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Diverse roles and perceptions of public officials and NGOs in local citizens' assemblies – A comparative analysis of the cases of Poland and Hungary

Paulina Pospieszna^a, Magni Szymaniak-Arnesen^a, Daniel Oross^b
and Gabriella Kiss^c

^aFaculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland;

^bHUN REN Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary;

^cDepartment of Decision Sciences, Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article explores the roles and perceptions of public officials and NGOs in climate-related citizens' assemblies (CAs) organised at the local level in Poland and Hungary. Through in-depth interviews with these actors, we investigate how process design and their involvement shape their views on CAs. In a comparative analysis of two local cases in Poznań and Budapest, we apply Bussu and Fleuß (2023) framework to examine key differences in the initiation, implementation, and impact of these assemblies. Our findings reveal that the degree of involvement in agenda-setting significantly influences actors' perceptions, with civil society actors expressing more positive views when they are more involved, while public officials tend to view the recommendations with scepticism, particularly when they perceive them as challenges to their authority. This study contributes to understanding the role and potential of deliberative instruments in strengthening local democracy in CEE countries.

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Introduction

Deliberative democrats argue that incorporating deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), such as citizens' assemblies (CAs), into political systems holds the potential to address democratic deficits (Curato et al. 2021; Lang and Warren 2013). However, the claim that DMPs enhance representativeness and responsiveness remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate, as these

CONTACT Paulina Pospieszna  paulina.pospieszna@amu.edu.pl  Faculty of Political Science and Journalism Adam Mickiewicz University, ul. Uniwersytetu Poznańskiego 5, Poznań 61-614, Poland
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outcomes are not guaranteed in all cases. While there is evidence suggesting that CAs can contribute to more inclusive and responsive governance, particularly at the local level (Beetham 1996), and that overall they might have a positive impact on those who participate in these processes (Paulis and Pospieszna 2024) their effectiveness (impacts, implementation of developed recommendations, and the future of these processes) depends on how they are integrated within political and social ecosystems, including *whether* and *how* political and social actors are engaged (Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023).

Public officials and NGOs play a crucial role in integrating these processes within existing decision-making systems (Dryzek and Tucker 2008; Hendriks 2005; Nielsen, Lassen, and Sandøe 2007; Niessen 2019). Understanding their opinions and perspectives can enhance current decision-making structures and provide insights into the unique characteristics, potential, and limitations of deliberative mini-publics in CEE countries, as well as the relationships between actors involved in these processes (Oross, Mátyás, and Gherghina 2021; Sandover, Moseley, and Devine-Wright 2021; Wells, Howarth, and Brand-Correa 2021). After all, the future of these processes largely depends on these actors. Despite the growing popularity of climate-related citizens' assemblies in this region, organised mainly at the local level, especially in Poland and Hungary, research on deliberative mini-publics in Central Eastern Europe has been scarce (Gerwin 2018; Gherghina, Ekman, and Podolian 2020; Podgórska-Rykała 2020, 2024; Ufel 2022). Some of these assemblies are driven by social movements or NGOs, while others are influenced by the strong presence of local authorities.

Our study employs comparative analysis of the perspectives of two key types of actors engaged in the process at the local level in Poland and Hungary: 1) public officials, including elected representatives and administrative employees (public servants); 2) NGOs, selected in open tenders to organise, coordinate, and facilitate the events and civil society actors (social movements and interest groups) involved as initiators. We ask the following questions:

How do public officials and NGOs perceive the functions, normative values, and rationales for organising citizens' assemblies in these two CEE countries? What are the perceptions and attitudes of these actors towards the process design, agenda-setting, and outcomes of the CAs, as well as their relationship to democratic institutions?

By exploring their experiences with mini-publics in these two countries, this research can also contribute to a better understanding of how these instruments might strengthen or restore representative democratic institutions at the local level in CEE countries.

In our study we analyse the available documents on citizens' assemblies organised in both countries to gain a broader insight into the widespread

practice of the CEE region. Additionally primary data collection is necessary as mini-publics are often missing from databases of democratic innovations (see, e.g., Buergererrat.de, KNOCA.eu, OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023), Participedia.net). The data compilation relies on available public documents and first-hand materials gathered during the observation of these processes. To gain a deeper understanding, and to answer our research questions, two climate-related cases in Poznań and Budapest were analysed, shedding light on the specificities of these assemblies by applying Bussu and Fleuß (2023) framework to compare them, which helped us discern key differences in the roles of actors and the outcomes achieved. Relying on exploratory interviews with public officials and non-state actors involved in the local CAs we provide their motivations to support the organisation of local citizens' assemblies in Poland and Hungary and opinions about the role of these processes.

