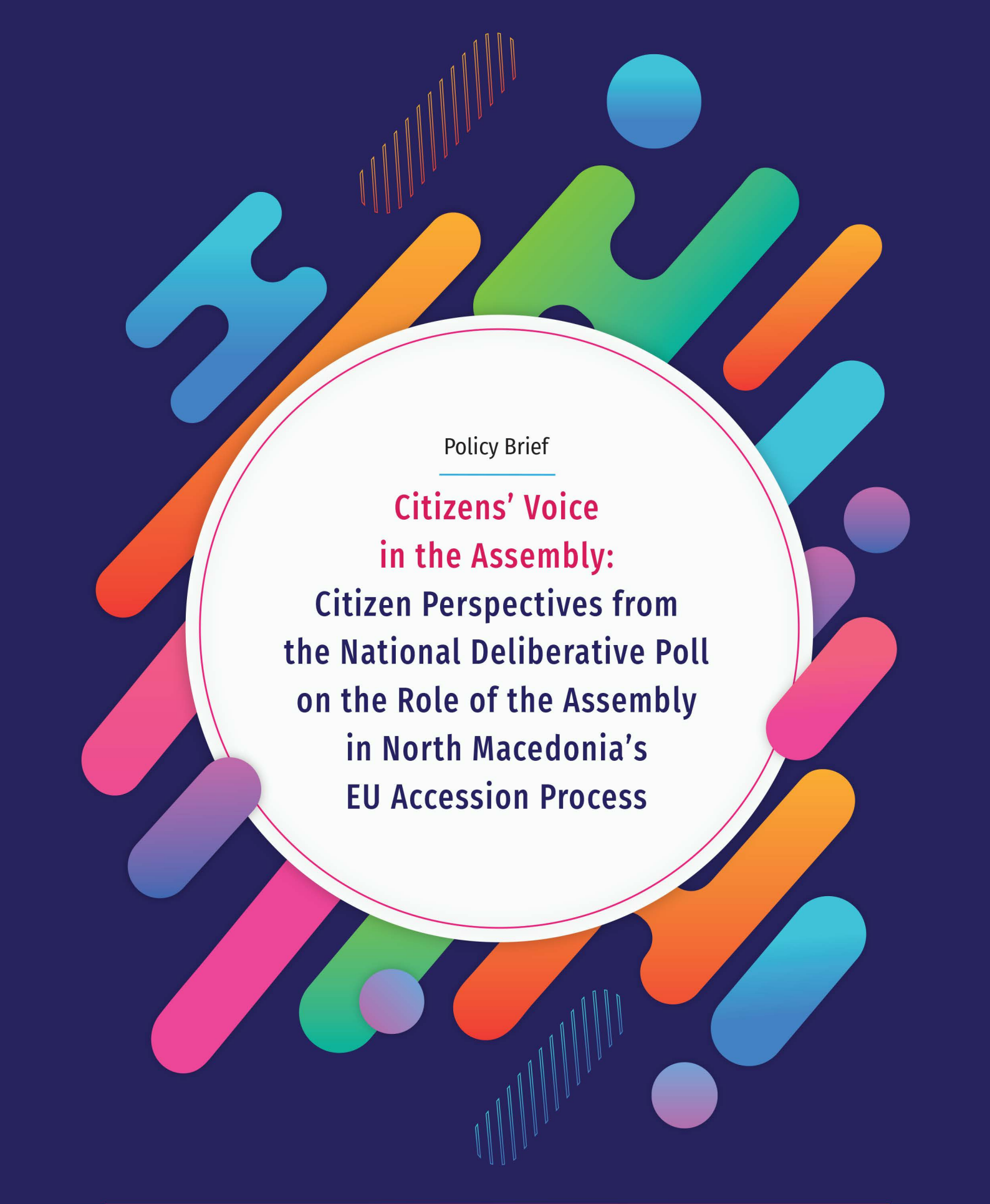
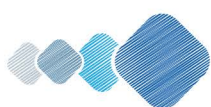




Policy Brief

**Citizens' Voice
in the Assembly:**

**Citizen Perspectives from
the National Deliberative Poll
on the Role of the Assembly
in North Macedonia's
EU Accession Process**



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Publisher: European Policy Institute – Skopje

Author: Dr. Ardita Abazi – Imeri

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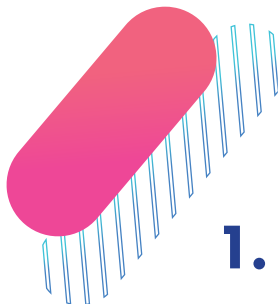
This document is based on the results of the fifth National Deliberative Polling event held in April 2026 as part of the project "Fostering Public Participation in Constructive Political Dialogue", implemented by the European Policy Institute (EPI) - Skopje in collaboration with Deliberative Democracy Lab (DDL) at Stanford University and the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The content of this document can in no way be considered to represent the views and opinions of the Deliberative Democracy Lab (DDL) at Stanford University and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).



