Designing Ethical Digital Platforms for Civic Participation

How to Build Social Media that Serves Democracy

Guidelines for Designing Ethical Digital Platforms for Civic Participation in Bucharest

INCA PROJECT

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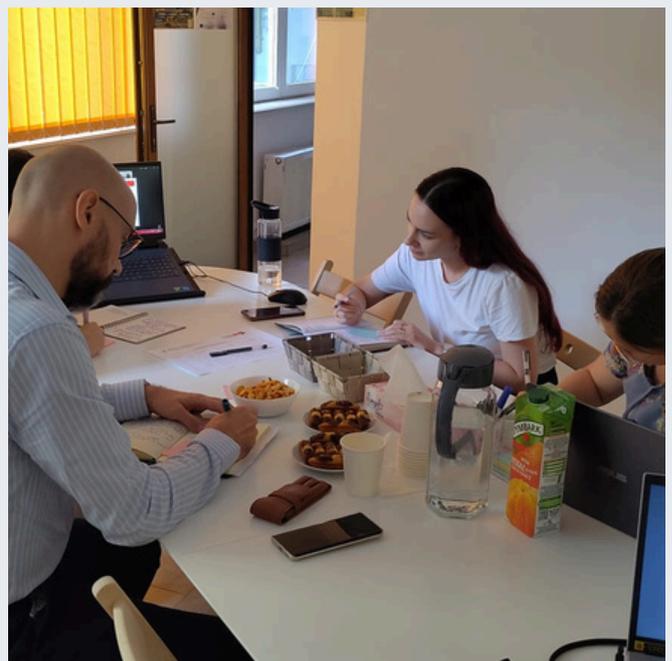March 2026

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Preface

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The present guideline has been developed with the overarching aim of establishing the foundations for a new generation of digital platforms that are more inclusive, transparent, and community oriented. Its primary focus is on reimagining the role of social platforms as instruments that mediate communication and collaboration between citizens, public administrations, service providers, and experts. Within the broader global context of accelerated digitalization, contemporary platforms are increasingly shaped by corporate logics that prioritize profit and data extraction, often at the expense of the public good. This dynamic has contributed to a progressive erosion of community-centred values, leading to diminished trust, limited citizen agency, and widening digital divides. Against this background, the guideline advocates for the creation of an alternative digital platform rooted in the principles of counter-hegemony. Such a platform seeks not merely to replicate existing digital models but to challenge and transform them by ensuring an ethical, safe, and participatory digital environment. Central to this vision is the recognition of users not only as passive consumers of information but as active participants whose voices, perspectives, and rights must be embedded in the design, governance, and operation of the platform.

The guide is designed as a practical and conceptual resource for a wide spectrum of users. While it is particularly relevant for public administrations, which are expected to assume a leading role in implementing its principles, it also addresses civil society organizations, experts, and local communities. By fostering collaboration among these groups, the guideline seeks to promote digital infrastructures that reflect democratic values, empower communities, and enhance collective decision-making in urban governance.

The principles outlined in this guideline have not been developed in isolation but are the product of an extensive collaborative process with local stakeholders in Bucharest. Through a series of consultations, workshops, and focus group discussions, participants identified a set of pressing challenges that hinder the effective functioning of current digital and urban governance practices. In light of these findings, it is also important to recognize that integrating all the diverse needs of local actors into a single platform may not be feasible, as these needs can vary significantly and often require distinct technical solutions. Two possible strategies are therefore recommended: either envisioning a constellation of interconnected applications and platforms coordinated by a central hub that facilitates navigation, or narrowing down the scope of needs to be addressed by the platform's functionalities through continuous dialogue and co-creation with local actors.

