

TOOLS OF RESISTANCE

***Participatory Theatre
against the Anti-Gender Backlash***
A Toolkit for Universities & NGOs



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* Glossary

TERM	DEFINITION
Anti-Gender Backlash	Discursive and policy attacks against the rights of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and some other multi-marginalized groups (i.e., migrant women).
Oppression	»A person or a community being exploited or blocked from their human rights, including the right to express their own identity.« (TONYC Wildcard Workbook).
Spectactors	An audience member in Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) who moves from observer to actor.
Trauma-informed Facilitation	»This approach involves being mindful of potential triggers and identifying signs of distress. And to foster a supportive environment that addresses the needs of survivors and promotes healing and resilience.« <u>(Behind the Shadows: Light)</u> .
Joker	In TO, the joker has the role of a facilitator who guides the performance, moderates audience interventions, and ensures a safe and inclusive space for participation.
Policy Team	Key stakeholders with institutional influence (e.g. local authorities, university board members, NGO staff working on the topic, student union representatives, etc.). Anybody who has power to implement real progressive change in a given community.

* 1. Introduction: About This Toolkit

This toolkit explores the potential of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) to empower students and communities to fight against anti-gender backlash.

Developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal (Boal, 2000), TO is a global method that uses embodied, participatory theatre to make power structures visible and transform them through collective reflection and action.

This toolkit focuses on Forum Theatre and Legislative Theatre, two key TO formats out of a range of fascinating methodologies. It provides important steps on how to implement these processes in your own context/organization and illustrates them through a concrete case study. It recommends further resources and offers considerations to reflect upon before implementing a participatory theatre process.

The case study presented here was designed and facilitated by Theatre of the Oppressed Vienna (TdU Wien), who implemented both methods in the framework of a university course on anti-gender backlash. Generally, these methods can serve as stand-alone tools for addressing anti-gender backlash. They are adaptable in length, depth, and scope, and can be implemented flexibly in diverse local contexts and communities.



Theatre Against Anti-Gender Backlash

Both Forum and Legislative Theatre offer unique and powerful strategies to resist anti-gender backlash:

- * Forum Theatre is typically used within communities to initiate dialogue, foster critical thinking, and empower participants to rehearse strategies for resisting oppression.
- * Legislative Theatre invites audience members and community stakeholders to co-create and deliberate on policy proposals rooted in lived experience, offering a direct path from personal story to structural change. It directly involves decision-makers and views rule-making and implementation crucial for systemic change.

These formats create participatory spaces where people can reclaim their voices, imagine alternatives, and intervene in the systems and processes that shape their lives.

Who Is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit is designed for those seeking to implement TO-based strategies to address anti-gender backlash in their communities or institutions, including:

- * Activist educators and university staff interested in integrating TO into their institutions and making feminist impact, may it be in open settings, course-setting, organization setting, or in research.
- * Feminist and social justice NGOs working with disadvantaged communities, particularly those not yet politicized or engaged in feminist activism.

The toolkit offers essential insights and tools for planning Forum or Legislative Theatre processes with the help of TO professionals and collects important resources for learning more about TO.

* 2. Forum Theatre: Building Resilience with Feminist Activists

Brief Description	Forum Theatre is a participatory theatre format where scenes of injustice are enacted, paused, and revisited with interventions from the audience. Participants become “spect-actors,” stepping into roles to rehearse strategies for change.
Goal	To explore and resist real-life injustice; build resilience and critical thinking through collective reflection; create dialogue on complex or taboo issues.
Target Audience	Students, youth, feminist activists, civil society and community groups. No acting experience required. Recommended group size: 12–20 participants are ideal for deep group work and scene development. Performance audiences may be from the same or a different community as the actors, depending on the aim of the performance.
Facilitation Team	One to two facilitators trained in Theatre of the Oppressed; ideally “trauma-informed.”
Recommended Duration	Minimum 3 days (5–6 hours/day); adjustable based on objectives and depth of the engagement with the issue at hand you envision.
Scalability	Forum can be implemented in different disciplines, and address different topics (e.g. social sciences). However, as leading this process requires some experience in TO, we want to encourage activist educators to read <i>Games for Actors and Non-Actors</i> (Boal, 2002) and use exercises as embodied practices in their teaching, as a low-level entry to integrating TO in your organization/university.
Preparation Needed	A quiet, open space that allows movement (a rough rule is 5m ² per participant). Chairs, notebooks, and basic materials for drawing or writing can support reflective exercises. We recommend providing snacks and drinks (coffee/tea) as the process can be bodily exhausting. Lunch can be organized as a potluck by participants where everybody brings nice homemade food, as this helps to knit the community together.