Public officials and non-state actors in deliberative processes: roles, perceptions, and local contexts

In contemporary democratic theory, deliberative democracy advocates for inclusive decision-making processes prioritising informed discussion and public participation (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Lafont 2015; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Central to this framework are deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), forums where a randomly selected group of citizens convene to discuss and deliberate upon public issues (Setälä and Smith 2018). Citizens' assemblies, a type of DMPs, foster deliberative democracy by enabling participants to engage in meaningful discussions, generate well-considered solutions, and influence policy decisions (Curato et al. 2021; Smith 2009).

Deliberative democracy literature emphasises that public officials must adapt to collaborative roles with non-state actors, especially in designing and organising deliberative processes (Setälä and Smith 2018). Once seen mainly as implementers (Osborne 2010), officials are now tasked with facilitating citizen participation, providing support, and ensuring an informed public (Blijleven, van Hulst, and Hendriks 2019; Fishkin 2018; Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Warren 2009, 2017). This shift may initially prompt scepticism, as officials sometimes view mini-publics as challenges to their authority (Nabatchi 2010). However, their engagement can enhance policymaking legitimacy and rebuild public trust (Curato, Hammond, and Min 2019; Fung and Olin Wright 2001; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2019).

Some public officials view the 'added value' of deliberative processes as stemming from diversity and deliberation (Koskimaa and Rapeli 2020; Vrydagh, Devillers, and Reuchamps 2020), while others express caution or criticism, especially compared to citizens' generally more favourable attitudes (Garry et al. 2022). Policymakers often regard deliberative processes as

educational tools or opinion sources rather than direct decision-making mechanisms, with some resistant to mini-publics holding binding powers (Garry et al. 2022; Hendriks 2005; Sandover, Moseley, and Devine-Wright 2021; Wells, Howarth, and Brand-Correa 2021). Thompson (2019) describes such views as 'instrumental motivations' for adopting democratic innovations, primarily aiming for specific outcomes (see also Oross, Mátyás, and Gherghina 2021). Negative views may reflect concerns that mini-publics could undermine the legitimacy of representative institutions (Beswick and Elstub 2019; Buge and Vandamme 2023). However, in Belgium's German-speaking community, political leaders saw the permanent citizens' assembly as reinforcing the electoral system's legitimacy (Macq and Jacquet 2021). Attitudes vary by political orientation, with leftist politicians generally more supportive of deliberative institutions (Jacquet, Niessen, and Reuchamps 2020).

Similarly to public officials, NGOs play a vital role in fostering citizen engagement and participation in deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies. Civil society actors usually attend as 'experts' presenting their knowledge (Hendriks 2019) or 'stakeholders' proposing their preferred solutions to the issue under discussion. They serve as education providers, offering valuable information and expertise to facilitate informed decision-making (Fung and Olin Wright 2001). They advocate for specific issues, working to include diverse perspectives and ensure the implementation of the results (Hendriks 2019, 241). NGOs also serve as organisers, mobilising citizens and amplifying their voices (Fishkin 2011). Civil society actors, including activists and advocacy groups, often engage in deliberative mini-publics to advance their causes and promote public participation (Hendriks 2006). However, their participation is contingent on the perceived instrumental value of the process and its alignment with their goals (Hendriks 2002, 2005). Some social movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, have mobilised around demands for more climate assemblies, highlighting the complex relationship between activism and public deliberation (Felicetti 2023). NGOs are particularly significant in coordinating and facilitating citizens' assemblies, ensuring that deliberative processes remain fair and inclusive (Bherer and Lee 2019; Escobar 2019). They can also contribute as monitors and evaluators, assessing the effectiveness of the deliberative process and suggesting improvements for future iterations. However, they also tend to idealise and romanticise deliberative mini-publics (Vrydagh 2023).

Sharing responsibilities between public authorities and a variety of different actors, such as NGOs, has been found to be crucial for developing collaborative innovations, however, the success of such innovations might depend on particular strategies applied to the meta-governance of these networks (Godenhjelm and Johanson 2018; Loeffler and Bovaird 2020; Lopes and Silva Farias 2022; Sørensen and Torfing 2017). The variations in

perceptions among public officials and non-state actors in deliberative mini-publics are shaped by their experiences, roles, and broader political positions, and conceptions of democracy and participation. These differences may also be influenced by the political context, particularly at the local level, political culture, and the level of engagement these actors have in the process (Hendriks 2005; Nielsen, Lassen, and Sandøe 2007). There is a high probability that actors with a greater degree of involvement in the agenda-setting phase, such as civil society groups or public officials closely collaborating in the planning and organisation of assemblies, are likely to feel a stronger sense of ownership over the outcomes and hold a more positive perception of the process. Conversely, those with less engagement may view the outcomes more critically, perceiving them as externally imposed or less aligned with their expectations.