Introduction

Methodological approach

These guidelines have been developed within the framework of Horizon Europe INCA project where Bucharest served as one of three pilot cities - alongside Barcelona and Bologna - responsible for testing how participatory and ethical alternatives to dominant digital platforms might be conceived and implemented. Central to this effort was the establishment of the Open Innovation Lab (OIL), a civic experimentation hub designed to foster inclusive urban development through digital co-creation. The OIL aimed not only to explore the societal impacts of platform power on urban life, but also to engage stakeholders in co-developing guidelines for an alternative participatory platform - one that promotes transparency, accountability and democratic governance. A shared engagement strategy was implemented across the three cities, consisting of a sequence of qualitative research activities. These included semi-structured interviews and participatory focus groups with key stakeholders, structured around the quintuple helix framework (public sector, academia, civil society, private sector and intermediary bodies). These processes served both diagnostic and generative functions: diagnosing the influence of major digital platforms (Facebook - in the case of Bucharest) on urban governance and envisioning citizen-driven alternatives rooted in local needs.

Among the most prominent issues raised was the highly decentralized manner in which urban data is collected and stored, which creates fragmentation, reduces accessibility, and limits its effective use for evidence-based decision-making. In addition, stakeholders emphasized the insufficient communication of information concerning urban regeneration projects, which restricts public awareness and limits opportunities for meaningful community input. This lack of transparency was seen as a significant barrier to building trust between citizens and public authorities. Equally critical was the recognition of a limited institutional capacity to foster and sustain active citizen engagement in decision-making processes related to urban development. This gap not only reduces the inclusivity of urban governance but also undermines efforts to ensure that regeneration initiatives respond to the lived realities and priorities of residents.

By integrating these identified needs and challenges into the formulation of its guiding principles, the Open Innovation Lab has ensured that the proposed guidelines directly addresses the specific governance and participatory deficits of Bucharest, while also serving as a potential model for other urban contexts facing similar constraints. The subsequent section will outline the findings of this procedure, with a particular emphasis on the conceptual framework that has been derived to establish an alternative platform through a collaborative development process.

From Blueprint to Practice

A Roadmap for Platform Development

The resulting guidelines include a roadmap that indicates the main steps in the co-creation process for the alternative civic participation platform, as well as the groups of ethical principles to be considered and their implications for the platform's characteristics and functionality during the various stages. It is important to note that this roadmap should not be viewed as a fixed, linear process, but rather as an iterative process in which feedback from various stakeholders is considered and implemented at each stage. Similarly, the graphic representation of the groups of principles for each step below is intended to guide the process and simplify their application. However, it should not be understood as a fixed and immutable scheme, but rather as a tested and validated framework.

- **Contextual analysis and stakeholder engagement:** Map the broader social, cultural and technological context. Engage with a range of stakeholders to understand their needs and expectations, and their potential role in developing the platform.

- **Platform purposes and functionality discussion:** Facilitate collaborative discussions to define the platform's core mission, values and functions. Clarify what the platform should do, for whom, and why.

- **Governance and platform design discussion:** Discuss core components such as platform governance, data use policies, accessibility, and the ethical principles that will guide the platform.

- **Platform sustainability:** Address long-term viability, including funding, maintenance, community ownership and adaptability over time. Plan for resilience and continuous engagement.

- **Integration and final shape:** Synthesise insights and decisions into a coherent system. Translate collaborative contributions into practical design and implementation strategies for the platform.

Figure 1: Guiding principles groups to be following during the roadmap.

Stakeholder engagement and co-design

Involving stakeholders from the outset of the platform's development process is essential to ensuring that its structure and features accurately reflect the real needs and expectations of the community it serves. This engagement is facilitated through a combination of participatory methods, including focus groups, public workshops, and surveys. Special attention is given to reaching underrepresented and marginalized groups—such as youth, minorities, low-income residents, and the elderly—through targeted outreach strategies designed to remove barriers to participation. By embedding inclusive practices from the beginning, the platform fosters a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Furthermore, continuous feedback mechanisms are integrated into the platform's operation, enabling users to regularly contribute suggestions and voice concerns. These ongoing feedback loops not only improve platform functionality over time, but also strengthen community trust, foster a sense of ownership, and encourage sustained civic engagement.

Early and on-going involvement

Engaging stakeholders from outset of the design process is essential to ensure the platform reflects community needs and values. Methods such as focus groups, workshops, and surveys play a critical role in shaping development, fostering public trust, and encouraging future adoption and sustained use of the platform.