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1. Introduction

The European Union accession process is predominantly discussed in terms of reforms, legislation, and compliance with membership requirements, while its democratic dimension is less often at the forefront of the debate. Yet accession also requires effective institutions, political accountability, public trust, and citizen ownership of reforms. In North Macedonia, discussions on European integration have frequently focused on the role of the executive branch, while the role of the Assembly and opportunities for citizen participation have received comparatively less attention.¹ At the same time, broader debates on democratic governance have highlighted challenges related to political polarisation, declining trust in institutions, and the quality of democratic decision-making.² These developments raise important questions regarding the role of the Assembly in the accession process and the extent to which citizens feel informed, represented, and involved in decisions that shape the country's European future. The Assembly occupies a central position in the democratic governance of EU accession. Beyond adopting legislation required for alignment with the EU acquis, it exercises oversight over the executive, provides a forum for political debate, and represents diverse societal interests. The effectiveness of these functions influences not only the quality of reforms but also their legitimacy and public acceptance.

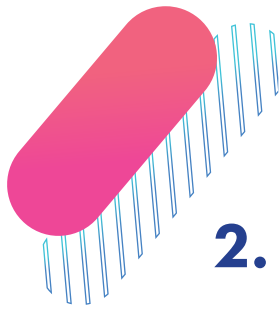
To explore how citizens perceive the Assembly's role in the EU accession process, the European Policy Institute (EPI), organised the fifth National Deliberative Poll.³ The initiative aimed to assess whether citizens' knowledge and attitudes change when they have access to balanced information, structured discussion, and direct interaction with experts and policymakers. The Deliberative Poll methodology, developed by Professor James Fishkin and the Deliberative Democracy Lab at Stanford University,⁴ combines public opinion research with informed citizen deliberation. Participants receive balanced briefing materials, engage in moderated small-group discussions, and interact directly with experts before completing a post-deliberation survey. The approach provides insight not only into what citizens think, but also how their views evolve when they have the opportunity to become more informed and deliberate collectively.

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- 1 Kocevski, G. (2025). The Parliament of North Macedonia in the Advent of Accession Negotiations with the European Union: Bystander or Actor? *Central European Academy Law Review*, 2(1), 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.62733/2024.1.125-146>
 - 2 Bliznakovski, J. (2025). *EUPopLink Country report - North Macedonia*. Open Research Europe, 6, 179. ; House, F. (2024). Nations in Transit 2024 - North Macedonia. Freedom House.
 - 3 <https://epi.org.mk/post/33093>
 - 4 James S. Fishkin, *Democracy When the People Are Thinking* (2018).

The deliberative process began with a nationally representative survey involving 1,200 citizens from across North Macedonia. From this sample, participants were invited to take part in a two-day deliberative event held in the Assembly on 25–26 April 2026. A total of 136 participants completed both the pre-deliberation and post-deliberation surveys and form the basis of the analysis presented in this policy brief. The results of both surveys were analysed using a paired-samples t-test and an ANOVA to assess whether there were statistically significant differences in citizens' opinions pre- and post- the deliberative event. The National Deliberative Poll on the Role of the Assembly in the EU accession process focused on two main topics for discussion divided into two days. The first day focused on the model of involvement of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU accession process, delving in the subtopics of its functions including the legislative function of the Assembly and the quality of laws, the oversight function of the Assembly, and the representative and debating function, in addition to transparency and trust. The second day focused on the working bodies of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia and their role in the EU accession process, delving into the work of the Committee on European Affairs and the National Council for European Integration, as well as comparative examples from the region. During the event, the participants engaged with experts and political figures to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

This policy brief summarises the key findings of the Deliberative Poll and examines what they reveal about citizens' perceptions of the Assembly, democratic participation, and the governance of the EU accession process. The findings provide important insights into how informed deliberation shapes public understanding and what this may mean for strengthening democratic ownership of North Macedonia's path towards European Union membership.