Benefits

of Using Forum Theatre Against Anti-Gender Backlash

- * Forum Theatre fosters dialogue and emotional empowerment. It encourages participants to explore resistance through personal and emotional engagement and strengthens individual and collective agency.
- * Forum Theatre reveals everyday impact of backlash. It makes visible how anti-gender narratives show up in daily life — at home, school, work — and how they affect relationships and behaviours.
- * Forum Theatre builds community through participation. It gives space to marginalized voices and brings people together through shared storytelling, strengthening solidarity, and mutual support.
- * Forum Theatre transforms spectators into actors. Audience members try out interventions, practicing ways to challenge injustice in real time. This builds confidence and readiness to act.
- * Forum Theatre exposes internalized oppression. It helps participants unpack how silence, fear, and norms reinforce gender injustice — and imagine different responses.
- * Forum Theatre nurtures grassroots resistance. It empowers communities to resist cultural narratives and take collective action from the bottom up.
- * Forum Theatre supports healing and emotional processing. It creates space to share experiences, name harm, and process trauma collectively.



Case Study: Forum Theatre at University in Salzburg, Budapest, Amsterdam

Local Forum Theatre courses were carried out with students in three cities.

Participants explored personal and political experiences related to gendered power dynamics, including sexual harassment, queerphobia, patriarchal violence, and state discrimination. Each group co-created Forum Theatre plays that were presented in public or semi-public performances. Audience members were invited to reflect on the root causes of these scenarios,

step into the performance, and experiment with strategies for action. To get a more concrete idea of how such a process can look like, you can find a sample course flow below. In order to implement such a process in your organization/university, we recommend to get in contact with TO practitioners. If you want to implement it yourself, make sure to plan an intensive training on Theatre of the Oppressed beforehand.

Sample 3-Day Course Flow

Day 1: Foundations & Trust-Building

The first day focuses on group cohesion and thematic entry points. Through games, movement, and discussion, participants begin connecting with each other and dive into the topic of gender-based discrimination and power.

Sample Activities:

