EUARENAS

D1.4 Final Report Chapter

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EUARENAS investigates the ways in which social movements coupled with local government reform initiatives, manifesting themselves in local-level experiments, create momentum for political change that include more inclusive and participatory forms of governance.

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As WP1 leaders, the EUARENAS project team formed at SWPS University has entered the project as specialists in classical and contemporary theories of democracy, cultures of participation, and urban politics[1]. The variety of backgrounds represented in the team throughout the lifespan of the project – from philosophy and cultural studies to politics, governance, and psychology – opened up a variety of possibilities for team members to engage with various parts of the project. Thus, from the very beginning of the conceptual and theoretical tasks outlined in the project for Work Package 1, our approach was driven equally by the aim of supporting the project with various humanistic interpretations, and by the eagerness to advance theories in our disciplines with unique innovative findings provided by other work packages.

Since the launch of the EUARENAS project, theoretical and conceptual developments played a prominent role in the project's endeavor, **integrating the whole team around this task**. A solid theoretical and conceptual framework provides the pillar for any academic research activity, but also – often in a more cover way – for any practical change-making effort in the social fabric. This is especially valid for transdisciplinary and multi-actor projects such as EUARENAS. **A solid framework, however, does not mean a static framework as theoretical debates (should) evolve and develop over time**. The connection between the conceptual/theoretical frameworks and empirical parts of the EUARENAS project was designed to be both flexible and bidirectional, providing a structure and input for the practical research work as well as taking influence and inspiration from the practical results and experiences to develop the conceptual and theoretical work in the project.

Contrary to the often marginal role of providing glossaries and general frameworks to allow for effective mutual communication across empirical and practical parts of the project, **from the very beginning of the project all the collaborators decided to adopt a proactive approach and engage with the most contemporary debates in philosophy and social theory**. This has been achieved in multiple steps that can better be systematized in three phases, marked more or less by three deliverables provided in the project's lifespan.

Phase 1 – Mapping the territory

The initial theoretical framework was established at the project's beginning in the form of D1.1, which was the result of the first six months of the project. The work involved desk-based work as well as collaboration, discussions, and online workshops with the other project partners. The main aim of this phase was to "ensure that all project partners ha[d] a shared understanding of

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[1] A shortened version of this document is included in D6.10.

the most recent concepts in the field, together with their multiple connotations and meanings" (D1.1: 4). To make it possible, it was essential to engage with the variety of EUARENAS partners and understand their perspective to identify the diversity of concepts, assumptions, and needs specific to the project work that was planned.

In terms of content, the initial Conceptual Framework (D1.1.) provides a **relevant and logical progression of knowledge and information on the concepts**, theory, and philosophical underpinnings of deliberative and participatory democratic developments and innovations. In its 1st section, the key characteristics of and problems experienced by representative democracy and proceeds to show **how deliberative democracy has been developed to address the shortcomings of representative models democr**acy. Following this analysis of the epistemic foundations, the authors of D1.1. move on to the 2nd Section to show **how participatory and deliberative practices have evolved over time**, showcase some deliberative and participatory tools that have been deployed to complement representative modes of democracy, and lastly explore some other approaches that have been applied to challenge traditional democratic practices and strengthen the voice of citizens and residents, such as protests and performance. In the 3rd Section, **some wider societal trends** and challenges/opportunities that are significant for and influence participatory practices **are explored**, including power and leadership questions, online activism, and populism.

D1.1 has served the project researchers in several ways. By presenting the main theoretical fields relevant to the project, it served as a **mapping of critically reviewed concepts and debates**, thus identifying lacunas, challenges, and uncertainties that are relevant to EUARENAS research efforts and helping the project partners to frame their own activities within these wider contexts and debates. Even more fundamentally, the initial Conceptual and Theoretical Framework also contributed to a **shared understanding of concepts among the diverse group of researchers** with various academic and disciplinary backgrounds. Another "device" that was proposed by the EUARENAS team to develop such a language infrastructure – a shared understanding of key terms and concepts – in the form of an ***EUARENAS Glossary – Key Concepts and Working Definitions***. To this end, the academic partners came together in three online and one face-to-face meetings at the early stages of the project to build a glossary of 33 'operational' terms/concepts. The results of this work have been published in The EUARENAS Working Paper Series 1.