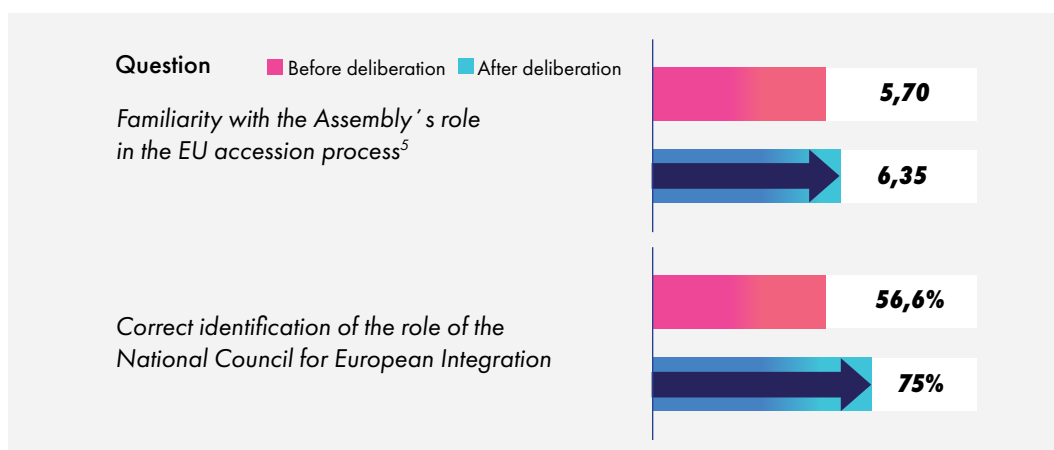


2. Key Insights from the Deliberative Poll

The survey covered a broader range of issues related to the Assembly's role, oversight, public debate, transparency and citizen participation. The analysis below focuses on three areas in which the comparison of pre- and post-deliberation responses reveals some of the most notable shifts.

2.1 Understanding the Assembly's Role in EU Accession

The first group of findings concerns citizens' understanding of the Assembly's role in the EU accession process. The questionnaire examined both participants' self-assessed familiarity with the Assembly's role and their knowledge of its functions and specific parliamentary bodies involved in European integration. This allows us to consider whether deliberation affected not only how informed participants felt, but also their understanding of the institutional framework of the accession process.



5 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($t(134) = 2.46$, $p = 0.015$; Cohen's $d_z = 0.21$).



Citizens can develop a more nuanced understanding of the Assembly's functions when provided with accessible information and opportunities for discussion.

One of the clearest findings of the Deliberative Poll is that participants became more familiar with the Assembly's role in the EU accession process after engaging with balanced information and deliberative discussions. While public debates on European integration in North Macedonia frequently focus on the actions and responsibilities of the Government, **the findings suggest that citizens can develop a more nuanced understanding of the Assembly's functions** when provided with accessible information and opportunities for discussion.

Participants reported significantly **higher** familiarity with the Assembly's role following the deliberation, with the mean value increasing from 5.70 to 6.35 after the debate. At the same time, knowledge-related questions showed **notable improvements** regarding specific parliamentary mechanisms involved in European integration.

Within the Assembly, the Committee on European Affairs reviews, screens, and aligns draft legislation marked with an EU flag, assessing its alignments with the EU acquis before plenary adoption.⁶ Complementing this, the National Council for European Integration acts as a broader consultative platform to foster cross-party consensus on strategic reform priorities. In this regard, the results from the deliberation show that awareness of the National Council for European Integration (NCEI) increased the most, with 75% of participants correctly identifying its role after deliberations compared to 56.6% prior to the deliberations. This finding is particularly important because many institutional mechanisms linked to the accession process remain relatively unknown to the broader public despite their relevance for democratic oversight and participation. The findings challenge the assumption that EU accession issues are too technical or complex for meaningful citizen engagement. Participants demonstrated an ability to engage with institutional questions, understand the distribution of responsibilities between institutions, and reflect on the Assembly's role in shaping and overseeing reforms related to European integration.



Participants often became more critical of existing practices after developing a better understanding of how decisions are made. This distinction is important because it suggests that deliberation contributes not only to civic learning, but also to more informed democratic judgement.

