

# 23<sup>rd</sup> IOPD Conference Valongo 2024

## Populist Threats: Building Democratic Resilience with Participatory Communities

*From 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> of October in Valongo, Portugal*

### Presentation

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy – IOPD is an international network of over a thousand cities, organisations, and research centres that implement and exchange experiences of participatory democracy at the local level. The 2024 conference of the IOPD will be held in Valongo, Portugal, from 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> of October. The forums and debates of this conference will be primarily dedicated to identifying the forms and mechanisms of participatory democracy that best defend communities from authoritarian drifts based on disinformation, typical of some populist phenomena.

#### Thematic axes:

The Valongo Conference will have 5 main thematic axes related to the promotion of participatory democracy, namely:

- The challenges that new populisms pose to participatory democracy
- The threats and opportunities of Artificial Intelligence
- The potential and opportunities of civic technology
- Best practices in inclusive participatory processes
- Investments in transparency and open governance

#### Framework

Throughout the world, democratic societies have been weakened by a sense of crisis that contributes to the reduction of both the perceived legitimacy of the representative political system and the civic engagement of communities in the life of their territories.

Discontent with representative institutions has fuelled a vicious circle of lower civic performance and degradation of political life, which can be seen simultaneously as both a cause and an effect of the emergence of different populist phenomena. These phenomena - in various parts of the world - construct political logic with multiple ambiguities. While their speeches often include dissatisfied claims and the



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populace's desire for closer proximity to decision-makers, many of these politicians endorse exclusive and demagogic practices. These practices undermine the quality of liberal democracies and disrupt the balance of power. These drifts jeopardise pluralism and the individual and collective freedoms achieved through many struggles, preventing the public space from asserting itself as the place to promote equality of opportunity, where diversities meet, get to know each other, and dialogue.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> conference of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy – IOPD, which Valongo will organise in Portugal in 2024 on October 17/18/19, will have as its theme "Populist Threats: Building Democratic Resilience with Participatory Communities" and will feature Cas Mudde, one of the most renowned experts on populism, in its inaugural session. In addition to assessing the reasons for discontent and the risks looming over free and informed communities, this conference will be an opportunity to highlight the potential of participatory democracy mechanisms as an antidote to authoritarian drifts based on disinformation.

Participatory democracy, by seeking balance, sustainability, and moderation, as well as consensus and commitment, has all the conditions to assert itself in the coming decades as an unavoidable reference for elected governments in implementing reforms that improve communities in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. In this way, by proposing politically informed strategies for change and adapting them to existing resources for implementation, participatory democracy will constitute the core of 21<sup>st</sup>-century democracies and serve as a competent and tolerant barrier against the greatest threats posed by demagogic and exclusionary populist movements and parties.

### **The challenges that new populisms pose to participatory democracy**

If the most recent populist trends originated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the financial crisis of 2008 gave them a powerful boost by producing a long-lasting economic stagnation globally, which led to a compression of incomes for the working and middle classes, creating a bitter sense of loss and, at the same time, a persistent feeling of insecurity and external aggression.

Many citizens felt that their living conditions, the comfort of their old age, and the future of their children and grandchildren were being threatened by elitist democracies, which - according to most populist parties and their leaders - lacked the strength and determination necessary to confront what they themselves felt as threats to the quality of their daily lives and their socio-economic status.

This type of opportunistic populist discourse has been poisoning political debates in all the contexts where it has emerged. Movements of this nature that have come to power have failed either due to the unrealistic dualism of their diagnoses or the simplicity of the proposed solutions to problems, which instead of solving them, worsened them. Faced with complex issues, these opportunistic populisms tend to fuel negative emotions and demagogy, blurring the lines between what is true and what is false. By introducing massive doses of half-truths and aggression into political discourse, they radicalise and polarise positions, often treating opponents as enemies with whom no form of dialogue is admissible.

