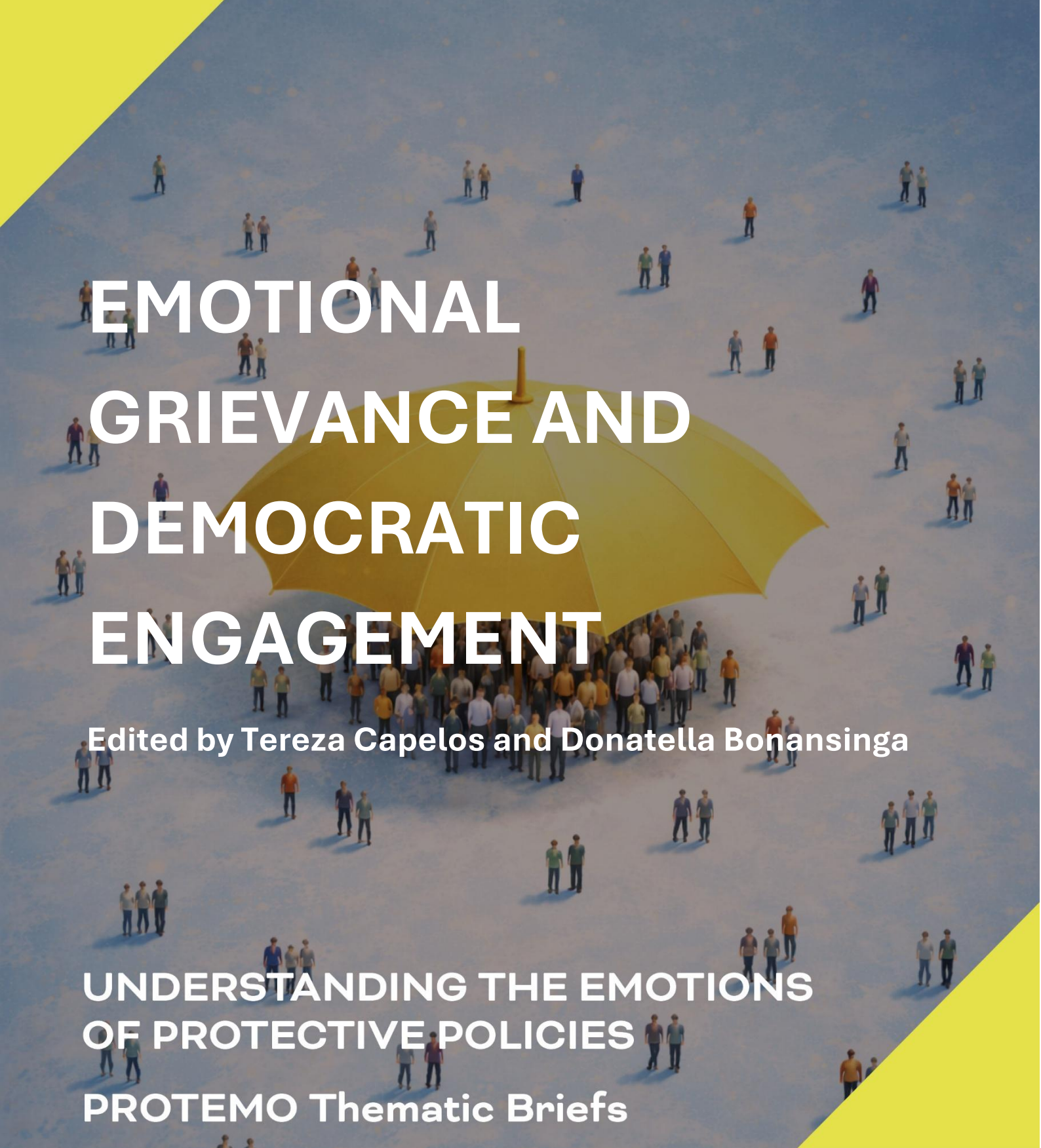




EMOTIONAL GRIEVANCE AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

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UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONS
OF PROTECTIVE POLICIES
PROTEMO Thematic Briefs



This policy brief draws on discussions and insights from a stakeholder workshop held on April 13th, 2026, at King's College London.