Inclusion of underrepresented voices

To uphold the platform's commitment to inclusivity, it is essential to actively engage marginalised groups - such as youth, minority communities, low-income populations, and the elderly - through targeted outreach initiatives. These groups are often underrepresented in urban development processes, making it crucial to inform them about the platform and ensure equitable access to its features and services.

Feedback loops

Establishing continuous feedback mechanisms is essential to ensure that community members can actively contribute suggestions and improvements throughout the platform's development and implementation. These processes enhance user engagement, foster a sense of collective ownership, and build trust in the platform's information and services.

Content creation and moderation

To ensure fairness, contextual understanding, and alignment with democratic principles, the platform adopts a hybrid content moderation model that combines automated (AI-driven) systems with human oversight. This approach allows for both efficiency and nuance in handling user-generated content. Human moderators are selected based on demonstrated commitment to the platform's values and are trained to apply community-informed standards with care and consistency. These standards are established through collaborative sessions with community members, ensuring they reflect shared values and cultural context. To maintain transparency and user trust, the platform incorporated a clear and accessible appeal mechanism, allowing users to challenge moderation decisions. Oversight from an independent ethics committee and user representative groups ensures accountability throughout the process. Moreover, the platform integrates proactive measures to safeguard users - particularly those from vulnerable or marginalized backgrounds - against online harm, including hate speech, disinformation, and harassment. These measures contribute to a secure and inclusive digital environment that supports constructive dialogue and civic engagement.

Hybrid moderation model

Based on research and consultations with local stakeholders, the implementation of a hybrid moderation model approach was identified as necessary. This model combines automated moderation using AI with human oversight to ensure fairness, contextual sensitivity, and accuracy. Human moderators will be selected based on their willingness to engage, and will undergo training and evaluation to ensure alignment with the platform's values and content guidelines.

Community standards

It is necessary to establish a content guideline. The development of content guidelines requires collaborative sessions with community members. This approach ensures that the standards are grounded in shared values and reflect the social and cultural context of the platform. These collaboratively developed norms will guide moderators in making consistent and respectful decisions regarding content management.

Appeal and review mechanisms

To uphold fairness and accountability, the platform must include clear procedures that allow users to challenge moderation decisions. Oversight of these appeals should be ensured by the Ethics Committee or designated user groups. In this context, civil society plays a crucial role as an independent observer, helping to safeguard the platform's ethical standards and having the right to submit formal complaints to the Ethics Committee regarding any concerns related to content or moderation practices.

Protection against harm

·Safeguarding users - particularly those from vulnerable groups - requires proactive measures to prevent hate speech, disinformation, and online harassment. The platform needs to be committed to fostering a secure and inclusive digital environment accessible to all. To achieve this, moderators must be properly trained to uphold users' rights and ensure digital safety. Additionally, from the moment of registration, users should be clearly informed about the platform's core principles, which emphasize mutual respect and the protection of individual rights within the digital community.

Platform content key words:

INCLUSIVITY

96,6% of respondents think that the platform should ensure accessibility in content creation and reception.