6 Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, Secretariat for European Affairs, Institutional Platform and Principles for Conducting Negotiations on the Accession of the Republic of Macedonia to the European Union, 11.2007. Link: <https://portal.mdt.gov.mk/post-body-files/pregovori-i-nova-metodologija-file-GrBh.pdf>.

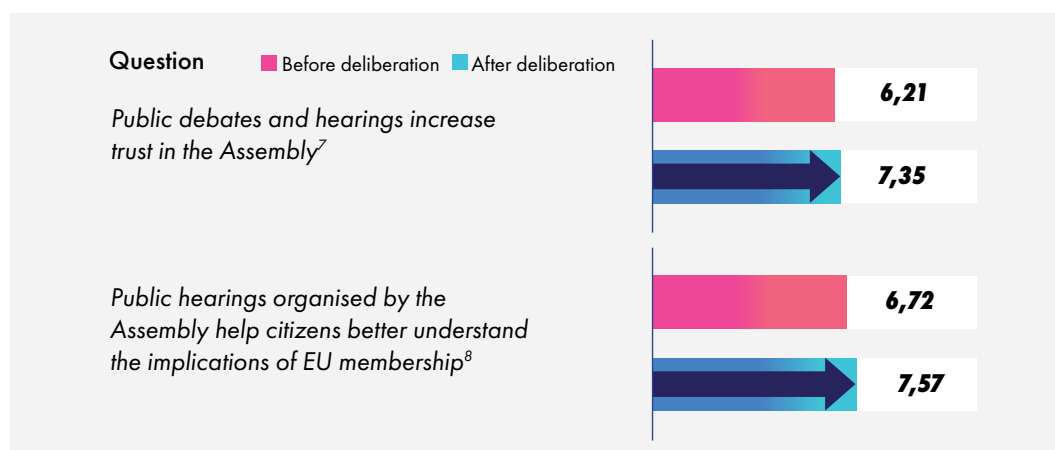
The results indicate that opportunities for informed engagement can contribute to addressing gaps in citizens' knowledge. Throughout the deliberative process, participants were able to discuss competing viewpoints, question experts and decision-makers, and reflect collectively on institutional responsibilities. This appears to have contributed to a deeper understanding of how democratic institutions function within the accession framework. At the same time, increased knowledge did not automatically translate into more positive assessments of institutional performance. As the following sections demonstrate, participants often became more critical of existing practices after developing a better understanding of how decisions are made. This distinction is important because it suggests that deliberation contributes not only to civic learning, but also to more informed democratic judgement.

The findings therefore indicate that citizens are capable of engaging meaningfully with complex accession-related issues when information is balanced, accessible, and accompanied by opportunities for discussion and reflection. For institutions seeking to strengthen public ownership of EU accession, this represents an important lesson: citizens should not be viewed merely as recipients of information, but as participants capable of contributing to informed public debate.



2.2 Citizens Value Participation and Public Deliberation

A second group of findings explored citizens' views on public debate and participation in the Assembly's work related to EU accession. The questionnaire examined perceptions of public debates and discussions, opportunities for citizens and civil society to engage in EU-related reforms, and the value attached to inclusive debate. The findings presented below focus on the questions where deliberation produced the most notable shifts, particularly regarding the relationship between public debate, trust and citizens' understanding of EU membership.



Citizens do not perceive participation merely as a procedural requirement or a symbolic consultation exercise. They view meaningful dialogue as a mechanism that can improve understanding, strengthen legitimacy, and contribute to greater trust in democratic institutions.

Beyond increasing knowledge about the Assembly and the EU accession process, the Deliberative Poll revealed a broader finding: participants emerged with a stronger appreciation of public participation and deliberative engagement as democratic practices. The strongest positive shifts recorded in the post-deliberation survey related to the perceived value of public debates and hearings, with the mean value increasing from 6.21 to 7.35 after the debate. Following the deliberative process, participants were significantly more likely to agree that public debates and parliamentary hearings can increase citizens' trust in the Assembly, compared with the pre-deliberation results. Similarly, participants agreed more strongly that public hearings organised by the Assembly can help citizens better understand the implications of EU membership,

7 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.001 level ($t(134) = 3.65$, $p = 0.000$; Cohen's $d_z = 0.31$).

8 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($t(132) = 2.73$, $p = 0.007$; Cohen's $d_z = 0.24$).

with the mean value increasing from 6.72 to 7.57 after the debate. These findings suggest that citizens do not perceive participation merely as a procedural requirement or a symbolic consultation exercise. Rather, they view meaningful dialogue as a mechanism that can improve understanding, strengthen legitimacy, and contribute to greater trust in democratic institutions.