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Key Findings

- *Democratic engagement is increasingly shaped by emotional dynamics such as frustration, fear, resentment, insecurity and alienation, rather than by policy disagreement alone.*
- *Feelings of recognition, having a voice, and belonging strongly influence whether citizens participate in democratic life, disengage from it, or become receptive to polarising and anti-democratic narratives and actors.*
- *Experiences of deprivation can generate shame, powerlessness, and frustration, which may be redirected into grievance politics through narratives of intergroup competition and blame.*
- *Distrust in institutions is reinforced by everyday experiences of inadequate public services, political and emotional unresponsiveness, and perceptions that meaningful change is no longer possible.*
- *Emotional exhaustion linked to overlapping “polycrises” contributes to political withdrawal and disengagement, while digital environments can amplify hostility, negativity and social fragmentation.*
- *Far-right narratives provide affective belonging through narratives of shared insecurity, identity and grievance, making people feel seen, vindicated, protected, and part of a larger ‘we’.*
- *Contemporary political institutions often struggle to engage citizens emotionally, relying on technocratic and rationalising forms of communication that feel distant from lived experience.*
- *Civil society actors can play a vital democratic role by creating spaces of recognition, meaningful contact, shared belonging, and practical agency.*
- *Building democratic resilience requires more than countering polarisation. It requires emotionally responsive forms of engagement that acknowledge grievance without allowing it to be captured by resentful antagonistic, exclusionary, or authoritarian narratives.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, democratic politics is increasingly shaped by the emotional force of grievance, mistrust, insecurity, and polarisation (Capelos et al. 2022). These are not simply by-products of political disagreement or policy dissatisfaction. They shape how citizens interpret institutions, how they assess responsiveness, legitimacy and fairness, and whether they move towards participation, withdrawal, protest, or resentful antagonism (Capelos et al. 2024). Emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, resentment, and alienation are now central to the ways in which political identities are formed and experienced, shaping the relationship between citizens, communities, and institutions (Wenzelburger, Carbone et al. 2023).

This thematic brief examines how these emotional dynamics shape democratic engagement and public trust, with particular attention to the role of civil society actors. Its central concern is on one hand how grievance emerges, and on the other how it can be engaged constructively before it hardens into distrust, polarisation, or anti-democratic mobilisation. The task for civil society is not to suppress grievance, but to create conditions in which emotional experiences can be acknowledged, interpreted and redirected towards dialogue, agency and democratic participation.

This brief combines insights generated during a stakeholder workshop with emerging findings from the Horizon Europe projects PROTEMO and PLEDGE, which examine the emotional dynamics of protective policies, grievance politics, democratic engagement and public trust (Capelos et al. 2022).

The stakeholder workshop was held on April 13th, 2026, at King's College London. The workshop brought together researchers from the Horizon Europe projects PROTEMO and PLEDGE, alongside participants from think tanks, local councils, civil society organisations and policy-facing bodies across the UK. Participants were invited because of their

practical and research-based expertise in democratic engagement, political trust, inequality, institutional reforms, social cohesion, community resilience and democratic innovation. The event was designed as a space for dialogue between researchers and practitioners working directly with communities experiencing political disaffection and democratic strain.

The workshop explored a central contemporary democratic challenge: politics is shaped not only by what citizens *think* about policies and institutions, but also by how they *feel* in relation to them. Feelings of recognition or neglect, protection or abandonment, belonging or displacement, increasingly mediate democratic engagement and political behaviour. The discussion therefore focused on the emotional mechanisms operating between individuals, groups and institutions, and to how these mechanisms can either deepen resentful antagonism or create opportunities for constructive engagement.

The workshop was organised around two moderated sessions. The first focused on the emotional dynamics of grievance and political disengagement, examining how citizens experience mistrust, exclusion, powerlessness, shame and alienation in different social and political contexts. The second focused on communication and constructive engagement, exploring how civil society actors, institutions and community organizations can respond to grievance in ways that may foster recognition, trust, and agency rather than amplifying resentful antagonism. The recommendations in this brief are grounded in these discussions and are intended to support civil society actors working on awareness-raising, democratic engagement, social cohesion, and community resilience.

2. EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS OF GRIEVANCE & (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

The workshop highlighted that contemporary grievance politics is not driven by one emotion alone. It is shaped by a wider emotional ecology in which shame, frustration, fear, insecurity, resentment, alienation and exhaustion interact. These emotions are not simply private feelings. They become politically consequential when they shape how citizens interpret their position in society, how they judge institutions, and whether they feel that democratic participation remains meaningful (Capelos et al. 2024).

Discussions examined (a) barriers to democratic engagement, including distrust in political institutions, perceptions of exclusion and political fatigue; (b) drivers of mobilisation, including protest activity and forms of emotional identification that encourage collective political action; (c) community-level dynamics such as social fragmentation, intergroup tensions, and the role of local institutions in either mitigating or amplifying polarisation. The second moderated session adopted a 'solution-oriented' focus, exploring recommendations on effective communication and engagement strategies to reach disengaged and marginalised communities. This session considered both digital and offline engagement strategies and discussed in-depth practical tools and approaches to reduce polarisation and engage with emotions constructively.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the relationship between **deprivation, shame, and grievance**. Communities experiencing economic and social deprivation often encounter hardship not only as a material disadvantage but also as humiliation, failure and loss of status. Poverty, insecure housing, limited opportunities, and poor access to services can generate feelings of shame, powerlessness and resentment. These feelings may remain internalised, producing withdrawal and low political efficacy. They may also be redirected outward through political narratives that identify other groups as responsible for scarcity,

unfairness, or loss. In this way, inward-facing shame can be transformed into outward-facing grievance (Salmela and von Scheve 2018).