MODERATION

90% of respondents think content should be moderated mainly to prevent misinformation, hate speech and to respect diversity.
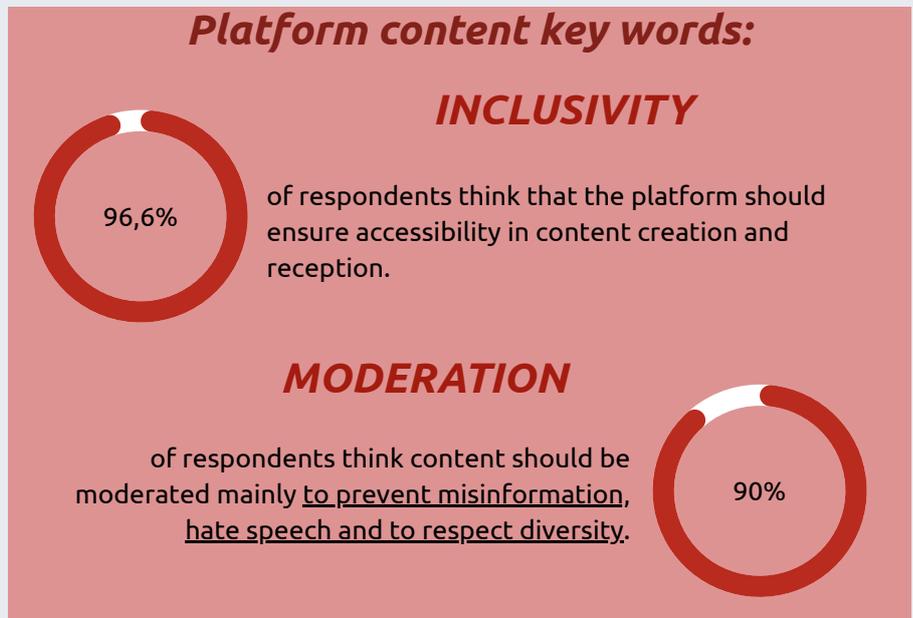
Figure 2: Responses collected through the questionnaire "Rethinking Social Platforms: Co-creating an Ethical Alternative to Facebook in Bucharest", 2025.

Platform accessibility and usability

To foster equitable participation, the platform must adhere to inclusive design principles that prioritize accessibility, usability, and multilingual support. In addition, the interface should be intuitive and user-friendly, accommodating users with varying levels of digital literacy and technical skills. Multilingual functionality is essential to engaging diverse communities, particularly in urban contexts where residents may speak multiple languages. Moreover, platform features should be designed to enhance the discoverability, and accessibility of information, such as searchables content libraries, filter options, and customizable interfaces. These tools help bridge digital divides, reduce barriers to engagement, and enable broader, more inclusive participation in civic and community processes.

Inclusive design

The platform will be developed to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities and compatibility across various devices. It will adhere to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), promoting equal access and usability for all users.

Multilingual support

The platform will provide multilingual access, reflecting the linguistic diversity of its user base, including foreign residents. Language selection will be guided by the most recent census data. Additionally, AI-based translation tools will be integrated to facilitate real-time content accessibility in multiple languages.

User-centric features

The platform will prioritize intuitive design by incorporating clear navigation, accessible reporting tools, and seamless integration with commonly used digital services. These features aim to support active participation, particularly from users without technical expertise.

Content accessibility

The platform will facilitate the wide dissemination, discoverability, and translation of community-generated content. These features are intended to ensure that information can be easily accessed, understood, and shared by diverse user groups.

Supporting democratic participation

The platform should incorporate a suite of digital tools that actively promote meaningful civic engagement and democratic participation. Core functionalities such as participatory budgeting, local debate forums, and citizen journalism empower residents to contribute directly to decision-making processes, express diverse perspectives, and share information that reflects their lived experiences. These tools not only enhance civic literacy but also foster a sense of agency and belonging among community members. To safeguard the quality and balance of discourse, the platform must also integrate algorithmic strategies specifically designed to counteract polarization and reduce the formation of echo chambers. Furthermore, embedding fact-checking mechanisms and clearly labeling verified information contributes to the platform's overall trustworthiness, helping users distinguish between credible content and misinformation. Equally important is the platform's focus on local relevance. By anchoring engagement in the community's daily realities, the platform becomes a meaningful tool for collective problem-solving and grassroots innovation.

Civic functionality

The platform should incorporate digital tools that support democratic engagement, such as public consultation modules, participatory budgeting mechanisms, spaces for local debates, and citizens journalism features. These elements are essential for fostering inclusive dialogue and encouraging active civic participation in local governance.

Counter polarization

The platform will be designed to mitigate the formation of echo chambers by using algorithms that promote diverse perspectives and encourage respectful, constructive dialogue. This approach aims to reduce content silos and foster a more inclusive and balanced digital public space.