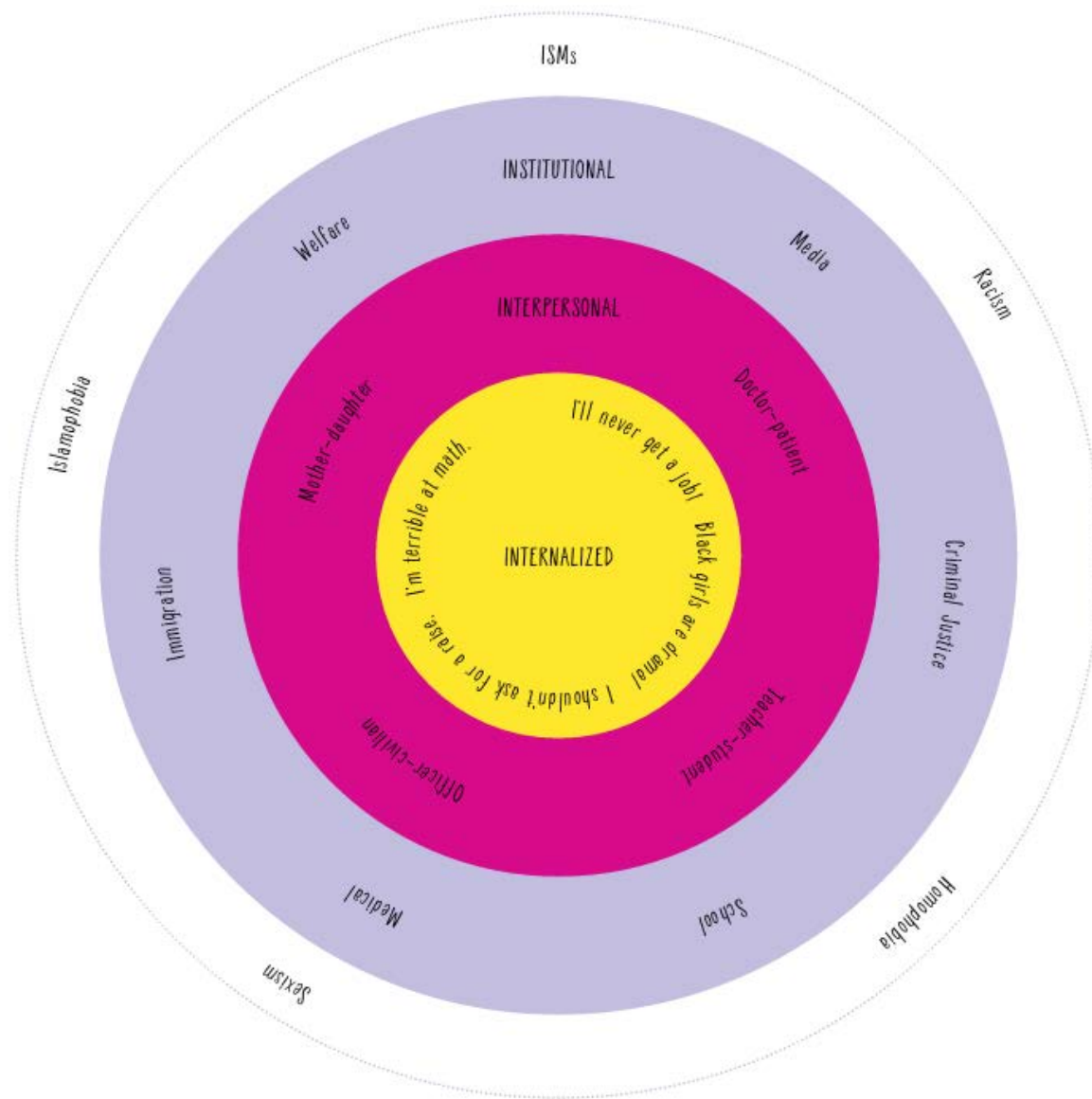
- > **Trust Walk:** Participants walk together in pairs. One person closes their eyes and the other leads them through the room, making a noise that the person should follow with their eyes closed. You can experiment with different distances and changes of direction. Change roles.
- > **Statue Museum:** In pairs, one person shapes the other into a statue representing a theme (e.g. gender equality or backlash) and whispers a fitting word or sentence into the ear of the statue. All the statue makers can look around a museum of statues that has been created. The statues say their sentence aloud when tapped. Change roles.

Day 2: Exploring Oppression & Personal Stories

Participants use creative tools (drawing, journaling, image theatre) to examine personal and collective experiences of oppression. Participants begin crafting their scenes and experimenting with interventions.

Sample Activities:

- **Anti-Oppression Lens** (LeoNimm, Morgan & Rubin, 2022, pp. 168-169, originating from the Center for Racial Justice): This model introduces different layers of power (ideology (isms), institutional, interpersonal, and internalized) to frame participants' experiences. It helps to break down different forms of oppression in order to better analyse the stories that actors are telling. In the workshop, we showed participants this model and let them brainstorm examples for each layer.



- **Song of the Mermaid** (Diamond, 2007): Participants close their eyes and make a sound that expresses a personal feeling from an experience of being discriminated against or silenced. A few chosen sounds are repeated; everyone gravitates towards the one they resonate with most. Groups form around shared emotions and begin reflecting on their stories. From here, they start building a collective Forum Theatre scene.

Day 3: Staging Resistance & Public Engagement

The final day is dedicated to refining the Forum Theatre scenes and performing them in front of an audience.

Sample Activities:

- **Hot Seat:** participants take a seat in the role of the character they are going to perform. The group asks questions about the characters' daily life, preferences, fears, dreams, etc. The participant tries to answer all questions.
- **Use different rehearsing techniques:** Rehearse the scene in slow motion, with only one word, as animals instead of humans, etc., to deepen the understanding of the dynamics and relationships within the scenes.
- **Performance & Reflection:** The group shares their scenes with an invited audience, who are encouraged to intervene and rehearse alternatives. The process ends with a collective debrief and emotional closure.