This variation in perception is particularly relevant in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, where citizens' assemblies are emerging as a novel democratic tool. Compared to advanced democracies where political decision-makers increasingly make use of citizen assemblies (Niessen 2019), mini-publics are a relatively new phenomenon in this region. Paradoxically, these innovative instruments have begun to be utilised amidst democratic backsliding as a response to remedy the shrinking of public space and to strengthen participation and the role of citizens in decision-making processes (Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves 2024).

In Hungary, citizens' assemblies remain in their infancy, with no legal framework explicitly addressing them. While the Act on Local Governments mandates annual public hearings, creating some opportunities for deliberative democracy, the concept of citizens' assemblies is absent from legislation. Government-aligned media suppress dissenting voices and largely follow the official agenda (Hann et al. 2020), reflecting the government's influence through both voluntary compliance and direct control. The right-wing populist government has weakened checks and balances and reduced avenues for public participation in policymaking. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'State of Danger' allowed the government to issue decrees overriding parliamentary acts (Gárdos-Orosz 2020), centralising political power and undermining local democracy. Additionally, the financial autonomy of local governments, including Budapest, has been severely restricted in recent years (Dobos 2020), limiting their capacity to make independent decisions and implement initiatives. Despite these challenges, civil society organisations, such as Sortition Foundation and DemNet, have actively promoted and organised citizens' assemblies. Between 2020 and 2023, Budapest hosted three assemblies, and smaller deliberative experiments were conducted in Miskolc and Érd (see Table A1, Appendix).

The current state of local governments in Poland reflects a shift in the relationship between central and local authorities. Historically, Polish

municipalities enjoyed significant autonomy in policy scope, organisation, and influence on higher-level policymaking (Ladner et al. 2019). Compared to Hungary, Polish local governments remain more empowered and engaged in coordinating with the central government, enabling them to challenge national policies through economic leverage and political opposition (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022).

Citizens' assemblies have gained popularity in Poland, particularly at the local level, with 12 assemblies organised between 2016 and 2023 (see Table A1, Appendix). Their introduction was driven by civic activists like Marcin Gerwin, who began popularising them in 2014 with a guidebook for organisers (Gerwin 2018), and NGOs such as Civis Polonus Foundation, Pole Dialogu Foundation, and Stocznia Foundation, which co-organised many assemblies (Górski et al. 2021). Interestingly, local public administration in Poland has opened up rather than becoming more restrictive, contrasting with populist governments' tendency to undermine administrative independence and professionalism in state bureaucracies (Bauer 2024).

Despite the growing popularity of mini-publics, especially in Poland and Hungary, research on these and other aspects of deliberative mini-publics in Central Eastern Europe remains scarce (Gherghina, Ekman, and Podolian 2020; Podgórska-Rykała 2020, 2024; Ufel 2022), particularly concerning the perceptions of actors involved (Oross, Mátyás, and Gherghina 2021; Podgórska-Rykała 2024), many papers focused on the perceptions of citizens (Grönlund, Setälä, and Herne 2010), but the understanding of other actors remain unrevealed. Thus, we aim to fill this gap.

Comparative insights into climate-related citizens' assemblies in Budapest and Poznań: unpacking processes, actor roles, and interrelations

In this empirical chapter, we first explain the data collection and research methodology, followed by a detailed introduction to the two selected cases, their context, and the particulars of their implementation. We then proceed to our analysis, beginning with a comparison of the two cases.

From all citizens' assemblies conducted in Poland and Hungary, we selected two typical cases (Seawright and Gerring 2008, 299) to explore the causal mechanisms at work and gain deeper insights into the contexts of CEE countries (see Table A1 in Appendix). The selection was based on specific characteristics: both were organised at the local level and involved either the Mayor or Vice-Mayor of the city, focusing on climate-related issues and representing city-level decision-making processes. Importantly, the authors of this paper were present at these events and collected systematic data. The comparison of the two selected cases allows for a broader investigation into

the specifics of the CEE context and a more detailed understanding of these processes.