Information integrity

The platform will prioritize the visibility of verified content and incorporate fact-checking mechanisms to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information. These measures aim to foster a trustworthy digital environment and reduce the spread of misinformation.

Local relevance

The platform will emphasize locally significant issues, events, and civic initiatives to ensure that community engagement is rooted in the everyday realities and needs of its users. This approach strengthens the connection between digital participation and tangible urban life.

Governance and decision-making

The ownership and leadership of the platform should reside primarily with public institutions - such as municipal authorities, regional development agencies, or other relevant state entities - to ensure legitimacy, public accountability, and long-term sustainability. However, the governance structure must go beyond institutional oversight by embedding co-governance mechanisms that actively involve civil society organizations, academic institutions, and private-sector partners. This multi-stakeholder approach fosters transparency, distributes responsibilities fairly, and enhances collective decision-making. To further strengthen democratic accountability, the platform should implement transparent and participatory governance processes, to build public trust and engagement. A crucial element in upholding the platform's ethical standards and core values is the establishment of an independent Ethics Committee, that will provide oversight on issues such as data use, content moderation, and institutional partnerships. Its role is to ensure that the platform remains aligned with its mission of equity, integrity, and public interest.

Public ownership

To guarantee the platform's reliability and long-term accountability, both its development and ownership should remain under the authority of public institutions - such as state bodies, municipal governments, inter-municipal development associations, or regional development agencies - depending on the governance structure of each city or metropolitan area.

Multi-stakeholder governance

The platform's governance must be inclusive, ensuring active participation from all relevant stakeholders. While the initiating public institution will take a leading role in coordination and oversight, other public bodies, civil society actors, and private sector representatives will engage collaboratively in both the development and operational phase. This co-governance model will be formalized through a jointly approved governance framework that outlines member selection procedures - transparent and open to the wider community - their responsibilities, and fixed terms of participation, thereby promoting accountability, transparency, and institutional integrity.

Public oversight

To safeguard the public interest throughout the platform's development and operation, transparent decision-making and moderation processes must be established, including open access to governance records and deliberations. Civil society will serve a key oversight role, participating in decision-making processes, accessing relevant information, and identifying potential issues or risks that could impact the platform's purpose and effectiveness.

Democratic representation

To promote democratic legitimacy, the platform's governance structure should incorporate participatory elections and a system of rotating seats for key positions. This approach encourages broad community involvement and fosters trust by ensuring that representatives are chosen through transparent, public voting processes. Candidates will present their visions, and selection will be based on community votes, reinforcing accountability and inclusivity in governance.

Ethics Committee

An inclusive and independent ethics committee should be established to oversee the platform's adherence to core values, including content moderation, data governance, and partnership ethics. Comprising representatives from public institutions, civil society, the private sector, and professional bodies, the committee will be elected based on citizen inputs. Its mandate and responsibilities will be defined by the platform's governance framework to ensure transparency, accountability, and ethical integrity.
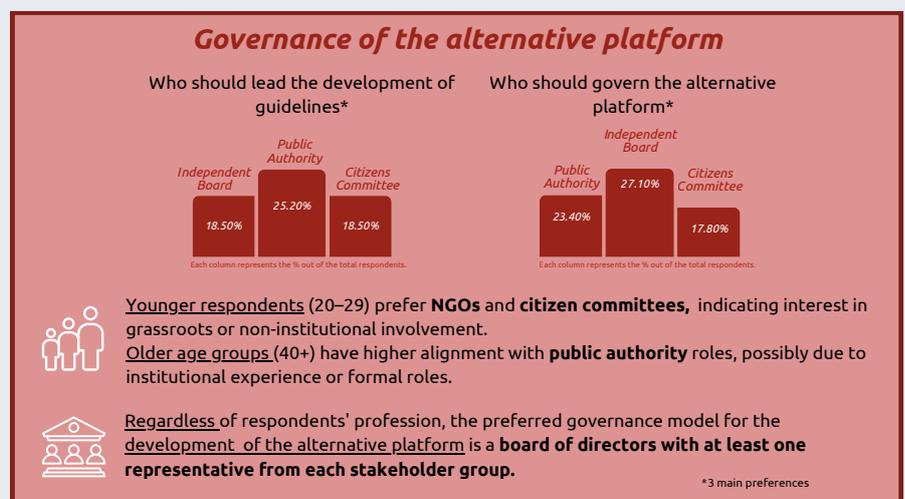
Governance of the alternative platform

Who should lead the development of guidelines*

Independent Board — 18.50%
Public Authority — 25.20%
Citizens Committee — 18.50%

Each column represents the % out of the total respondents.