* 3. *Legislative Theatre: Changing the Laws and the Way We Implement Them*

Brief Description Legislative Theatre (LT) is a method of policy engagement that brings together affected communities and decision-makers to co-create legislative solutions. LT pays attention to systemic change by questioning existing laws and their implementation. The focus is on rules, laws and resources that are missing to tackle a problem. Or, if rules are already existing on paper, we question what we need to really implement and live them.

Goal To identify systemic barriers, co-develop policy or legislative solutions, and involve both citizens and authorities in democratic decision-making. Develop a consciousness in ordinary citizens that they, too, are policy makers.

Target Audience Students, youth, feminist activists, civil society and community groups, groups with a specific experience of oppression, groups with a specific knowledge and experience about a certain policy problem. No acting experience required. Recommended group size: 12–20 participants are ideal for deep group work and scene development.
Invite “policy team” for the performance. Performance audiences may be from the same or a different community as the actors, depending on the aim of the performance.

Facilitation Team At least two facilitators familiar with Theatre of the Oppressed methods and especially LT. Ideally, the team includes also local experts of laws/rules/policies that are (or are not) in place that want to be tackled through the LT event.
You as a university or NGO stakeholder or initiator of an LT project need to calculate resources for your role in the process: You need to invite a policy team and have their contacts, you need to know the law you want to have impact on and provide the LT facilitators with insights and policy knowledge. The LT facilitators will only work as a very special kind of consultant to you in this role.

Recommended Duration Minimum 5 months. Minimum 5 rehearsal days, 5–6 hours/day, though processes can be adapted according to the goals (see detailed timeline below).

Scalability Effective at local levels (e.g. schools, councils, neighbourhoods), with potential to scale to regional or national settings if supported. For instance, to make sustainable change it is recommended to go to the same audience several times to develop deeper solutions and make policy making a continuous process. Alternatively, you can use the same performance and perform it at least 20 times so that with 100 audience each a considerable amount of the affected population by a specific law is reached (Concrete examples can be found on the [People Act website](#)).

Preparation Needed

Staff Allocation:

Assign 1 staff member for logistics (full process, ~80h) to ensure access to resources and infrastructure (e.g. space, equipment, printing, refreshments, accessibility support). Assign 1 staff member for policy engagement (~80h) to connect with stakeholders, research policies, and prepare with LT facilitators (incl. 5h run-through of the [LT Playbook](#)).

Implementation Context:

Decide early whether LT will be part of a course, research group, or community initiative to tailor outreach.

Stakeholder Engagement:

Use university networks to identify and invite key actors (e.g. policy-makers, admin, support services).

Some More Tips

- Decide early whether LT will be part of a course, research group, or community initiative to tailor outreach.
- Use university networks to identify and invite key actors (e.g. policy-makers, admin, support services).
- Use a real-world occasion (e.g. university reform plans) to build momentum.
- Ensure strong research & documentation on existing laws and gaps.
- Provide emotional safety and room for rest, reflection, and emotions during the play-making process.
- Build diverse groups and consider language/cultural dynamics when working with cross-border groups.

DIVIDE PARTICIPANTS INTO GROUPS:

Policy Group:

This group researches existing policies that are fed into the play, gathers relevant data, and prepares policy interventions. They accompany the policy team on performance day. They are also responsible for note-taking and inviting experts on the topic.

Forum Theatre Group:

This group develops and performs the Forum play. They craft characters, practice legislative interventions, and structure the dramaturgy in close coordination with the other teams.

Aesthetics Group:

This group focuses on aesthetic strategies including Newspaper Theatre, abstract staging, non-human character work, and material/prop design. They are responsible for the visual and atmospheric framing of the performance space. (An option if you have many participants, but this group is optional.)

Benefits

of Using Legislative Theatre Against Anti-Gender Backlash

- * LT targets structures by focusing on laws, policies, and institutions.
- * Makes backlash visible and concrete by enacting lived experiences to expose how systemic gender injustice works, especially in issues like sexual harassment.
- * LT engages policymakers directly by inviting them to the play, making the need for policy change more urgent and personal.
- * LT builds collective action and solidarity by uniting diverse groups — activists, students, communities — to push for concrete legal change together.
- * LT tests policy solutions on stage which allows participants to rehearse and refine interventions before proposing them — bridging imagination and implementation.
- * LT challenges anti-gender narratives by showing lived experiences to counter fear-based and misleading narratives, helping audiences see the real impact of injustice.
- * LT creates public pressure for change by turning policymaking into a transparent, participatory event, building accountability and visibility for gender justice demands.