The analysis and comparison of the cases, along with the presentation of the views of involved actors, were made possible through data collection about the events, including document analysis, participant observations, and semi-structured interviews with key actors associated with initiating and organising each of the two Citizens' Assemblies in Poznań and Budapest. Document analysis involved gathering all available written and video materials related to the events. Researchers conducted participant observations, which were documented and analysed. The primary data collection also included 12 semi-structured interviews with public officials, elected officials, and representatives from non-governmental organisations involved in initiating, coordinating, or participating in the events. Six interviews were conducted for each case between September 2022 and July 2023. Each interview lasted up to one hour and was held either in person or online, depending on the interviewees' availability. The same set of questions was used for both cases, covering topics such as the organisation and structure of citizen assemblies, participant behaviour, specific recommendations, and their consequences.

In Hungary, we focus on the 'Breathe easy, Budapest!' citizens' assembly,¹ the third CA conducted in the city. It was organised by the Climate and Environmental Department and the Open Budapest Department of the Municipality of Budapest in collaboration with the SocialFokus – Community Venture Foundation. The Department was in charge of convening the participants, inviting experts, providing the venue and ensuring permanent contact with the policymakers of the city, while SocialFokus facilitated the event and developed the proposals on reducing air pollution together with the participants of the CA.

This third CA in Budapest had a specific climate-related focus on reducing transportation-related air pollution. The assembly was held on two weekends: September 10–11 and September 24–25, 2022, at the City Hall. It involved experts and stakeholders who provided their insights during the education phase. The participants of the 50-member assembly were selected through a random selection process (excluding individuals holding political positions), just like in the first (Oross, Mátyás, and Gherghina 2021) and second citizens' assembly in Budapest. The Sortition Foundation was responsible for the participant selection process. During the assembly, participants learned about air pollution's impact on health, air quality regulations, and transportation-related pollution. The citizens' panel generated 16 proposals through discussions and voting, with recommendations shared with relevant authorities for consideration. Participants of the CA of Budapest demanded road safety and public transport improvements, as well as traffic calming, greening of streets, pedestrian and cyclist-friendly developments. According to them

the Liberty Bridge, the Chain Bridge and the Lower Embankment of the Danube, as the main sights of the city need to be car-free. They called for more green areas to be created in Budapest, even at the expense of on-street parking. Better maintained road signs, enforcement of rules, penalties for speeding, traffic education for children, and an adult traffic law update were also suggested as part of road safety. Shaping public opinion was also seen as important, participants called for the promotion of a positive vision under the headlines 'Healthy city, healthy people' and 'It could look like this'. Overall, the third citizens' assembly aimed to address Budapest's air pollution challenges and gather recommendations from diverse participants to improve transportation and air quality, guided by expert insights and stakeholder discussions. The Open Budapest Department played a significant role in every stage of the citizens' assembly, fostering citizens' involvement in decision-making processes and engaging residents in shaping the city's future.

For the Polish case, we selected the First Poznan Citizens' Panel (PPO), held online in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The panel focused on adapting Poznan's forests and green areas to climate change and transitioning away from residential coal heating. Initiated by NGOs advocating for climate action, the PPO involved city councilors, the Mayor, and the Deputy Mayor for environmental matters in its preparatory stage. The By Nature Initiative (*Inicjatywa z Natury Rzeczy*) coordinated the process, chosen through an open tender for NGOs with expertise in citizens' panels and deliberative democracy, supported by the City Hall's citizen participation department. A monitoring team with representatives from various organisations, the City Council, the City Hall, and local academic experts supervised the process.

The assembly focused on two issues: banning coal-based heating in households and adapting the city's green spaces to climate change. The schedule included four educational meetings (two per topic, live-streamed on YouTube and Facebook), four deliberative sessions, and two preliminary meetings for integration and training. Seventy panellists were selected through a multi-stage process, with experts contributing during educational phases. Stakeholders, including environmental NGOs and other affected groups, were welcome to join. Additionally, 'Afternoon Talks with Experts' provided informal sessions for in-depth discussions, which were recorded and shared online. Deliberative meetings were closed to the public, with designated observers allowed private access. Participants discussed, refined, and voted on proposals from experts, stakeholders, and their own suggestions. Proposals with over 80% support became 'binding' recommendations. Non-participating residents could submit feedback online, which was shared with the assembly members.

The CA resulted in 77 recommendations: 31 on phasing out coal-based heating and 46 on adapting city forests and greenery to climate change. After presenting these recommendations to the Mayor, the City Administration

began implementation efforts. A team from various departments, city organisations, and partner companies reviewed each recommendation. Five months later, the City Hall held a meeting with former assembly members, where civil servants discussed implementation feasibility and departmental assignments, expressing reservations about five recommendations. In early 2024, the City Hall published an implementation status report, categorising recommendations as ‘in progress’, three as ‘in preparation’, three for future implementation, and two marked for abandonment due to objective reasons. Assessing the full impact of the citizens’ assembly on city policies would require further investigation, which lies beyond this article’s scope.

