete benefits or understand how to engage with EU-related programmes. Citizens therefore called for approaches that are face-to-face, accessible and locally grounded, such as community

meetings, school workshops or informal events in libraries and public spaces. They stressed the importance of using simple, inclusive language and two-way formats that allow for questions, feedback and open dialogue.

The recommendation is addressed to the European Commission (especially DG Communication), the European Parliament and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, in cooperation with local authorities and civil society organisations active in public dialogue and civic education.

Next steps for implementation could include piloting local info sessions or mobile EU corners in smaller towns and rural areas, with the goal of reaching citizens who are typically excluded from institutional communication. In parallel, it would be important to train institutional staff in citizen-friendly communication methods, enabling them to adapt language, tone and format to different audiences. Additionally, institutions should invest in visual and narrative-based materials that are tailored to specific local contexts and easily understood by non-expert audiences. Finally, to ensure continuity and effectiveness, these efforts should be backed by stable and accessible funding at both EU and national levels, allowing for long-term outreach strategies that go beyond one-off campaigns.

2. Explain the benefits of EU membership in a simple and accessible way

Citizens participating in the national consultation stressed the importance of making the benefits of EU membership clearer and more understandable. While many recognised that EU funds and policies contribute to national development, they often struggled to connect those impacts to their everyday lives. This was especially evident in the local consultations in Pazin and Rijeka, where participants voiced uncertainty about how EU programmes function and how individuals or communities can engage with them. The resulting sense of distance and scepticism weakens public support for EU initiatives.

Participants proposed that institutions should use simple, relatable language and concrete examples to explain the effects of EU membership. Rather than abstract figures or policy terminology, they want to see real-life stories how EU funding supported a new school, hospital equipment, or youth programmes in their region. This includes using visual formats and local case studies to make communication more engaging and relevant.

This recommendation is addressed to the European Commission Representation in Croatia, the European Parliament Office in Zagreb and national bodies such as the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, in cooperation with local governments and civil society organisations. To implement this recommendation, institutions should identify projects with visible, local impact and present them through storytelling formats suited to different audiences. They should also collaborate with municipalities and NGOs to ensure inclusive, decentralised communication. Most importantly, communication should be two-way, allowing citizens to ask questions and share concerns, thereby strengthening trust and engagement with the European project.

3. Develop a system of small financial grants to improve quality of life in smaller communities

During the national consultation, citizens proposed the creation of a system of small, easily accessible financial grants aimed at supporting local initiatives that directly improve the quality of life in smaller and less developed communities. This idea emerged from a shared sense that EU and national funding opportunities are often too complex, centralised, or competitive, favouring well-established organisations and urban areas.

Participants highlighted that many good ideas exist at the local level, particularly among informal groups, youth initiatives and civic-minded individuals, but they often lack the capacity or legal status to access existing funding schemes. A system of micro-grants, simple in application, transparent in selection and designed for non-formal groups, was seen as a way to empower citizens and foster bottom-up development.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, in collaboration with local and regional self-government units and supported by the European Commission, particularly within cohesion and rural development policies.

Implementation would involve designing a light administrative model for grants of small financial value, accompanied by clear guidelines and minimal reporting requirements. Local authorities or regional development agencies could coordinate calls and provide mentoring or technical assistance. Civil society organisations could also serve as intermediaries or host structures for informal groups. Such a scheme would help build trust in institutions, stimulate civic engagement and ensure that EU and national support is felt more directly at the local level. Most importantly, it would send a message that citizen-led local action matters and that public funding mechanisms can be made accessible, inclusive and community-oriented.

4. Promote and popularise existing tools for democratic oversight and public participation

Citizens highlighted that while Croatia has formal mechanisms for democratic oversight, such as access to public information, public consultations and petition rights, these tools are poorly promoted, difficult to navigate and often perceived as symbolic rather than impactful. Participants in both local and national consultations described a general lack of awareness, skills and motivation to engage with these instruments, especially among young people and those living outside major cities.

The recommendation calls for a comprehensive effort to revitalise and democratise these existing tools, making them more visible, accessible and usable in practice. Citizens expressed a need for clear instructions, simplified digital platforms and public education campaigns that explain citizens' rights and how to exercise them effectively. They also stressed the importance of ensuring that public input is not only collected, but also meaningfully considered by institutions.