Who should govern the alternative platform*

Public Authority — 23.40%
Independent Board — 27.10%
Citizens Committee — 17.80%

Each column represents the % out of the total respondents.

Younger respondents (20–29) prefer **NGOs** and **citizen committees,** indicating interest in grassroots or non-institutional involvement.
Older age groups (40+) have higher alignment with **public authority** roles, possibly due to institutional experience or formal roles.

Regardless of respondents' profession, the preferred governance model for the development of the alternative platform is a **board of directors with at least one representative from each stakeholder group.**

*3 main preferences

Figure 3: Responses collected through the questionnaire "Rethinking Social Platforms: Co-creating an Ethical Alternative to Facebook in Bucharest", 2025.

Data Governance and privacy

The platform must adopt a privacy-first approach grounded in the principle of data minimalism. This means collecting only the essential data required for functionality, while explicitly avoiding invasive tracking practices, behavioural profiling, or unnecessary data retention. Such restraint not only protects users from potential misuse but also reinforces ethical standards in digital governance. Transparency is a fundamental requirement in his framework. All data collection and usage practices should be clearly communicated to users through accessible, up-to-date policies. Crucially, user consent should be at the center of all data-sharing processes. The platform must implement mechanisms for users to grant or withdraw consent regarding third-party access to their data, with no default opt-ins. Additionally, to guarantee digital autonomy, users should be granted the unconditional right to delete their personal data - including both content and metadata - at any time.

Data minimalism

The platform will adhere to a principle of data minimalism, collecting only essential personal information required at registration, along with activity and demographic data necessary for platform functionality. Geolocation data will not be used. This approach aims to protect user privacy by avoiding intrusive tracking practices and preventing the creation of misleading or unnecessary user profiles.

Transparent data policy

The platform will include a dedicated section clearly outlining all data collection and usage policies related to its operations. This ensures that users have continuous and easy access to relevant information, beyond the initial registration phase. Additionally, users will be notified promptly of any updates or changes to these policies, supporting transparency and informed consent.

Consent-driven sharing

The platform will implement clear mechanisms to obtain user consent before any personal data is shared with third parties. Without explicit permissions, no user data may be transferred to external entities, whether physical or digital. This ensures that users maintain full control over how their information is used beyond the platform.

Right to be forgotten

The platform will incorporate a feature that enables users to permanently delete their personal data at any time. This includes not only users-generated content but also associated metadata. By doing so, the platform ensures that individuals retain full control over their digital footprint and personal information.

Ethical and sustainable funding models

To maintain the platform's independence, credibility, and alignment with its core public interest values, funding strategies must prioritise partnerships with public institutions and ethical non-profit organizations. This approach avoids reliance on commercial advertising or corporate sponsors whose business practices may conflict with the platform's commitment to data protection, inclusivity, and democratic participation. A strict ethical screening process should be in place to ensure that no funding is accepted from entities associated with disinformation, surveillance capitalism, or exploitative technologies. Preserving the platform's integrity also involves rejecting revenue streams that compromise user experience, such as intrusive or manipulative advertising models. Financial transparency is a key pillar of trust and democratic accountability. The platform should publish regular and detailed reports on funding sources, expenditure, and financial partnerships, allowing users and stakeholders to fully understand and evaluate the financial ecosystem supporting the platform. To further enhance sustainability without compromising ethical standards, the platform should explore diverse alternative funding strategies.