The citizens’ assemblies in Poznań and Budapest illustrate distinct approaches to participatory governance, shaped by their unique socio-political contexts. To highlight these differences, we use the typology by Bussu and Fleuß (2023), who outline key dimensions for organising citizens’ assemblies. This framework examines: the initiating actor (whether government or grassroots), funding sources and execution roles, process design (including expert involvement and voting mechanisms), agenda setting, guiding principles (such as knowledge-building versus citizen-driven decision-making), primary objectives (implementing popular demands, functional governance, or transformative change), and the assembly’s relationship with existing institutions. These dimensions, rather than fitting into strict ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ categories, reveal a spectrum where traits intermingle, creating hybrid forms of assembly governance.

From our comparative analysis it resulted that while both assemblies of Poznan and Budapest share commonalities in funding sources and normative values, they significantly differ in initiating actors, implementation strategies, core aims, and relationship to institutions (see Table 1.). Poznan’s assembly was directly instigated by Extinction Rebellion, a grassroots movement advocating for environmental action.

Table 1. Characteristics of two local citizens’ assemblies in Poznan and Budapest.

Dimensions	Poznań	Budapest
Initiating actors	Directly: Extinction Rebellion	Indirectly: Greenpeace, directly: mayor
Funding	The city	The city
Implementation	Semi-binding	Consultative
Process design	Predetermined by the coordinating team (selected in a tender)	Predetermined by the facilitating team, (selected in a tender), lead expert, and civil officials
Agenda setting	Predefined by the civil society and the city	Predefined by the civil society and the city
Normative values informing CAs	Primarily epistemic	Primarily epistemic
Core aims	Implementing popular demands	Legitimation of policies
Relationship to institutions	Improving existing institutions	Strengthening existing institutions

Source: Framework inspired by Bussu and Fleuß (2023). Based on authors’ own compilation of data.

In contrast, Budapest's assembly was only indirectly inspired by Greenpeace and directly initiated by the mayor's office, highlighting a combination of civil society and government involvement. Both assemblies were financially supported by their respective city governments. Poznań's assembly operated under a semi-binding implementation framework, suggesting that its recommendations carried some weight but lacked full enforceability. Conversely, Budapest's assembly had a consultative implementation approach, wherein its advisory recommendations did not hold any binding authority.

In Poznań, an independent coordinating team selected through a tender designed the assembly process, while in Budapest, civil officials and a facilitating team collaborated with a lead expert on the process. This reflects different approaches to managing deliberative processes, impacting how each assembly was later assessed. Both assemblies had predetermined remits developed jointly by civil society and city authorities, indicating a commitment to consensus in topic selection. Poznań's assembly focused on implementing popular demands, aiming to turn citizen preferences into policies and reform existing institutions. Budapest's assembly, however, aimed to legitimise current policies, strengthening the credibility and effectiveness of existing governance structures.

To sum up, even though the two cases are superficially alike, the Poznań case exhibited a more significant role to be played by NGOs and was designed to have a more substantial impact, while the Budapest assembly demonstrated greater involvement and ownership by public officials and had a solely consultative character. These differences provide a basis for further analysis aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of the actors involved.

Perceptions and attitudes of local public officials and non-state actors toward citizens' assemblies in Poznań and Budapest

After comparing the main characteristics of both cases, we present insights from interviews with public officials and NGOs involved in two processes. Using a coding process, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 12 recorded and transcribed semi-structured interviews. Analysed with NVivo and guided by predefined codes from the literature (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014), the analysis focused on attitudes towards: 1) the process design, agenda, and outcomes of the CA, and 2) normative values, core aims, and institutional relationships.

Perceptions and attitudes toward the process design, agenda and the resulting outcomes of the citizens' assembly

All interviewees, regardless of their roles, generally assessed the internal processes of the CAs as successful and of high quality. Primary concerns about the design revolved around scopes and timeframes. Interviewees suggested that a slightly longer period allocated for deliberation would have been beneficial in both instances. This need was particularly evident in Poznań, where the CA covered two remits. Civil society actors emphasised that the second remit, concerning the prohibition of coal burning in households, was poorly formulated, unnecessary, and posed challenges to the process's quality, leading to less time available for deliberation and recommendation refinement.