There has also been an active presence of theoretical frameworks in the preparatory phase of other work packages. It has been most prominent in the methodological WP 2, where certain

detailed concepts and frameworks that have been developed for the research purposes of the project were introduced separately, together with their underlying paradigms. These theories provided grounding for quantitative research and qualitative categories in Work Packages 3, 4, and 5, as well as accounted for action research and citizen science approaches central to the EUARENAS project. Throughout the cooperation with leading teams in the preparatory phase for case studies and piloting, the methodological frameworks have been fine-tuned to resonate with general conceptual debates on urban participatory and deliberative governance outlined in D1.2. Such a dual approach is a consequence of the project's complex and multi-faceted approach that requires the use of various and sometimes even contradictory paradigms – broadly falling into either systemic or interpretative approaches[2].

Phase 2 – deepening the research

After outlining the key conceptual areas of the project's interest and orientating research questions, methods, and tools toward them, efforts in work package 1 were directed toward situating the project within **the most contemporary theoretical debates from a range of disciplines represented in the consortium**: urban geography, sociology, political and legal studies, philosophy, and to some extent also psychology. While the majority of our work involved desk research and critical literature review, **perhaps our most valuable findings came from deepening our understanding of the inevitable differences that surround key concepts and values depending on the represented background within the consortium**. Through various workshops, discussions and debates, and peer collaboration including reviews and co-authorships, we have discussed concepts such as participation, deliberation, inclusion, empowerment, and diversity in order to paint a richness of possible understandings of these particular terms from various practical and academic perspectives. This allowed us to indicate several opportunities to make theoretical interventions into contemporary debates by introducing new perspectives and interpretations in addition to the rich evidence gathered in the project's lifespan.

The key outcome of the second phase was **D1.2 – State of Democracy Debate**. This is a dense literature review synthesizing the most relevant theoretical debates and groundings of the project and providing a comprehensive set of useful references. Its role is to **provide guidance for consortium members and interested parties navigating through the weeds of theoretical debates** and pinpoint certain lacunas, loopholes, or inconsistencies that are still awaiting evidence-based interventions. Written to high academic standards, D1.2 is set to inspire new

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[2] We explained this relationship in detail in further documents (D1.2: 3-7, 47-52).

interpretations and understanding of the project activities and provide a rich conceptual background for forthcoming publications. This deliverable starts with outlining several discussions on the crisis of democracy, pinching various ways to interpret its reasons and forms on local, national, and EU levels. The next three chapters focus on three areas key to the project: city politics, deliberation, and participation. Together they depict how urban democracy is set to respond to the aforementioned crises, but we also focus on areas that are still seen as problematic, pointing to potential pitfalls in making local co-governance fully democratic.

There is also a more conceptual endeavor delivered in this phase, outlined at the beginning of D1.2. This is a **closeup study of nuances in how key concepts – such as participation, deliberation, or inclusion – are used by various partners**, thus outlining some differences induced by positions and/or disciplines represented in EUARENAS. This part describes the results of our workshops and conceptual analysis of project documents published in the first year of the project in order to indicate possible connections between the project's functioning and contemporary debates – to learn from them and to prepare further interventions.

Phase 3 – translating the outcomes

After mapping and preparing the conceptual territory for development**, we tended to cultivate our findings, "fertilizing" them with empirical evidence and other outcomes of the project**, such as the growing understanding of its matter by all consortium members. This was made possible thanks to our constant engagement as collaborators in other work packages via conducting empirical research, preparing and participating in various project workshops, and discussing the preliminary and final results. Such close collaboration between all partners and work packages – a design feature of the EUARENAS project – allowed for a theory development to happen with a close entanglement with all empirical, practical, and future-oriented (foresight, policy recommendations, impact) parts of the project. Based on our assessment of these developments we have outlined a range of possible topics and fields where a theoretical intervention from the project can be meaningful and timely. These topics have been discussed and selected during the Consortium meeting in Gdańsk (M24), and amended towards a skeleton of our final deliverable D1.3 – Updated Conceptual Framework, in which we engage with a selection of contemporary debates to depict how the EUARENAS project can elucidate most contemporary dilemmas within the urban participatory and deliberative governance theories (and, inextricably, practices).