Public/ non-profit funding first

The platform should prioritize financial support from public institutions and ethical non-profit organizations, rather than relying on corporate advertising. To maintain user trust and a positive experience, intrusive advertising should be minimized or avoided altogether.

Transparent financial practices

To foster user trust and ensure accountability, the platform should openly disclose all sources of funding, financial partnerships, and expenditures. This transparency is essential for maintaining the integrity of the platform and its operations.

Ethical guiding principle

97% of respondents support creating an **ethics committee** to ensure ethical compliance during the alternative platform development and operation
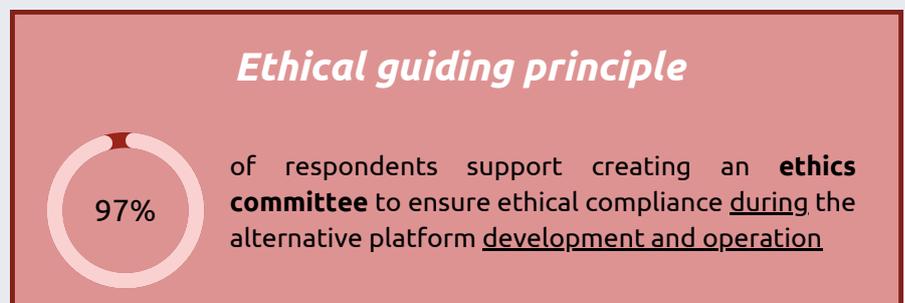
Figure 6: Responses collected through the questionnaire "Rethinking Social Platforms: Co-creating an Ethical Alternative to Facebook in Bucharest", 2025.

Avoid ethical compromises

The platform must refrain from accepting funding from entities whose activities conflict with its core values - such as those involved in data misuse, misinformation, or unethical practices. This approach safeguards the platform's integrity and aligns its operations with ethical standards.

Explore alternative revenue

To preserve the platform's independence and sustainability, alternative funding strategies should be considered. These may include voluntary user contributions, tiered access models, or financial support from municipal institutions. Additionally, the platform may offer paid services to professionals in urban development and related fields - such as access to survey data or promotional support - provided their initiatives align with the public interest and contribute positively to the community.
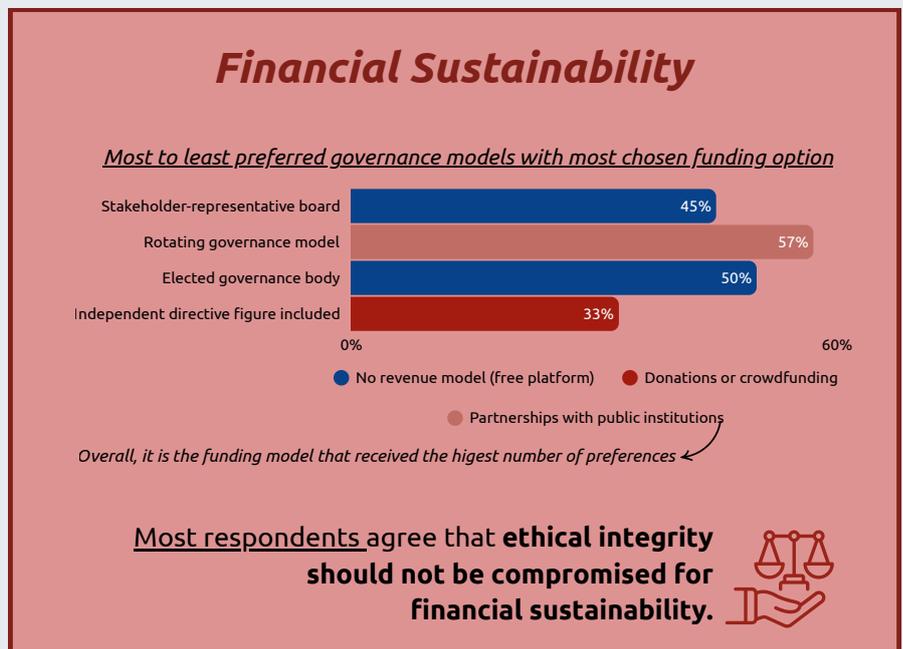

Figure 7: Responses collected through the questionnaire "Rethinking Social Platforms: Co-creating an Ethical Alternative to Facebook in Bucharest", 2025.