Timeline: What Steps are important to think of?

5 Months Before:

Find a clear aim of the Legislative Theatre process: what exactly do you want to change/implement?

Get in contact with a Legislative Theatre facilitator to plan the process. If you want to implement yourself, make sure to plan an intensive training on Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre beforehand.

Network: who is working on this topic already? Who are important people in power positions to foster change? Start mapping allies and power-holders.

3 Months Before:

Secure venue. Recruit participants and “policy team”. Start PR of the event.

1–3 Weeks Before:

Run 5-day workshop with participants to create and rehearse the play. Have a meeting with the policy team to brief them on the structures and aim of the event.

One Day Before the Event:

General rehearsal, run-through of the whole event, technical check.

Event Day:

- Opening and welcome [15min]:
The audience is greeted and introduced to the evening's format and purpose.
- The play developed by the students is presented [20min].
- Legislative interventions [35min]:
Audience members are invited to step into the performance, suggesting and enacting alternative responses, new rules, or resources on stage. Students from the policy team record all interventions and proposals emerging from the stage and audience.
- Audience members are given the opportunity to write down concrete policy suggestions based on what they observed and discussed [10min].
- The policy team reviews and sorts the proposals, while the audience takes a break [15min].
- The policy team presents each proposal (also shown on a projector screen). Audience gets back into breakout groups to prepare amendments or questions about the top proposals [15min].
- The proposals are opened for discussion among audience members, who can suggest amendments or refinements [15min].
- The audience votes on the final proposals to prioritize actions [10min].
- The event concludes with the policy team sharing concrete commitments and next steps they will take to advance the proposed changes within their institutions or spheres of influence [15min].

3 Days After:

Send out policy report summarizing proposals and commitments to the audience and policy team.

6–8 Weeks After:

Contact policy team and follow up on implementations of their commitments, revise policy report and send out to audience and policy team.

Enacting Safer Spaces at University – A Legislative Theatre on Gender-Based Violence

Take the stage. Change the story. Rewrite the rules.

The event focused on evaluating and enhancing sexual harassment policies within universities. Through engaging performances and interactive discussions, community members and policymakers came together to identify the strengths and shortcomings of current anti-harassment measures. The audience developed actionable solutions to ensure effective enforcement of existing policies and to create safer, more inclusive environments for students, staff, and administrators. The event successfully bridged the gap between performance and policy, advancing efforts to address gender inequality and counteract anti-gender backlash in academic institutions by promoting pro-equality policies.

»I was really caught within the process, felt empowered afterwards, like it's really possible to change something.«

(Reflection statement from a participant).

Goals of the event included:

- Working out an action plan against gender-based violence that will be implemented in the context of universities.
- Finding ways of supporting prevention mechanisms of sexual harassment.
- Implementing new reporting mechanisms that include the perspectives and needs of victims.



* 4. Cross-institutional Cooperation

The case study brought together universities and an NGO working with TO to explore innovative teaching methods and confront anti-gender backlash across Europe. A key component of this collaboration was the combination of theoretical inquiry, participatory theatre-making, and cross-cultural exchange.

While this format proved creative and impactful, it also revealed structural differences between universities and NGOs, raising critical lessons for future collaborations. This section integrates reflections from the team, drawing on practical experience, project design feedback, and participant observations.

Key Lessons & Recommendations

>>> 1. Different Logics, Shared Purpose

Universities and NGOs work under different structures — universities are often hierarchical and bureaucratic; NGOs are horizontal and flexible. A successful partnership must acknowledge these differences and negotiate responsibilities accordingly.

Recommendations:

- Clarify expectations and co-leadership from the beginning.
- Hold regular check-ins to align pedagogical goals and logistics.
- Your contribution as an NGO or university is a key to the success of a TO intervention (e.g., hosting, logistics).

>>> 2. Communication and Organizational Culture

Consider the differences in meeting styles and planning approaches.

Recommendations:

- Balance emotional check-ins (common in TO culture) with time-efficient academic meetings.
- Build a shared meeting culture that respects both NGO and academic norms.