Participants noted that perceived loss and deprivation, whether economic, symbolic or cultural, are increasingly interpreted through narratives of intergroup competition, particularly around migration, national identity, and access to resources. These narratives give emotional direction to hardship. They offer citizens a language through which frustration can be organised, blame can be assigned, and belonging can be reimagined. This is why grievance politics can be so powerful: it connects personal suffering to collective identity and offers emotionally satisfying explanation for complex problems.

The discussion also highlighted the danger of dismissing those drawn to radical or exclusionary narratives as simply irrational, ignorant, or extreme. Such responses can compound the very feelings of shame, misrecognition and contempt that grievance politics feeds on (Capelos et al. 2022). When citizens who feel unseen or looked down upon are further stereotyped as 'far-right supporters' or morally deficient, the emotional distance between them and democratic institutions can widen. This does not mean excusing prejudice or anti-democratic behaviour. It means recognising that democratic engagement requires understanding how grievances are emotionally produced, amplified, and defended.

Powerlessness and frustration are not confined to communities experiencing deprivation. Participants also emphasised how everyday encounters with failing or inaccessible public services such as housing, healthcare, policing, justice, and local government, produce feelings of **rejection** by the state. Citizens may experience institutions as ineffective and indifferent. Over time, this can generate a **sense of inevitability**: the feeling that nothing works, nobody cares, and meaningful change is impossible. This form of democratic exhaustion can lead to withdrawal, cynicism and disengagement (Flinders 2015).

The workshop situated these dynamics in a wider context of overlapping crises. Rising living costs, climate anxiety, social unrest, geopolitical instability and global insecurity create a sense of permanent pressure and limited control. For many citizens, disengagement can be a coping mechanism in response to emotional overload. Switching off the news, avoiding political discussion, or retreating from public debate may reflect exhaustion rather than indifference.

Digital environments intensify many of these dynamics. Participants reflected on how social media often reward negativity, outrage, and polarising content, while reducing opportunities for slower, relational trust-building forms of interaction. In this context, grievance can circulate quickly and become detached from local forms of accountability, deliberation, and repair (Barbera 2020).

Within this emotional landscape, far right and exclusionary narratives can become resonant because they perform two functions at once. First, they simplify complex problems by offering clear explanations and identifiable targets. Second, they provide affective belonging: a sense of *shared* insecurity, shared identity and shared grievance. Their appeal goes beyond what they say, to what they make people feel – seen, vindicated, protected, and part of a larger ‘we’ (Bonansinga 2022).

The discussion also showed that democratic strain is experienced differently across communities. Young people may feel dispossessed of their futures, facing insecure employment, unaffordable housing and climate anxiety while feeling that their concerns are marginalised. Migrant communities may experience fear and anxiety in the face of anti-migrant sentiment, hostile rhetoric and far-right mobilisation. Black British communities may experience persistent dynamics of alienation and unbelonging, shaped by racial inequalities and by assumptions that position them as outsiders within national political discourse.

Overall, the workshop underlined that emotions are central to how citizens interpret political

reality and navigate democratic life. They shape not only voting behaviour or issue positions, but deeper orientations towards trust, belonging, participation and social cohesion. For civil society actors, this means that engagement cannot begin only with information, correction or persuasion. It must begin with understanding the emotional conditions under which people come to politics — or turn away from it.

3. WHY EMOTIONAL RESPONSIVENESS MATTERS FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

A central insight emerging from the workshop was that emotions are no secondary to democratic life. They are integral to how citizens experience politics, evaluate institutions, and decide whether democratic participation feels meaningful. Participants repeatedly emphasised that politics is experienced not only through policies and outcomes, but also through feelings such as recognition, belonging, security, dignity, and having a voice. When citizens feel unheard, unseen, dismissed, disrespected or abandoned, democratic disengagement becomes more likely. Equally, when citizens experience recognition, responsiveness and agency, opportunities emerge for trust-building and constructive engagement (Capelos et al. 2024).

The workshop highlighted that many democratic institutions continue to struggle with recognising emotions as legitimate components of political life. Political communication and policymaking are frequently framed through technocratic and rationalising language that fails to engage with citizens lived experiences, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. Participants noted that institutional communication frequently prioritises information transfer and managerial competence while overlooking emotional conditions under which citizens interpret political messages. As a result, political communication can feel emotionally distant, procedural, and disconnected from everyday life.