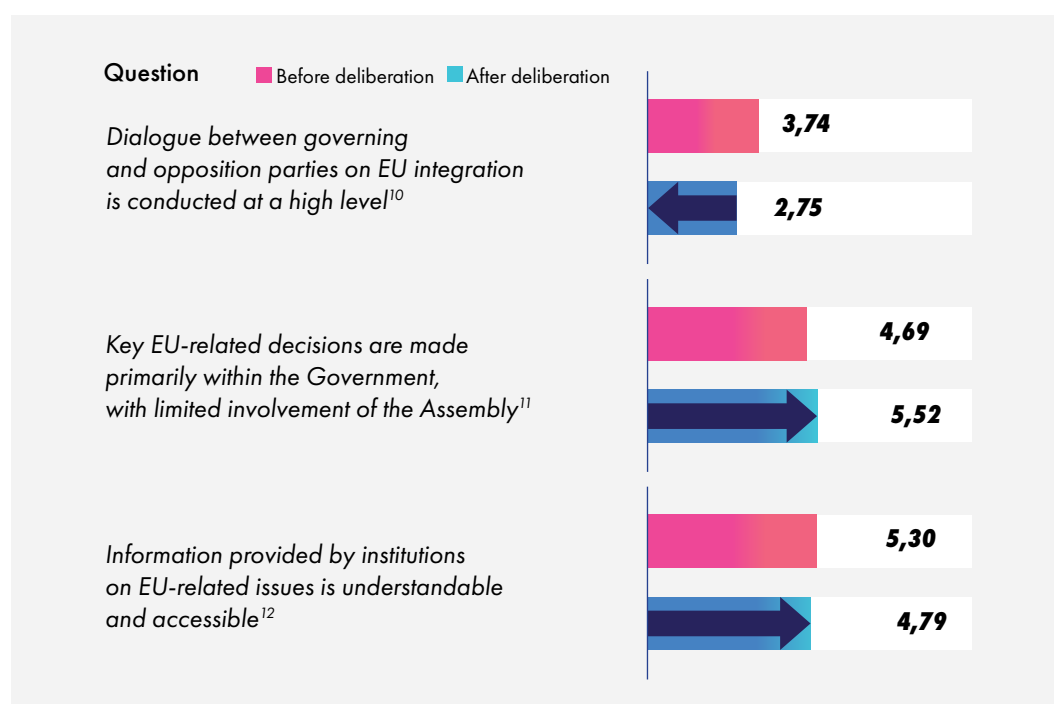
Importantly, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that participation automatically increases trust in the Assembly itself.⁹ Instead, participants became more convinced that opportunities for dialogue, discussion, and engagement have the potential to strengthen trust. This distinction is important because it points to the value citizens place not only on institutional outcomes, but also on the quality and inclusiveness of democratic processes. The findings are particularly relevant in the context of EU accession. Citizens are often informed about reforms after decisions have already been taken, while opportunities for meaningful engagement remain limited. The deliberative process demonstrated that citizens are willing to discuss complex issues related to European integration when provided with balanced information and a structured environment for dialogue. The results also challenge assumptions that public participation slows down or complicates policymaking. Participants consistently associated public hearings and debates with better understanding and stronger trust. This suggests that citizens view participation not as an obstacle to decision-making, but as a means of improving the quality and legitimacy of decisions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that citizen participation should be viewed as a component of democratic governance rather than solely as a communication activity. For institutions involved in the accession process, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement can contribute not only to better-informed citizens, but also to stronger public ownership of reforms and greater confidence in democratic institutions.

9 Warren, M. E. (2018). "Trust and democracy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford University Press.

2.3 Greater Understanding, More Critical Assessment of Institutional Practice

A third group of findings concerns how citizens assess the functioning of the EU accession process in practice. The questionnaire explored the relationship between the Assembly's formal role and its perceived influence over EU-related decision-making, the quality of dialogue between the governing majority and opposition in the Assembly, and the accessibility of institutional information on EU-related issues. The findings below highlight areas in which deliberation was followed by more critical assessments of existing institutional practice.



While the Deliberative Poll increased participants' knowledge of the Assembly and strengthened support for public participation, it also produced another important outcome: participants became more critical in their assessment of how the EU accession process functions in practice. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that increased knowledge does not necessarily lead to more positive views of institutions. Instead, when citizens become better informed about institutional processes and governance arrangements, they may develop a more nuanced and demanding assessment of institutional performance.