This recommendation is addressed to the Information Commissioner of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration and local and regional authorities, with support from the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and relevant civil society organisations. To implement it, institutions should redesign public consultation portals, ensuring user-friendliness, accessibility standards and feedback mechanisms. Schools and youth organisations could include training on how to use transparency and participation tools in practice. Local governments should proactively inform citizens about consultations and their outcomes, using multiple communication channels. By empowering citizens to use what already exists, this recommendation aims to close the gap between formal rights and lived democratic practice, increasing institutional accountability and building a more participatory political culture.

5. Integrate principles of civic participation into formal and informal education from an early age

Participants in both local and national consultations emphasised that democratic habits and values should be cultivated from an early age, not only through isolated civic education classes, but as an integral part of the entire educational experience. They highlighted the importance of embedding principles such as participation, cooperation, solidarity and trust into both formal curricula and informal learning environments throughout childhood and adolescence.

Citizens expressed concern that many young people in Croatia grow up disconnected from democratic processes, often encountering politics for the first time only as voters, without prior experience in decision-making, deliberation, or community engagement. This recommendation responds to that gap by calling for a systemic and value-based approach to civic learning, starting already in preschool and continuing through all levels of education.

In addition to strengthening values-based education, participants underlined the importance of retaining and improving existing programs and subjects, such as Politics and Economy, particularly in vocational schools, where civic content is often marginalised. They also supported the expansion of proven educational models, such as *Škola i zajednica* (School

and Community), which connects school learning with community engagement through project-based methods and collaboration with civil society.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Ministry of Science and Education, in cooperation with teacher training institutions, curriculum development agencies and relevant civil society organisations active in the field of education for democratic citizenship. Implementation would involve integrating civic values and participatory methods across school subjects and daily routines, for example, through classroom voting, student councils with real responsibilities and community-based projects. Informal education providers, such as youth centres and CSOs, should also be supported as key actors in fostering participation beyond the school system. This approach aims to normalise participation as part of everyday life, fostering democratic resilience from the bottom up. Over time, it would help build a generation of citizens better prepared to engage critically and constructively in a democratic society.

6. Continuously support CSO initiatives that strengthen youth civic competencies and update civic education content

Citizens recognised the vital role that civil society organisations (CSOs) play in promoting civic awareness and participation among children and young people. While schools are central to democratic education, participants highlighted that CSOs often fill crucial gaps, especially through non-formal education, extracurricular activities and peer-to-peer learning. However, many of these initiatives are project-based and short-term, dependent on unstable funding cycles and limited institutional support. This recommendation calls for sustained and predictable support for CSOs working in the field of civic education, particularly those that innovate with new methods, reach marginalised groups, or connect schools with local communities. Citizens also called for a systematic update of existing civic education curricula, especially in secondary education, to reflect contemporary democratic challenges and participatory approaches.

This recommendation is addressed to the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Culture and Media and the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs, as well as local and regional authorities responsible for youth and education policies. To implement it, institutional stakeholders should establish multi-year funding frameworks for CSOs working on civic engagement and education. Priority should be given to programmes that build civic competencies, promote critical thinking and support active youth participation at local and national levels. In parallel, formal education curricula should be reviewed and updated in partnership with educators, researchers and experienced CSO practitioners. This recommendation aims to create stronger links between formal and non-formal education, ensuring that young people encounter democratic values and practices across different learning environments. By supporting CSOs as strategic partners, institutions can strengthen the foundation for a more participatory and resilient democratic culture.

7. Introduce mandatory voting over a two-day period, including one working day

To address persistently low voter turnout in Croatia, especially among young people and disenfranchised groups, participants at the national consultation proposed the introduction of mandatory voting, combined with a two-day voting period, including one working day. The recommendation reflects a desire to reaffirm voting as a civic duty, while also addressing practical barriers that prevent participation—such as time constraints, work schedules, or lack of transport.

This proposal was debated extensively. While some participants questioned the appropriateness or feasibility of mandatory voting in the Croatian context, the majority supported it as a way to signal the importance of democratic engagement and to stimulate a broader public conversation on electoral participation. The inclusion of a working day was considered essential to increase accessibility, particularly for working parents, people in precarious employment, or those living far from polling stations.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Croatian Parliament, the State Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, with the possible involvement of the Ministry of Labour and Pension System to ensure legal and logistical alignment with labour regulations. Implementation would require a legal and constitutional review of

mandatory voting, followed by public consultation and debate. A pilot programme at the local or regional level could test the two-day voting model without introducing the obligation immediately. Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns should accompany any legislative change, explaining the rationale and benefits to the public.

