



DEMOCRACY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS MEMO

Direct Democracy in EU Countries at a glance: Germany at the bottom of the league

Germany is the only country in the European Union that does not have any instrument of direct democracy in place at national level, and its citizens have never had the possibility to vote on specific issues.

This absolute lack of direct democracy at national level stands against systems of direct democratic practice within the individual federal states ("Länder") and also at local level, where German people can exercise different forms of direct democracy.

The above findings derive from the Direct Democracy Navigator, www.direct-democracy-navigator.org, a database that worldwide categorises these instruments of direct democracy:

A) Initiatives (Citizen initiated and veto-initiatives)

People themselves decide on a given political issue and approve/veto related laws already adopted by parliament

B) Obligatory or mandatory referendums

The law stipulates that bills pertaining to certain issues require popular approval by direct vote

C) Plebiscites

Authorities or a minority within an authority may call a plebiscite to let the people decide on a given issue.

Please note that Democracy International considers Initiatives (A) with low hurdles as the best form of direct democracy as these allow the people to draft and implement proposals for new laws. By contrast, we take a critical view of plebiscites as these often enable representative authorities to bypass the constitutional checks and balances within the democratic system.

Then of course, there are also countries that do not have any instruments of direct democracy at national level (D)

At a glance:

A. EU-countries with Initiatives (citizen-initiated and veto-initiatives - in alphabetical order)

People themselves decide on a given political issue and approve/veto related laws already adopted by parliament

Bulgaria	Croatia	Hungary
Latvia	Lithuania	Slovakia
Italy	Luxembourg	Slovenia
Malta		

B. EU-countries with Obligatory Referendums (in alphabetical order)

The law stipulates that certain issues require popular approval by direct vote

Austria	Denmark	Estonia
France	Ireland	Latvia
Lithuania	Malta	Romania
Slovakia	United Kingdom	

C. EU Countries with Plebiscites (in alphabetical order)

Authorities or a minority within an authority may call a plebiscite to let the people decide on a given issue.

Austria	Bulgaria	Croatia
Denmark	Estonia	Finland
France	Greece	Hungary
Ireland	Italy	Latvia
Lithuania	Luxembourg	Malta
Poland	Portugal	Romania
Slovakia	Slovenia	Spain
Sweden	United Kingdom	

EU-Countries without instruments of Direct Democracy at national level

Belgium	Czech Republic	Cyprus
Germany	Netherlands	

Please Note:

All these countries excepting Germany have in the past held at least one referendum on a specific issue:

- In the Czech Republic people were able to vote about joining the European Union;
- Cyprus voted about the Annan-Plan;
- Belgium approved the monarchy;
- the Netherlands held a referendum on adopting the European Constitution.

When making statements on the above list please bear in mind the following:

- Legal instruments of direct democracy do not generally allow people to decide indiscriminately on any kind of issue. For instance, any tax-related laws and international treaties are excluded from the popular vote.
- Sometimes decisions made by the people are not binding, or require a high turnout (participation-) quorum and/or a special majority quorum in order to gain validity.
- For Initiatives or Veto-Initiatives (A), the initiators may need to overcome hurdles such as high minimum signature requirements for petitions- and/or a limited time period to collect signatures. Some countries like Bulgaria for example are young democracies and judicial states that have yet to foster a democratic political culture. At the same time, democratic rights are enshrined in these countries' national constitutions.

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