10 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.01 level ($t(129) = -3.08$, $p = 0.003$; Cohen's $d_z = -0.27$).

11 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($t(123) = 2.29$, $p = 0.024$; Cohen's $d_z = 0.21$).

12 The paired-samples t-test indicates that this change is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($t(134) = -2.06$, $p = 0.041$; Cohen's $d_z = -0.18$).

One of the clearest examples concerns the political dialogue. Participants expressed lower levels of agreement with the statement that dialogue between governing and opposition parties on EU integration is conducted at a high level. Notably, citizens' opinions prior to the deliberations were already relatively negative. After the deliberations, participants became even more sceptical about the quality of political cooperation on EU-related reforms, with the mean value decreasing from 3.74 to 2.75.

This finding suggests that citizens recognise the importance of political dialogue for the success of the accession process. Throughout the discussions, participants were exposed to different perspectives on the role of institutions, reform processes, and democratic accountability. Rather than reinforcing partisan positions, deliberation appears to have increased awareness of the challenges associated with political polarisation and limited cooperation on issues of strategic national importance.

A similar trend emerged regarding perceptions of institutional influence in decision-making. After the deliberation, participants were more likely to agree that key EU-related decisions are made primarily within the Government, with limited substantive involvement of the Assembly, with the mean value increasing from 4.69 to 5.52 after the debate. This shift is particularly important because one of the central themes of the deliberative process concerned the Assembly's role in shaping, scrutinising, and overseeing accession-related reforms. As participants gained a better understanding of formal institutional responsibilities, they also became more attentive to the distinction between formal powers and actual influence over decision-making processes. The shift suggests greater awareness of the gap between the Assembly's formal role in the accession process and participants' perceptions of its substantive influence over EU related decision-making. Participants also became more critical of the accessibility and clarity of institutional information concerning European integration. Following the deliberation, respondents were less likely to agree that information provided by institutions on EU-related issues is understandable and accessible to citizens, with the mean value decreasing from 5.30 to 4.79 after the deliberations.

At first glance, this finding may appear counterintuitive. However, it may reflect a greater awareness of the complexity of the accession process and the challenges citizens face in navigating information related to reforms, negotiations, and institutional responsibilities. As participants became more familiar with these issues, they may also have become more aware of the limitations of existing communication efforts. Previous research on Deliberative Polling has demonstrated that deliberation can increase knowledge and produce more considered opinions, while broader democratic theory has shown that support for democratic principles can coexist with critical assessments of institutional performance.¹³

13 Luskin, R. C., Fishkin, J. S., & Jowell, R. (2002). "Considered Opinions: Deliberative Polling in Britain." *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(3), 455–487; Norris, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford University Press.

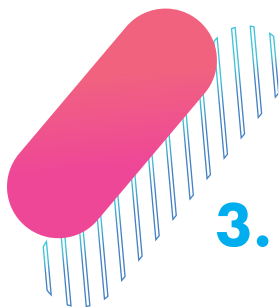


The findings therefore point to a distinction between understanding an institution's formal role and evaluating its performance in practice. Deliberation appears to have made this distinction more visible rather than simply increasing institutional approval.

The findings of this Deliberative Poll add a specific perspective from the democratic governance of EU accession. As participants became more familiar with the Assembly's role, they did not simply evaluate institutional practice more positively. Their assessments became more critical regarding political dialogue, the balance between Government and Assembly in EU-related decision-making, and the accessibility of institutional information. The findings therefore point to a distinction between understanding an institution's formal role and evaluating its performance in practice. Deliberation appears to have made this distinction more visible rather than simply increasing institutional approval.

Taken together, these findings suggest that deliberation encouraged more informed democratic judgement. Participants did not simply become more knowledgeable; they also developed more critical assessments of political dialogue, institutional influence in EU-related decision-making, and the accessibility of information. **In this sense, greater knowledge was accompanied by higher expectations of how democratic institutions should perform in the EU accession process.**





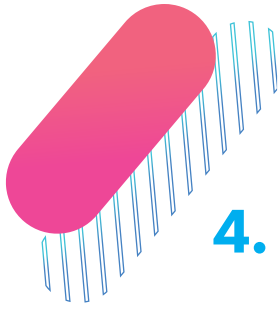
3. Conclusion

The Deliberative Poll demonstrates that citizens are willing and able to engage with complex issues related to North Macedonia's EU accession process when provided with balanced information, opportunities for discussion, and direct interaction with experts and decision-makers. Three broader conclusions emerge from the findings.