Monitoring, evaluation and iteration

To ensure that the platform consistently upholds its foundational values, a system of continuous assessment must be embedded within its governance and operational structure. This includes regular evaluations to monitor the platform's impact on community engagement, equitable access, and the protection of user rights. Transparency is essential for building and maintaining trust. Therefore, the platform should publish accessible performance metrics, including user activity, content moderation outcomes, and decision-making processes. These metrics must be presented in a clear and understandable format, enabling both the general public and institutional partners to monitor the platform's functioning and outcomes. In addition, community audits should be conducted at regular intervals, involving both users and independent observers. These participatory reviews allow stakeholders to assess the platform's alignment with its ethical commitments, identify emerging concerns, and propose improvements. The audit process itself should be inclusive, representative, and open to scrutiny. Crucially, the platform must remain flexible and adaptive. By establishing iterative feedback loops, the platform ensures that user voices play a central role not only in content creation but also in shaping the platform's future direction. This approach reinforces accountability and ensures that the platform remains relevant, resilient, and genuinely responsive to the needs of the communities it serves.

On-going assessment

The platform will undergo regular evaluations to monitor its performance in key areas such as ethical standards, inclusivity, and democratic participation. These assessments will help ensure continuous improvement and alignment with the platform's core values.

Transparent metrics

The platform will publish regular reports detailing user engagement, moderation decisions, and governance procedures. This transparency will enhance accountability and foster trust among all stakeholders.

Community audits

The platform will periodically engage users and independent reviewers in evaluating its ethical standards and overall integrity. These audits aim to ensure transparency, reinforce public trust, and promote continuous accountability.

Flexible development

The platform will adopt an adaptive approach, regularly updating its features and governance rules in response to user feedback and the evolving needs of the community. This ensures long-term relevance and responsiveness to societal change.

Knowledge and limitations

The guidelines presented here are grounded in the recognition that democratic digital infrastructures require institutional redesign rather than incremental technical adjusments. Central to this perspective is the premise that ownership and governance strcutures fundamentally shape communication power. Control over platform architecture determines how visibility is allocated, how data is collected and used, how norms are enforced, and whose interests are prioritised. Accordingly, social media systems that aim to serve democracy must embed principles of co-ownership, shared responsibility, and public accountability into their foundational design.

The application of these guidelines must nevertheless be understood within certain limitations. Their development has been informed by a specific socio-political and regulatory environment, and contextual variation across jurisdictions may influence feasibility and implementation pathways. Institutional capacity, civic culture, technological infrastructure, and levels of public trust differ significantly between settings. requiring adaptive translation rather than direct replication.

These limitations do not undermine the validity of the guidelines, rather, they highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity, iterative evaluation, and institutional reflexivity. Building social media systems that serve democracy requires continuous adaptation, structural accountability, and sustained commitment to redistributing power within digital environments.

The development of these guidelines was made possible through the sustained engagement, expertise, and critical reflection of a diverse range of local stakeholders. Public officials, civil society representatives, academic contributors, technology practitioners, and community members provided essential insights into the practical challenges and normative expectations surrounding digital governance. Their contributions extended beyond consultation, shaping the conceptual orientation, governance principles, and operational recommendations embedded in this framework. The willingness of these actors to engage in dialogue, share institutional experiences, and critically assess existing platform dependencies significantly strengthened the relevance, feasibility, and democratic grounding of the proposed guidelines.

INCREASE
CORPORATE POLITICAL
RESPONSIBILITY AND
ACCOUNTABILITY

INCA

2026

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THE INCA GUIDELINES HELP CITIES RECLAIM DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE, OFFERING PRACTICAL PATHWAYS TOWARD MORE ETHICAL, TRANSPARENT AND CITIZEN-CENTRED PLATFORM ECONOMIES.

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