Populist drifts can impact participatory dynamics. The increase in polarisation and hostility among social groups generated by populist movements, which demonise, in some cases, the most vulnerable members, can hinder cooperation and dialogue within the community. The growing distrust in institutions and the actions of public authorities may contribute to increasing intolerance, generating impasses in collective action, and hindering commitments to address complex problems. Lastly, disinformation and denialism, practices that new populisms have helped foster, can spread lies, distort political debate, and influence decision-making, undermining trust in science and evidence-based research.

### The threats and opportunities of Artificial Intelligence

Indeed, many technological instruments - from social networks to algorithms and Artificial Intelligence - have contributed to polarising democratic audiences, sowing doubts about the political systems of democracies, and mobilising dissatisfied citizens to support populist and anti-establishment drifts with increasing authoritarian connotations. The mobilisation of negative emotions such as fear, paranoia, and a sense of constant aggression has been promoting hate speech, pushing citizens towards increasingly tribal and destructive behaviours, and identifying those who are different or think differently, as enemies.

We intend to discuss, in Valongo, the mechanisms and practices of participatory democracies that have proven to be particularly effective in preserving and enhancing the proper functioning of democratic institutions.

The 2024 IOPD conference will question and discuss the impacts that Artificial Intelligence will have on the communities of our cities. The entire society - particularly municipalities and other local and regional governments - must urgently prepare to address the risks posed by AI: risks to security, risks to elections, risks to the functioning of democracies, and, more broadly, to ensuring a clean and objective assessment of reality.

However, Artificial Intelligence is a tool. With appropriate regulation, it has enormous innovation potential, and it can contribute decisively to innovating in public policies, rationalising the distribution of resources, and scrutinising policies, elected officials, and candidates. By democratising access to more elements of reality and the complex way in which they are interconnected, AI has the potential to improve citizens' informed understanding of public affairs.

### The potential and opportunities of civic technology

In recent years, the concept of civic technology has emerged, involving the use of digital tools to promote citizen engagement, strengthen participation, and foster new channels of communication between decision-makers and citizens. Multiple collaborative and open-source platforms have been developed to share data, provide information, and encourage citizen participation, thereby increasing transparency and contributing to bolstering trust in administration.



Civic technology has also become a means of mobilising and structuring collective intelligence, which is the ability to aggregate groups of people to promote collective action through a specific group judgment aimed at solving a relevant community problem. Digital devices can help collect and analyse data, for example, through *citizen science* tools, contribute to decision-making, and monitor the implementation of public policy.

### **Best practices in inclusive participatory processes**

Participatory democracy and the political engagement fostered by these reforms across all Continents are the common cause uniting the more than a thousand cities that make up the IOPD. The first outcome of this gradual change that is asserting itself worldwide - and of which IOPD conferences are a stage and a beacon - is the increase in inclusive public policies, which are producing new political actors in cities: women, the elderly, young people, children, new families, migrants, and many others.

Women and the municipal feminist movement are at the heart of the new policies. The new sustainable policies imply significant reductions in consumption to protect ecosystems and genuinely promote social equity and opportunities for all.

The role of medium-sized cities - like Valongo - is critical in this process across all Continents: as places of connection between rural areas and urban spaces, between peripheries and centres of political power, medium-sized cities are quintessential spaces of democratic learning. It is in these cities that some of the most promising experiences of co-creation and citizen participation, community involvement, and representative democracy have flourished.

The greatest merit of participatory democracy is the way in which the intervention of citizens and their expressions of will intertwine with the missions of local, regional, and national public services - and with the action of elected politicians in each branch of government. It is precisely through participation that citizens become the engines of structurally important changes!

Participatory practices are eloquently demonstrating that democracy is not only, nor primarily, "the decision of the majority." Democracy is not limited to the peaceful replacement of one government by another. The most important aspect of democracies is indeed the functioning of their institutions - and their rules! In short, the "civic engagement" that results from the process itself.

In an experience involving citizens of different genders, ages, academic backgrounds, and social conditions, more important than the outcome of the choice is how they collectively formed their proposal, how they presented it to elected officials, and how they fought for its realisation, obtaining their agreement. It also matters how citizens subsequently monitor the implementation of the political decision by public services. For the democratic resilience of communities, this process of citizen engagement is as important, if not more so, than the material outcome obtained in the end.