- » **Deliberation contributes to civic learning:** Participants demonstrated a stronger understanding of the Assembly's role in the accession process and improved knowledge of institutional mechanisms related to European integration. This suggests that citizens are capable of engaging meaningfully with complex governance issues when information is accessible and opportunities for participation are provided.
- » **Citizens attach considerable importance to participation and public dialogue:** Participants expressed stronger support for public hearings, debates, and other mechanisms that allow citizens to engage with institutions and policymaking processes. The findings suggest that citizens view participation not merely as consultation, but as an important component of democratic governance.
- » **Deliberation encourages more informed democratic judgement:** Participants became more critical of political dialogue, executive dominance in decision-making, and the accessibility of institutional information. Rather than indicating declining trust, these changes suggest that informed citizens develop higher expectations regarding transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight.

Taken together, the findings indicate that strengthening democratic ownership of the EU accession process requires more than communicating reforms to citizens. It requires creating opportunities for citizens to understand, discuss, and engage with the institutions and processes that shape the country's European future. Creating the opportunities for such engagement can strengthen both the democratic legitimacy of the accession process and public ownership of reforms.

While the topic of the poll is specifically connected to the role of the Assembly in the EU accession process, the findings and conclusions go beyond this topic and are valid for public participation and deliberative engagement in the Assembly as democratic practices.



4. Recommendations

Strengthen citizen engagement in the Assembly's work and in the EU accession process

The Assembly should develop a more systematic framework for deliberative citizen participation in the EU accession process and in its broader work. This could include the use of citizen panels, deliberative forums or similar mechanisms for selected major accession-related reforms and issues of significant public interest, with clear procedures for how their findings are considered by relevant parliamentary bodies.

Drawing on comparative parliamentary practice,¹⁴ the Assembly should consider the most appropriate procedural basis for embedding such mechanisms in its regular work, including, where appropriate, through the Rules of Procedure or other relevant acts.

Increase participation and visibility of parliamentary oversight and public debates

The Assembly should communicate its oversight activities more proactively, particularly regarding the monitoring of accession-related reforms. Greater visibility of committee work, public hearings, and scrutiny mechanisms can improve public understanding of the Assembly's role in the accession process.

The responsible working bodies should increase involvement in parliamentary oversight hearings and public debates on subject matters related to EU accession, focusing on issues relevant for everyday life of citizens.

A systematic evaluation of the oversight hearings and public debates would be beneficial for improving these mechanisms for deliberation within the Assembly, as well as developing specific mechanisms for citizens engagement

Strengthen deliberative engagement through the NCEI and KEP

The National Council for European Integration (NCEI), given its cross-party and consultative role, should make greater use of structured deliberative roundtables on key accession-related issues, bringing together MPs from different political parties, citizens, independent experts and civil society representatives. Small-group deliberation could provide a more interactive format for discussing reform priorities and bringing citizen perspectives into parliamentary debate.

The Committee on European Affairs (KEP), within its mandate, should also strengthen opportunities for citizen, civil society and expert engagement in discussions on EU-related legislation and reforms. Similar participatory approaches could be used by other relevant parliamentary working bodies where accession-related reforms fall within their areas of responsibility.

¹⁴ <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-08/deliberative-engagement.pdf>

Promote constructive political dialogue

Given the importance citizens attach to political cooperation on EU-related issues, political actors should strengthen efforts to foster dialogue and consensus-building on strategic reform priorities. The Assembly should provide space for substantive cross-party dialogue on accession-related reforms, particularly through the NCEI, KEP and other relevant parliamentary working bodies. Greater cross-party engagement can contribute to the credibility, continuity and sustainability of the accession process.

Improve communication and citizens engagement on EU-related reforms

Institutions, especially the Ministry for European Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Assembly, should provide clearer, more accessible information on reforms, accession commitments, and decision-making processes. Public communication should focus not only on outcomes, but also on explaining how decisions are made, which institutions are involved, and how reforms affect citizens' daily lives.

More systematic approaches to citizen participation, including deliberative forums and public consultations should be explored, and mechanisms that allow citizens to contribute to discussions on major reform priorities throughout the accession process developed.

