



## **PLEDGE – Politics of Grievance and Democratic Governance**

PLEDGE – Politics of Grievance and Democratic Governance is a research project funded by the European Commission under Horizon Europe, answering to call topic [HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01-04 - The emotional politics of democracies](#). The project was officially launched in February 2024 for a period of three years, and focuses on the role of emotions in political protest and democratic engagement in Europe.

### **About PLEDGE**

PLEDGE investigates the emotional dynamics of political protest in the context of multiple, overlapping crises that have affected Europe and the world over the past decade, including the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, energy shortages, and the war in Ukraine. The project seeks to understand how emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, hope and anxiety shape political grievances and influence whether political engagement develops in pro-democratic or anti-democratic directions.

A central objective of PLEDGE is to identify the emotional mechanisms that underlie authoritarian preferences, support for extremism or political violence, political cynicism and apathy, as well as constructive forms of democratic participation, solidarity and collective action. By doing so, the project aims to contribute to the strengthening of democratic governance and to counter democratic erosion in Europe.

In addition to producing scientific knowledge, PLEDGE aims to develop emotion-sensitive democratic innovations. These innovations are intended to facilitate constructive expressions of protest, reduce the risk of anti-democratic outcomes, and help restore trust between citizens and democratic institutions.

One of the key challenges addressed within the project is the **normative complexity of distinguishing pro-democratic from anti-democratic expressions of protest**. As democratic erosion can be gradual and context-dependent, defining clear boundaries requires careful theoretical reflection and empirical sensitivity. In addition, analysing emotionally charged political phenomena across different national and crisis contexts presents methodological and comparative challenges.

PLEDGE adopts a multimethod and interdisciplinary research approach, combining political psychology, political science, philosophy, sociology, media and communication studies, and social innovation research. The project analyses how emotions interact with values, beliefs and identities, including through the study of social media communication, electoral campaigns, and different forms of political protest across Europe.

Empirical research focuses on a variety of protest contexts, including environmental protests, populist movements and politically polarised settings linked to current geopolitical conflicts.

Alongside empirical analysis, the project brings together research and practice by co-creating democratic innovations through events, workshops and conferences involving policymakers, civil society organisations, media professionals and academics.

PLEDGE is implemented by a multidisciplinary consortium of 14 partners from 11 countries, coordinated by the University of Helsinki (Finland). The consortium includes universities and organisations from Sweden, Germany, Greece, Poland, Belgium, Spain, Hungary, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

### **VUB in PLEDGE**

The **Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)** participates as a partner through its **Centre for Democratic Futures**. The VUB team contributes expertise on democratic theory and democratic innovation, with a particular focus on how democratic practices can become more responsive to citizens' emotional experiences.

VUB's motivation for participating in PLEDGE stems from its longstanding research agenda on democratic deficits and democratic innovation. As highlighted by the Centre for Democratic Futures, contemporary democratic practices often overlook the emotional dimensions of political participation, despite widespread feelings of anger, anxiety and demoralisation among citizens. Participation in PLEDGE provides an opportunity to **link theoretical research** on democracy **to concrete innovations** that can strengthen democratic functioning

A positive aspect of developing the project has been the **strong interdisciplinary composition of the consortium**, particularly the collaboration with political psychologists and researchers specialising in emotions and protest. This has enriched the analytical framework and opened up new perspectives on how emotions can function not only as risks to democracy, but also as potential democratic resources.

More information on PLEDGE can be found on the project website: <https://pledgeproject.eu>.