In the end, the content of D1.3 provides an extensive examination of various themes that emerged during the project, both from within the consortium and through literature review, allowing the

Authors to formulate original interventions to recent debates and develop their theoretical concepts. A significant portion of this deliverable looks into the complexities and nuances of participatory and deliberative democracy, highlighting the need to transcend the binary categorization intricate to many frameworks: "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches, and the "dialogue–conflict" opposition. The project has revealed that these simplistic frameworks often fail to capture complex power dynamics at play within participatory processes, where roles and influences can blur, leading to a more integrated and holistic understanding of governance. Following these assumptions, one novel conceptual theme discussed in D1.3 is the "**Piano of Participation,**" which serves as a metaphor for the multifaceted nature of civic engagement. This conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of recognizing and incorporating diverse voices and perspectives into the deliberative process. Unlike the traditional "Ladder of Participation," which implies a hierarchical progression, the "Piano of Participation" suggests a more fluid and dynamic interaction among stakeholders. This approach encourages a more inclusive and equitable participation, acknowledging the various "notes" or forms of engagement that contribute to the democratic process. Furthermore, the document addresses the role of cognitive capabilities in ensuring inclusivity in deliberation. It highlights the need to design participatory processes that accommodate the diverse cognitive and psychological needs of participants. This includes recognizing and mitigating barriers faced by older adults and neurodivergent individuals, and ensuring that the deliberative spaces are accessible and conducive to their full participation. Such considerations are crucial for fostering an environment where more voices can be heard and respected, enhancing the quality and outcomes of the deliberative processes while acknowledging the role of inevitable forces that keep on excluding "Others".

The final chapters of D1.3 are an attempt to summarize the interplay of power within deliberative and participatory practices. The discussion begins by **breaking down the process into three critical stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation**. In **the preparation stage**, the document highlights the influential role of politicians and public officials, who decide on the initiation and structure of participatory events. This stage involves defining the topic and selecting appropriate techniques, heavily influenced by the political and financial constraints at hand. The preparation phase sets the foundational language rules that shape the ensuing deliberations, potentially guiding the outcomes toward the authorities' objectives while aiming for recommendations that are relevant to the policy issue at hand and achievable within the social, political, economic, and legislative frameworks**. The implementation stage** focuses on the actual conduct of the participatory event and underscores the need for flexibility to accommodate

improvisations and adjustments as the event progresses. Here, the roles of various stakeholders come to the forefront, including moderators, facilitators, and participants. Moderators and facilitators play a pivotal role in guiding the discussion and managing conflicts. Their proactive involvement is often in maintaining a balanced and productive dialogue, steering between genuine deliberation, discursive meta-narratives that participants bring into it, and political expectations and legal constraints of local governments. **In the evaluation stage**, our focus shifts to the aftermath of the participatory event, where the implementation of decisions and public discussions about the outcomes take place. This stage involves assessing the impact of the deliberation, learning from the process, and determining the feasibility of implementing the recommendations. Politicians and public officials again play a significant role here, as they have the authority to enact the outcomes.