It is precisely because participatory processes fully embody the ancestral genetic material of democracies that they represent the virtues of democratic systems and their rules and processes. It is precisely for this reason that they serve as schools of democratic practices and, in this sense, as true incubators of democratic resilience and barriers to demagogic and exclusionary populisms in the communities where they operate.

### Investments in transparency and open governance

Open governance emerges as a necessity to streamline public administration, promote greater transparency and responsiveness, and thereby regain citizens' trust. It also aims to address the need to prevent practices that undermine institutional integrity and affect the credibility of decision-makers. Its implementation involves a set of changes in how public policies are conceived and executed, offering citizens the opportunity to engage in their formulation and be active partners in their evaluation and monitoring, thereby fostering greater effectiveness and assertiveness.

These policies will necessarily involve an increase in multi-level governance experiences, increasingly involving local governments with national and multinational governments.

The Valongo conference will be held in October 2024, the year Portugal celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the April 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, a non-violent movement that ended a lengthy period of dictatorship, restored democracy, and established free and universal elections in Portuguese municipalities. The IOPD conference will be the right place to discuss and present proposals for building resilient democratic systems that give people real opportunities to influence change in their communities, municipalities, and countries.

The IOPD conference "Populist Threats: Building Democratic Resilience with Participatory Communities" in Valongo in 2024 will be a global milestone in mobilising participatory cities to revitalise their democratic systems for the benefit of their citizens.

### Provisional Program

#### Thursday, October 17<sup>th</sup>

Reception of delegations

Opening session:

- José Manuel Ribeiro, President of the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) and Mayor of Valongo
- Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)
- Cas Mudde, political scientist and UGAF Stanley Wade Shelton Professor of International Affairs at the University of Georgia (USA) is a world-renowned scholar on far-right and populist politics, focusing specifically, but not exclusively, on political developments in Europe and North America.

#### Friday, October 18<sup>th</sup>

Conferences, Plenaries, and Roundtables



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IOPD Award  
**Saturday, October 19<sup>th</sup>**  
IOPD General Assembly  
Conferences, Plenaries, and Roundtables  
Closing session

## **Municipality of Valongo**

The Municipality was founded in 1836, 187 years ago, but the history of this 75-square-kilometer territory spans hundreds of millions of years. It dates back to the Paleozoic Era when trilobites populated the Earth. It was also the stage for significant historical episodes linked to its gold mines when it was part of the Roman Empire.

Today, Valongo is the main metropolitan destination for outdoor sports and is the gateway to the Porto Mountains Park. In addition to the beauty of the hills and rivers, it boasts a vast heritage, including the centuries-old tradition of biscuits and *regueifa* bread, the art of traditional portuguese toys, the spectacular tradition of the *Bugiada* and *Mouriscada* Festival, the richness of slate, religious monuments, and railway heritage.

Prepared to welcome investment, promote the settlement of people, and attract tourists, over the last decade Valongo has established itself as a nationally recognised municipality in initiating and promoting participatory democracy processes, with its mayor serving as the president of the Portuguese Network of Participatory Municipalities.

From 2024 to 2025, the Municipality of Valongo will promote an uninterrupted event dedicated to the "50 Years of Local Democracy." The 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy - IOPD will be a highlight of this program.

## **IOPD**

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) is a network of over a thousand cities worldwide that seeks to encourage municipalities, other local and regional governments, as well as civil society organisations and research centres, to collaborate to develop, implement, and disseminate experiences of participatory and deliberative democracy based on international cooperation and solidarity.

Founded in 2001, the IOPD has been a part of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) since 2006. The UCLG is the largest network of cities and local governments worldwide, with a mission to represent its members and promote the fundamental principles of proximity, decentralisation, and democratic political leadership.



Observatório  
Internacional  
da Democracia  
Participativa

The IOPD holds an annual international conference, with participants from all Continents, to discuss and reflect on the state of participatory democracy worldwide.

## UCLG

The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is an international organisation that brings together cities, local and regional governments, and municipal associations from around the world. Its objective is to represent and advocate for the interests of local governments at the global level.



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