During the consultation, other proposals for increasing voter turnout were also discussed, such as digital voting, lowering the voting age to 16, or introducing voting incentives. However, after careful deliberation, these ideas were not retained as part of the final set of adopted recommendations. While not without controversy, this recommendation opens a conversation on how to revitalise democratic participation through both symbolic and practical measures. It highlights the need to make voting not just a right, but a habit and a shared responsibility.

8. Introduce reward measures for citizens who reduce waste and use sustainable packaging

Citizens expressed strong interest in shifting from a punitive to a motivational model of environmental policy, particularly in the area of waste reduction. Instead of focusing solely on penalties and enforcement, participants proposed the introduction of reward schemes that would recognise and encourage individuals, households and businesses that actively contribute to reducing waste, separating recyclables properly, or using sustainable packaging.

This idea was especially present during the local consultation in Rijeka, where participants highlighted distrust in the effectiveness of the current waste management system and expressed fatigue with constant appeals to responsibility that lack clear incentives. Citizens noted that when people perceive that their efforts make a difference and that they are acknowledged for it, they are more likely to adopt long-term sustainable behaviour.

The recommendation is addressed to the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund and local and regional self-government units, particularly through their public utility services and communal systems. Implementation would require defining a set of measurable and verifiable indicators of environmentally responsible behaviour (e.g. volume of waste reduced, frequency and quality of separation, return of reusable packaging). Local authorities could pilot incentive schemes such as discounts on waste collection fees, vouchers for eco-products, or public recognition programmes. Collaboration with schools, CSOs and businesses would be key to ensuring outreach and transparency. This approach aims not only to improve environmental outcomes, but also to rebuild public trust in local systems and to create a sense of shared ownership over environmental goals. By recognising positive action, institutions can foster a more cooperative and citizen-centred path toward sustainability.

9. Improve communication about the effectiveness of waste systems to counter public demotivation

One of the most frequently voiced frustrations during the local consultations was the widespread distrust in local waste management systems. Citizens expressed scepticism that waste separation leads to any meaningful environmental outcome, with comments like “it all ends up in the same truck anyway” reflecting a broader sense of demotivation and resignation. This perception undermines public willingness to participate in recycling and other sustainability efforts.

In response, participants proposed that public institutions and utility companies significantly improve the transparency and communication around how waste is actually processed, where it goes, and what impact separation has. They called for regular, clear and locally relevant updates, not just about rules and penalties, but about results, success stories and system improvements.

The recommendation is addressed to local and regional self-government units, particularly municipal public utilities, as well as the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development and the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund. Implementation could involve publishing periodic data reports in user-friendly formats (e.g. infographics, short videos), organising public briefings or site visits to waste processing facilities, and ensuring two-way communication channels where citizens can ask questions or express concerns. This should be done in cooperation with CSOs and local

schools, to increase outreach and public understanding. By providing evidence that citizen efforts are meaningful and that the system is functional, this measure aims to restore trust, increase motivation and encourage wider participation in environmental practices. Without transparent and proactive communication, even well-designed systems risk failing due to citizen disengagement.

10. Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models

Citizens participating in the REACH consultations expressed strong support for strengthening local food systems as a way to promote sustainability, support rural development and improve public health. They highlighted the need to move away from large, centralised supply chains toward shorter, more transparent, and community-based food production and distribution models.

This recommendation builds on concerns raised during the Pazin consultation, where participants discussed the negative environmental and social impacts of mass tourism, overdevelopment and agricultural industrialisation. Citizens called for a shift toward local food sovereignty, where communities have greater control over how their food is produced, distributed and consumed. They emphasised the importance of linking local producers with public institutions, such as schools, kindergartens, and hospitals, through prioritised procurement.

The recommendation is directed to the Ministry of Agriculture, in cooperation with local and regional governments, as well as public institutions and relevant CSOs working in sustainable agriculture, food justice and environmental protection. Implementation would involve reforming public procurement rules to allow preferential treatment for local producers and cooperatives, supporting the development of producer cooperatives and investing in local food infrastructure (e.g. distribution centres, community markets). Educational campaigns could promote seasonal and local food consumption, while municipalities could provide technical assistance to small-scale farmers and food initiatives. This recommendation aims to reduce dependence on global supply chains, lower the environmental footprint of food systems and reinvigorate local economies. By strengthening the link between food, community and sustainability, it reflects a broader citizen desire for resilient and self-determined local development.