Regarding the CA's outcomes, which are the recommendations, assessment varied intriguingly among all interviewed groups. In Poznań, public officials had ambivalent feelings about the recommendations, raising concerns about certain implementation issues. Conversely, civil society actors were generally very pleased with the recommendations and planned to monitor their implementation actively. Public officials acknowledged that some recommendations were too broad or strict, potentially conflicting with legal regulations or leading to legal and financial issues for the city. They also highlighted concerns about recommendations proposing procedures lacking established good practices. NGOs perceived the recommendations as highly satisfactory, aligning with their expectations, though they noted minor imperfections and suggested that the quality could have been better with either just one remit or more time available.

In Budapest, public officials expressed great satisfaction with the recommendations, viewing them as indicating long-term goals for gradual implementation and strategic incorporation. They found the recommendations encouraging for introducing necessary changes, expressing surprise at the more radical nature of some recommendations compared to typical political interventions. The NGOs, however, did not find the recommendations surprising or original, but rather as a solid foundation for improvements. Some recommendations were criticised for being simplistic and not directly addressing the issue and barely considered as acceptable.

Various factors can influence the perception of recommendation quality, particularly relating to the internal processes of the CA and the engagement level of its participants. The thematic scopes of these assemblies and the extent of engagement in the agenda-setting process from involved actors played significant roles. In Budapest, where public officials led the CA organisation, NGOs might present a more critical view of the Citizens' Assembly functions. In Poznań, the situation was reversed. Our findings revealed that in

Poznań, the assembly's topic, comprising two remits, was collaboratively determined by civil society actors and public officials. Several interviewees noted that the actual recommendations went beyond the strictly understood remits' formulations, addressing broader scopes proposed initially by civil society organisations during scope-setting workshops. Conversely, in Budapest, after civil society organisations and city officials established a remit, public officials from various relevant departments delineated more detailed scopes of forthcoming recommendations:

So a very large part of the background work we did together with the climate department was to be able to delimit these areas in this way. And I think this is really reflected in the recommendations from the point of view that there are a lot of recommendations that do not involve very large financial implications, which the municipality could probably afford even less now than before. [BC3]

These divergent approaches to delineating feasible recommendations likely contributed to noted disparities in evaluating and contentment with the CA's outcomes among various groups. The constrained influence over recommendation development generated unease for city officials in Poznań. As a consequence, two officials expressed the conviction that it should be up to the city's administration to set the CA's remit: *'(..) since the tool is for the mayor's consultation, the mayor has the right to pose the question he would like to ask, right?'* [PC1]. Meanwhile, a meticulously defined array of options managed by the city facilitated a feeling of 'encouragement' [BC1] for the city administration in Budapest, while the civil society actors assessed the added value of the recommendations developed under such controlled conditions much more critically.

The findings align with our expectations. Firstly, the data supports the idea that citizens' assemblies are perceived as valuable instruments for developing thoughtful solutions and setting policy directions, regardless of actors' engagement extent. Secondly, increased NGO involvement in citizens' assemblies led public officials to perceive these assemblies as potential challenges to their authority and expertise.

Perceptions and attitudes toward the citizens' assemblies' normative values, core aims, and relationships to institutions

The central rationale for organising citizens' assemblies by NGOs in Poznań and Budapest was to generate solutions and establish policy directions. NGOs envisioned the CA as a process focused on well-informed, scientifically grounded solutions that address community needs and shape the city's future. This included providing expertise on optimal solutions, highlighting issues, reconciling competing interests, and identifying genuine local needs,

thereby enhancing the likelihood of social acceptance. Public officials in both cities also recognised the CA as a platform for solution generation.

In Budapest, where non-state actor involvement was limited, civil society interviewees expressed concern that politicians might exploit the CA's results to legitimise pre-planned measures or selectively choose recommendations that align with their preferences, thereby reinforcing their positions in internal conflicts [BO2]. This also meant the CA could serve as an additional source of legitimacy for policy measures lacking confidence for introduction. Conversely, city officials acknowledged the importance of public support for critical policy measures, viewing the process and its outcomes as encouraging. The following quotes from city officials and NGOs illustrate this perspective:

And this is actually an encouraging sign that it is possible to convince the public about the issues that we think are right. When I say convince, I'm talking about a process of persuasion. So with arguments, not emotions. Rationally, focusing on the public interest in details. [BC1]

We demanded radical and quick solutions from politicians, and we saw the community meeting as an opportunity to give politicians equal legitimacy to move towards a solution. [BO3]

Interviews with public officials and NGOs in Budapest reveal that increased involvement of public officials in citizens' assemblies often leads to the perception of these assemblies as tools for legitimising pre-existing public policy preferences. In Budapest, civil officials noted that political decision-makers were committed to implementing the assembly's recommendations because they aligned with existing policies. However, elected officials viewed the recommendations as strong indications of citizens' needs but not binding. They emphasised the importance of further consultations with relevant civil society organisations or additional social consultations to confirm public support for specific policy measures.

