Surveillance at Public Gatherings

Insights from the GATHERINGS Living Labs

Public gatherings are increasingly monitored using surveillance technologies. This factsheet presents **insights** from **Living Labs in Austria, Bulgaria, and Greece**.

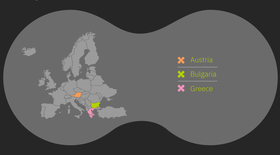
The goal of the project and living labs is to understand how surveillance affects people's behaviour and perceptions of safety and to identify good practices and standards for public space surveillance across Europe.

Methodology at a glance

The GATHERINGS project implemented a **mixed-methods approach** across the **three Living Labs** in Austria, Bulgaria, and Greece. These real-world environments enabled researchers to engage directly with citizens, vulnerable groups, law enforcement agencies (LEAs), event organizers, and other stakeholders.

The goal was to explore diverse perspectives through qualitative and observational methods, while also capturing broader trends via survey data. This multifaceted methodology ensured that both personal experiences and systemic insights were captured.

3 Living Labs:



Methods Used:

- Focus Groups (Citizens, Vulnerable Populations, Professionals)
- Individual Interviews
- Surveys (500–700 participants)
- On-site Observations at Public Gatherings (Concerts, Sports Events, Demonstrations)

Key Findings from the living labs

The cross-country analysis of Austria, Bulgaria, and Greece uncovered shared patterns in how different groups perceive and experience surveillance at public gatherings.

These findings reflect both challenges and emerging practices for more inclusive and effective security.

Citizens & Vulnerable Groups

Insights gathered from diverse citizen groups and individuals from vulnerable communities reveal complex, often ambivalent attitudes towards surveillance at public gatherings:

Low awareness of surveillance

Most participants were unaware of the surveillance measures in place, yet these measures shaped their sense of safety–positively or negatively–depending on context.

Preference for human-led security

Across all locations, participants expressed greater trust in **visible human actors**–such as police or private security–over impersonal technologies.

Context matters

Perceptions of safety actors vary:

- **Sports events:** Law enforcement agencies (LEA's) seen as protectors
- **Demonstrations:** LEA's perceived as threatening
- **Festivals:** Private security personnel are more trusted
  Police partially as a sign of insecure environments

Infrastructure as a silent safety factor

Functional, accessible infrastructure (toilets, shade, water) was seen as a core component of event safety–especially for vulnerable groups.

Bias and mistrust

For vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants, LGBTQ+, disabled individuals), police can be an unpredictable and biased actor towards them. They point out the lack of training as a main concern with private security personnel.

Technology viewed with caution

CCTV was accepted by some as a deterrent and by others as intrusive.

Body cams were appreciated for increasing police accountability.

Drones and AI triggered abstract concerns, particularly regarding unclarity about its potential use.

Community-based practices

Grassroots initiatives like **"Awareness Teams"**–community-led security efforts–were positively viewed, especially by women and LGBTQ+ groups, offering a **non-militarized, peer-based sense of safety**.

Professionals & Security Stakeholders

Technology is a tool-Not the answer

Surveillance professionals agree: technology supports detection but must not replace **human decision-making**. Nuanced judgment is essential.

Economic pressures

- **LEAs** value high-tech systems for public protection, accepting the costs.
- **Event** organizers face financial strain from security requirements and favor **flexible, affordable solutions**, such as security personnel over costly infrastructure.

Training is needed

Police and private security alike need more **training in de-escalation, bias awareness, and use of surveillance tools**.

Police also emphasized the need to improve training and accountability among private security contractors.

Transparency

Both citizens and professionals highlighted the need for **clear, standardized communication** about surveillance—what is in place, who operates it, and why. Over-information, however, can backfire and reduce trust.

Adaptability is Key

Effective surveillance depends heavily on **event type and context**. Spontaneous or unstructured gatherings present major planning and safety challenges, while regular events (e.g., football matches) allow for more tailored strategies.

Preliminary Recommendations from the Living Labs

Prioritise the human factor

- Surveillance technologies should **support**, not replace, human decision-making.
- Human actors bring essential **contextual awareness, ethical judgment**, and the ability to de-escalate sensitive situations.

Foster transparency and trust

- Citizens have the right to know what surveillance tools are in use, by whom, and for what purpose.
- Use **clear, accessible signage** and communication strategies to avoid both confusion and information overload.

Involve citizens in surveillance governance

- Encourage participatory mechanisms where citizens–especially vulnerable groups–can express concerns and **contribute to the design and oversight** of surveillance at public events.
- Empower communities to co-create alternative safety models (e.g., Awareness Teams).

Invest in continuous training

- Strengthen the training of **both police and private security personnel** in areas such as:
  - Anti-bias and diversity awareness
  - Communication and de-escalation
  - Ethical and lawful use of surveillance technologies
- Promote a shift towards a **more transparent, accountable, and community-sensitive security culture**.

Avoid overreliance on technology

- Do not place sole trust in automated systems or AI. These tools lack the capacity to navigate **social nuance, emotional context, and ethical complexity**.
- Balance innovation with **accountability and oversight**, especially in high-stakes public environments.

The GATHERINGS Living Labs shed light on how surveillance is perceived and experienced in real-world public events across Europe. While technology can support public safety, it is **human presence, transparency, and trust** that truly shape how secure people feel.

Inclusive and responsive surveillance strategies–co-designed with citizens and professionals–are essential to ensuring that public gatherings remain safe, democratic spaces for all. These findings lay the foundation for developing **common EU standards** that balance security, privacy, cost and community well-being.

Curious to know more about the living labs?
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