The deliverable also addresses the concept of **"PR-ticipation,"** where participatory processes are utilized more for public relations purposes rather than genuine engagement. While a complex political context is inevitable in the processes we study, we observe situations in which they are distorted by personal interests and perspectives that make broadly understood "participation" as a mere goal to achieve their own aims. This phenomenon can undermine the authenticity and effectiveness of participatory practices. **Political PR-ticipation** often manifests when authorities organize events to create an image of inclusivity and democracy but fail to incorporate the outcomes meaningfully into policy decisions. Such practices can lead to disillusionment among participants and the public, who may perceive these efforts as mere tokenism or symbolic gestures without substantial impact. Beyond political PR-ticipation, D1.3 identifies similar tendencies in civic and expert domains. **Civic PR-ticipation** occurs when NGOs and social movements engage in participatory processes not to contribute constructively but to oppose authorities and bolster their own visibility. This form of engagement is often marked by a confrontational stance, prioritizing public sentiment and organizational goals over genuine dialogue and cooperation. Similarly, **expert PR-ticipation** involves consultants and researchers who promote participatory methods primarily to advance their own professional agendas. These actors may emphasize positive outcomes and downplay challenges to secure funding and recognition, potentially inflating expectations and leading to greater disenchantment with participatory processes. Understanding PR-ticipation is crucial for mitigating its negative impacts. It is first of all an analytical tool helpful in identifying similar distortions in empirical research or during evaluations of participatory practices. By recognizing different forms of PR-ticipation and their manifestations, stakeholders can be more vigilant and critical in their approach to organizing and participating in these events. Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to maintain a

critical stance, ensuring that participatory processes are not co-opted for superficial purposes but are designed and implemented with a commitment to meaningful engagement and real impact. This awareness can enhance the potential of participatory democracy to address complex social and political issues.

A chapter in the document has also been inspired by one of the reviewer's comments made during the second project's review, suggesting a conceptual research on the particularity of **urban populism**. Not surprisingly we have noted multiple encounters with various populist attitudes and argumentations in the EUARENAS case studies and pilots, pinpointing several traces typical to urban populism(s) across Europe. Building on a broadened understanding of this phenomenon and recognizing it as a discursive/political strategy, the study identifies two primary strands of urban populism: conservative and progressive. **Conservative urban populism** typically centers on protecting individual freedoms perceived to be threatened by environmental urban policies, such as restrictions on vehicle use to reduce congestion or improve air quality. This group tends to favor direct democratic actions like referenda, believing that straightforward, "common sense" solutions should prevail without the need for complex deliberative processes. Their engagement in participatory events often manifests as resistance to compromise or negotiation, posing significant challenges to fostering productive dialogue and consensus

On the other hand, **progressive urban populism** is driven by a desire for rapid and radical improvements in public infrastructure and social services, often aligning with broader European standards and policies. Progressive populists advocate for more inclusive and participatory governance, yet their approach can be equally uncompromising. They often consist of middle-class professionals who are well-versed in deliberative practices and aim to leverage rational public discourse to push their agendas. This group is typically more supportive of EU policies but remains critical of local elites, whom they perceive as barriers to their vision of urban development. The challenge here lies in integrating their often well-researched and data-driven proposals into a broader consensus without alienating other stakeholders. Both forms of urban populism, despite their differences, share a common skepticism towards the existing political system and its actors, complicating efforts to create genuinely inclusive and deliberative urban governance processes.

Overall, the final chapters of D1.3 present **a comprehensive framework for understanding the power relations and dynamics within participatory and deliberative practices**. By examining the roles and influences of various stakeholders and the stages of the participatory process, the document provides valuable insights into designing and implementing more effective and

inclusive deliberative events. At the same time, we use these theoretical conclusions and concepts to design new research ideas, allowing us to foster an understanding of urban participatory governance. This dual entanglement marks our suspicion of the theory-practice divide often invoked in terms of research and innovation actions on participatory governance, showcasing them as intrinsically connected and in multiple constant tensions with each other.

The theoretical involvement in the project does not end here, though. After laying down the grounds and harvesting new ideas, EUARENAS enters an intensified and prolonged phase of dissemination and exploitation of its results**. With the conclusion of the data gathering and analysis processes, our intuitions and concepts are yet to be tested and fine-tuned against the vast body of knowledge coming from the project. We also firmly believe that the conceptual frameworks, literature review, and most importantly countless inspiring debates among consortium members, are providing solid grounds for a meaningful academic impact in various disciplines and through various outlets such as the upcoming books, articles, guidebooks, reports, and course materials.**