At the same time, participants stressed that emotionally responsive engagement should not be confused to emotional manipulation. The challenge is not to instrumentalise emotions for political gain, but to recognise that emotions are inseparable from questions of trust, legitimacy, participation, and social cohesion. Democratic institutions cannot respond effectively to grievance if they treat emotions as irrational disruptions to political life. Emotional responsiveness requires institutions and civil

society actors to engage seriously with how policies and political processes are experienced, interpreted, and felt by different communities.

Participants also reflected on how long-standing assumptions within Western political traditions continue to shape these dynamics. Rationality is often treated as the defining feature of legitimate political judgement, while emotions are associated with irrationality, volatility or weakness. Historically, these assumptions have also been unequal, with emotions projected onto women, racialised groups and other marginalised communities, while authority and expertise are associated with emotional restraint and rational control. These distinctions continue to influence institutional cultures and public discourse today, often narrowing the emotional vocabulary through which democratic concerns can be expressed and recognised.

The discussion further emphasised the risks associated with deepening public cynicism towards politics and institutions. While distrust often emerges from genuine frustrations and disappointing experiences, blanket assumptions that politics is inherently corrupt, uncaring, or incapable of change can become democratically corrosive. Participants stressed that democratic resilience depends on exposing institutional failures as much as on rebuilding citizens' sense that democratic engagement remains worthwhile and capable of producing meaningfully change.

Building democratic resilience therefore requires more than countering misinformation or reducing polarisation. It requires creating emotional conditions that support trust, dialogue, participation, and shared belonging. Participants repeatedly returned to the importance of openness, transparency, listening, responsiveness, and practical action. Citizens are more likely to engage constructively when they feel that institutions and organisations are genuinely attentive to their experiences, concerns and vulnerabilities rather than simply managing public opinion or performing political responsiveness.

Finally, the workshop highlighted the importance of developing more realistic and mature public conversations about democracy itself. Democracies are imperfect systems characterised by compromise, negotiation, policy iteration, and disagreement. Yet contemporary political cultures often encourage expectations of immediate solutions, moral certainty, and total ‘victory’

over political opponents. This can intensify frustration when democratic processes appear slow, contested, or incomplete. Democratic resilience therefore depends as much on institutional reform as on cultivating democratic cultures that are capable of sustaining disagreement, uncertainty, and compromise without collapsing into resentful antagonism or withdrawal.

4. CONCLUSIONS

What can we do? Key recommendations for civil society

1. Treat recognition as a democratic intervention

Civil society actors should create spaces where grievances can be heard without being dismissed or immediately moralised. Listening to and validating people's lived experiences does not mean endorsing all views expressed. It means recognising the emotional reality of grievance and reducing the distance that often turns frustration into resentful antagonism. Recognition is therefore not a soft add-on to engagement; it is a precondition for constructive democratic dialogue.

2. Build contact around shared practice, not abstract consensus

Efforts to reduce polarisation should prioritise meaningful contact across difference, especially through practical activities that allow people to work together on shared concerns. Arts, culture, sport, local campaigns and community projects can build trust by creating relationships around common interests rather than ideological positions. Civil society should focus less on winning over the loudest voices and more on creating repeated, everyday opportunities for cooperation, familiarity and mutual recognition.

3. Reframe grievance without reproducing resentful antagonism

Civil society actors should challenge exclusionary or harmful narratives without replicating their tone. This means avoiding moral superiority, contempt or dismissal, even in disagreement. Negative slogans and polarising claims can be reframed by shifting attention towards constructive alternatives, practical outcomes and shared interests. The aim is not to neutralise disagreement, but to prevent grievance from hardening into blame, humiliation or intergroup hostility.

4. Rebuild offline civic and relational infrastructure

Offline civic spaces remain essential for democratic resilience. Community centres, local forums, libraries, cultural venues, schools, sports clubs and neighbourhood initiatives provide settings where trust can be built through presence, repetition and friendship. These spaces help build solidarity and counter the isolating and amplifying effects of social media, where hostility often travels faster than understanding. Civil society should treat relational infrastructure as democratic infrastructure.

5. Localise complex anxieties and restore agency

Global crises and national conflicts can produce feelings of helplessness and overwhelm. Civil society actors can reduce this distance by grounding emotionally charged issues in tangible local concerns and achievable forms of action. Localising responses helps people move from powerlessness to agency. It also strengthens narratives of shared belonging by showing that diverse communities can work together on practical problems that affect their everyday lives.

6. Support emotionally informed dialogue

Civil society organisations should not treat emotions as disruptions to democratic engagement. Emotional dynamics need to be recognised, named and guided towards constructive outcomes. Facilitated dialogue, community listening, participatory workshops and storytelling can help people express fear, anger, loss or frustration without allowing these emotions to become captured by resentful, antagonistic or exclusionary narratives. The goal is not to remove emotion from politics, but to lean on emotion to make emotional communication more democratic.

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