>>> 3. Linking Practice, Theory, and Evaluation

TO interventions can generate deep personal and political insights, but connecting these to broader contexts — whether academic, activist, or policy-related — requires thoughtful framing.

Recommendations:

- Start from practice and let reflection or theory emerge from lived experience.
- Involve TO practitioners in shaping conceptual or strategic discussions.
- Design structured reflection formats that help participants process and connect their experiences.
- Strategic and systematic evaluation of your project paves the way for future improvement and even more successes!

>>> 4. Community Engagement and Equity

Marginalized participants may face barriers you are unaware of, and may require specific support to fully engage in the process.

Recommendations:

- Proactively identify and accommodate special needs of the participants (e.g. financial support, childcare).
- Critically reflect on hierarchy and roles and recognize the community as co-creators. They have the best knowledge about the issues at hand.



* 5. Reflections of the Process

**Embodied learning
= deeper understanding
of oppression and change.**

- Students felt empowered to act collectively.

Intersectionality must be intentional: include queer, migrant, and racialized perspectives in play creation and audience interventions.

Strategies may include:

- Write scenes with intersectional identities.
- Ask the audience to reflect on how different identities impact the characters' experiences and available solutions.
- Ensure marginalized participants lead interventions.
- Tailor policy proposals to specific groups, not just the average participant.
- Logistical support from host (rooms, meals, materials) is essential. This includes:
 - Rooms, keys, technical support, and materials (e.g. printer, workshop supplies).
 - Snacks, drinks, and shared meals to foster group-building and well-being.
 - Outreach support (e.g. flyers, networks, inviting policymakers).
 - A welcoming atmosphere (e.g. welcome dinner, accessible space).
 - A suitable performance venue with audience coordination.

»The process showed me that theatre can communicate complex issues in ways that resonate deeply with people, often more effectively than words alone. This realization changed how I think about art and activism.«

»This course has empowered me to take up more space, especially because it allowed me to practice doing so.«

»It was an extraordinary experience compared to everything else I did at university so far«

- Reflections by our student participants from the process

* 6. On the Horizon: Next Steps

**Thinking about Access & Outreach:
Bringing Theatre of the Oppressed
to Marginalized and Non-Politicized Communities**

A recurring challenge in political education and empowerment work is how to avoid preaching to the converted. For TO to fully realize its emancipatory potential, it must reach communities that are structurally marginalized and not already politically engaged.

Questions to reflect on in your planning process:

- Who has access to this workshop space, and who doesn't?
- Which barriers (language, trust, time, institutional affiliation, trauma, etc.) might keep some people away?
- How can you centre the needs, schedules, and rhythms of the community — rather than your own structure

Possible Approaches:

- As a university/NGO, partner with trusted community organizations already embedded in the daily realities of marginalized groups. Let them co-design or even lead parts of the process.
- Create low-threshold entry points: informal sessions, drop-in formats, food-sharing, music, child care — anything that reduces institutional distance.
- Let TO start where the community is: Don't assume the need for political framing. Begin with emotional or experiential connection, and let the themes emerge organically.
- Use everyday language: Avoid academic or activist jargon in outreach and facilitation.

Future Directions:

- Expanding TO Courses: As a university, you can integrate TO in your regular courses for students.
- Strengthening NGO-University Partnerships: Seek out collaborations with the respective other stakeholders as this benefits the success of your work.

* 7. List of Abbreviations

TO = Theatre of the Oppressed

LT = Legislative Theatre

TdU Wien = Theater der Unterdrückten Wien

PLUS = Paris Lodron University Salzburg

ELTE = Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem
(Eötvös Loránd University Budapest)

UvA = Universiteit van Amsterdam

8. References & Resources

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Legislative Theatre resources:

TdU Wien. (2025). Revised Policy Report of our case study project: here you can see an example of what the results of an LT project can look like.

The People Act (n.d.). www.thepeopleact.org.

People Powered, working on participatory democracy has endorsed LT as one of their key methodologies and developed a playbook with which you can think of your own project: <https://participationplaybook.org/wizard/legislative-theater>; it was also used in developing the case study project above.

* 9. Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer: The contents of this toolkit are the sole responsibility of its authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.

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