In contrast, while officials in Poznan viewed citizens' assemblies as valuable for establishing policy directions, they also saw the CA's organisation as a way to address civil society concerns. In Poznan's CA, which was organised in response to civil society demands, the focus on addressing citizens' issues and needs was more prominent. For public officials, organising a CA centred on climate change concerns was linked to the belief that the resulting recommendations would align with intended policy directions. NGOs were also positive about the CA's potential to promote specific solutions and encourage city officials to implement measures addressing environmental challenges:

Citizens' panel, because the matter is so pressing both literally and figuratively, that only a citizens' panel can address it, not the rigid procedures and methods that have been tested countless times and simply do not work. And that it will only work when these recommendations are implemented. [PO2]

Another interviewee expressed their expectations and how the recommendations can pressure the city more directly:

And whenever these recommendations, which ultimately turned out to be excellent from our perspective and something we were both anticipating and somewhat apprehensive about at the beginning, fearing that the residents might not want, for example, what we envisioned... It turned out that the residents want exactly what we want. Practically all the recommendations in this panel meet our expectations. And, as a result, we can now refer to them in any matter. [PO3]

Our findings indicate that greater NGO involvement in citizens' assemblies encourages a bottom-up approach, making the assembly a platform for addressing citizens' demands, grassroots participation, and collaborative policymaking. Surprisingly, public officials also viewed this as an opportunity to engage with civil society concerns.

These dynamics influence how the function of CAs is perceived. In Poland, due to an established model adopted across various cities, the binding nature of CAs' recommendations is seen as inherent and non-negotiable. Civil society interviewees emphasised this aspect, believing that recommendations stemmed from the people: 'coming from the people, done by the people for the people' [PO2]. This sentiment was echoed in Budapest, where civil actors noted that 'a CA should be held when you are committed in your heart and mind' [BO3]. In contrast, public officials from both cities were hesitant to accept that CAs' recommendations would be binding for formal decision-makers. In Poznań, where binding recommendations were intended 'by design', officials identified this as a challenge for city administration and a flaw of the method. They valued the consultative nature of CAs, seeing them as sources of public opinion.

Another frequently highlighted function of the citizens' assembly was its role as a source of public opinion. In both cities, public officials viewed locally conducted CAs as valuable indicators of public sentiment on various issues and policies. Civil society actors, unless discussing politicians' intentions or how CA recommendations align with informed citizens' preferences, did not emphasise this aspect as much. Public officials compared CAs to traditional sources of public opinion, like opinion polls, noting that CAs uniquely educate participants before they vote on recommendations. This sets them apart from the routine uninformed opinions or 'random feelings' [BC1] that citizens form based on brief media exposure. Officials in both cities were also aware of deliberative mini-publics, like deliberative polls, previously conducted in

Poznań, and did not see significant differences between that format and CAs. In Budapest, one official mentioned that the city conducted pre- and post-surveys during the CA to assess changes in support for various policy measures resulting from participation:

Even if we live in a representative democracy, where we elect someone to make decisions on our behalf (...) we should aim to construct such communication tools that enable us to understand our opinions better and ensure that these decisions align as closely as possible with our expectations. [PC1]

Public officials pointed out that a CA might not be suitable for all inquiries, as alternative tools exist to gauge public opinion on diverse matters. In the case of Budapest, the focus on understanding citizens' opinions was more specifically aimed at assessing public endorsement for particular policies. Even though the CA's recommendations were developed by participants and not generated by the city administration, both public officials and civil society actors described the CA in terms of gauging public backing for city policies, and determining if the public was prepared to embrace them:

In fact, the purpose was to test what a representative group of Budapest residents would think about this, what direction they see as worthwhile, and what, even with the methodology of the community assembly, is a proposal with less support. (...) The other such huge big question mark is specifically the toll fee and traffic reduction, so this is what I think was the most difficult to judge, what the residents of Budapest think about this. [BC3]

Another significant function emphasised by interviewees in Poznań is the educational aspect of CAs. City officials, in particular, viewed educating the public as the main goal and benefit of the CA:

From my perspective, as someone from my department, I would prioritize education first (...) that this several-month process has really allowed these eighty individuals to educate themselves, and if, in the next drawing, of course, using appropriate algorithms to select the representative group of residents, the next eighty people had a chance to educate themselves again, then that is definitely added value for me. [PC2]

Both officials and civil society groups in Poznań highlighted learning from experts and stakeholders as a crucial element. Some see it as an ideal outcome when residents 'speak with the voice of experts' [PC2] and recommendations align with expert and stakeholder presentations. However, a Budapest civil society representative critiqued this as top-down framing. Additionally, civil officials in Poznań emphasised that participating in a CA provides civic education that goes beyond the assembly's topic. They mentioned that CAs also may help citizens understand the complexities of public decisions and the effort required. It aims to enhance knowledge of legal boundaries, communication with city departments, and the realisation that differing opinions come from fellow citizens, not just officials. Both city

administration and civil society agree on the need to educate each other, with officials highlighting benefits for civil society, and civil society suggesting public officials update their knowledge.

In summary, the cross-case comparison shows that in both cities, NGOs and public officials viewed citizens' assemblies as valuable tools for generating thoughtful solutions and shaping policy directions. NGOs emphasised informed, community-oriented solutions and expected their direct implementation. In Poznań, NGOs saw CAs as a means to pressure City Administration for more progressive environmental measures. In Budapest, where public officials dominated, NGOs were concerned about politicians using CAs to legitimise pre-planned actions, a concern echoed by public officials in interviews. Conversely, in Poznań, where NGOs had greater influence, officials considered organising a CA essential for addressing civil society's demands and enhancing collaborative policy-making. However, in both cities, public officials viewed NGO-led assemblies as potential threats to their authority. CAs were also perceived as platforms for gauging public opinion. Additionally, the educational role of CAs was significant, particularly among officials in Poznań, who highlighted their commitment to educating citizens about assembly topics and complex public decision-making processes, alongside their scepticism regarding citizens' current competencies in these areas.

Conclusion

Deliberative mini-publics are gaining traction in Central and Eastern Europe, though these democracies have been relatively late adopters of such participatory mechanisms. Research emphasises that the success of deliberative processes depends heavily on the attitudes of key actors (Niessen 2019), making it essential to understand the views of public officials and NGOs. Our study contributes to global comparative studies on Citizens' Assemblies (Dean et al. 2024) by examining civil society and public officials' involvement in these assemblies.

Consistent with prior findings (Hendriks 2019), both groups highlighted the importance of expert and stakeholder learning in Citizens' Assemblies, particularly in countries grappling with media imbalances, disinformation, and populism. Public officials and NGOs viewed assemblies as valuable tools for developing thoughtful solutions and guiding policy, regardless of their degree of engagement. This underscores the relevance of deliberative processes in countering democratic backsliding at the local level and aligns with evidence that well-publicised assemblies can shape public opinion (Gastil 2018).

Our comparative analysis using Bussu and Fleuß's framework (2023) revealed distinct strategies in Poznań and Budapest. In Poznań, civil society

shaped the agenda more prominently, while in Budapest, public officials maintained tighter control, with civil society playing a peripheral role. Higher involvement in agenda-setting fostered a sense of ownership among civil society groups and led to more positive perceptions, whereas public officials, less engaged in planning, were more critical of recommendations, perceiving them as externally imposed challenges to their authority. These differences highlight tensions between civil society's preference for binding recommendations and public officials' preference for consultative outcomes.

The findings point to the need for stronger participatory legislative frameworks in Poland and Hungary. Greater NGO involvement often led public officials to view assemblies as challenges to their authority, emphasising the importance of collaborative governance. Public officials must feel empowered to implement recommendations, which requires cultural shifts and organisational support. Collaborative governance structures can enhance legitimacy and policy effectiveness (Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Warren 2009).

Our study also highlights how power dynamics influence assembly outcomes. Poznań's collaborative approach resulted in broader but more critically assessed recommendations, while Budapest's top-down approach produced more focused recommendations, viewed favourably by officials but seen as less ambitious by civil society. These dynamics underscore the role of agenda-setting involvement and power balance in shaping outcomes and perceptions. A limitation of our study is the exclusion of individual citizens' attitudes, as our focus was on public officials and civil society actors, which we identified as crucial. Future research should analyse the content and implementation of recommendations, particularly regarding their relevance to climate policies, as seen in the Polish case's larger number of recommendations (Appendix, Table A1).

Note

1. More information about the third CA available in Hungarian language at www.kozossegiyules.budapest.hu.

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