The ten policy recommendations adopted during the REACH national consultation demonstrate a high level of pragmatism, contextual awareness and constructive ambition among citizens. Their key strength lies in the balance between idealism and feasibility, most proposals are not radical, but rather seek to improve existing systems by making them more inclusive, transparent and locally responsive.

Several recommendations, such as those related to improving communication (on EU benefits or waste management), reflect a deep-seated lack of trust in institutions and public systems. These proposals are especially relevant in the Croatian context, where formal mechanisms often exist but are underused due to procedural complexity or public scepticism. Citizens addressed this not by rejecting institutions, but by demanding better access, clarity and responsiveness, a constructive stance that underscores their desire to re-engage.

Other proposals, like the introduction of mandatory voting or reward schemes for sustainable behaviour, are more ambitious and politically sensitive. Their strength lies in their potential to open societal debate on accountability and participation, but their implementation would require careful legal, ethical and procedural consideration. These ideas may face resistance without strong institutional leadership and public consultation.

Recommendations in the field of education, especially those promoting early civic learning and support for CSO-led programmes, reflect citizens' long-term thinking and recognition of democracy as a learned practice. However, their

success depends on systemic policy reform, cross-sector collaboration and sustained political will, the challenges often lacking in Croatia's fragmented education policy landscape.

Overall, the proposals show that when citizens are properly supported, they are capable of formulating relevant, grounded and forward-looking policy ideas. Their main challenge lies not in content, but in securing institutional commitment and follow-through to ensure real-world implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

The REACH consultative process in Croatia offered a rare opportunity for citizens to engage in structured, informed, and meaningful dialogue on some of the most pressing public policy challenges: the rule of law, the European Union, and environmental sustainability. Through local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin, followed by a national consultation in Zagreb, the process enabled participants to articulate shared concerns, explore tensions and synergies across different policy areas, and co-create concrete, actionable recommendations.

One of the most significant findings across all consultations was the interdependence between the three thematic areas. Citizens repeatedly emphasised that progress in environmental protection depends on the consistent enforcement of the rule of law; that the benefits of EU membership are undermined when institutions lack accountability; and that policy reforms in any one area require the active engagement of an informed and empowered public.

In the area of the rule of law, participants identified issues such as selective law enforcement, political patronage and weak civic oversight as central barriers to democratic progress. Their recommendations focused on promoting tools for public participation, investing in civic education and strengthening the role of civil society in democratic life.

Regarding the European Union, citizens acknowledged the strategic importance of EU membership but called for more transparent and accessible communication, better outreach in smaller communities and increased visibility of EU-funded initiatives. They also called for funding mechanisms, such as microgrants, that reflect local needs and capacities.

On environmental issues, participants voiced frustration with ineffective waste management systems and the lack of public trust in institutional responses. Their proposals emphasised incentives for responsible behaviour, improved communication from public utilities and support for local food systems and sustainable supply chains.

Across all three areas, the final ten recommendations reflected a clear desire for more responsive, participatory and locally grounded governance. While some proposals, such as mandatory voting, may be politically sensitive, most are highly implementable and could bring tangible improvements with relatively modest investment, especially at the local level.

Beyond the specific content of the recommendations, the REACH process itself was a powerful demonstration of the potential of deliberative democracy. It showed that when given space, information and facilitation, citizens are not only willing but able to tackle complex policy issues with seriousness, creativity and care. Their contributions challenge the often-heard assumption that the public is uninterested or uninformed and instead affirm that people want to be part of shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

Looking ahead, the lasting impact of this process will depend on how institutions respond. For the REACH consultations to have real meaning, public authorities at local, national and European levels must take citizen input seriously, provide feedback and act transparently in following up on these recommendations. Institutional trust is built not only through dialogue, but through demonstrated responsiveness and accountability. In that sense, REACH was not an end in itself, but a beginning. It opened a space for new forms of democratic engagement, more inclusive, dialogical and forward-looking and pointed to a path toward a more participatory, resilient and citizen-centred democracy in Croatia and across Europe.

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