

# Citizenship and Democratic Innovations in Europe

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## Chapter 5

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### **Empowering citizens through democratic innovations**

The case of Polish citizens' assemblies

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# 5 Empowering citizens through democratic innovations

## The case of Polish citizens' assemblies

*Joanna Podgórska-Rykała and Janusz Grygieńć*

### Introduction

Democratic innovations are slowly, though systematically, conquering the world.<sup>1</sup> The OECD report of 2020 clearly states that

over the past few decades, the 'deliberative wave' has been building. Public authorities at all levels of government have been using Citizens' Assemblies, Juries, Panels, and other representative deliberative processes. In these processes, randomly selected citizens, making up a microcosm of a community, spend significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to develop informed collective recommendations for public authorities.

(OECD 2020; cf. Elstub 2014; Escobar, Elstub 2017)

Democratic innovations are used today almost all over the world, even in non-democratic countries. In communist China, experiments with deliberative polling (DOP) and participatory budgets (PB) began more than a decade ago (Fishkin, He, Luskin, and Siu 2010; He, Warren 2017; Jiang 2010).

The reasons for such popularity of innovations should be sought in the growing dissatisfaction of citizens with the existing, established formulas of representative democracy (Smith 2009; Bedock, Pilet, 2021). This problem can be solved by empowering communities, especially local ones. In theory, it should increase the legitimacy of the entire political system (Pow 2021; Boulianne 2018; Jäske 2019). It can also foster greater identification of citizens with public institutions and the legal solutions adopted (Fung 2003; Smith 2009; Warren 2009). However, it all depends on the procedural transparency of the decision-making and the quality of final decisions (Tyler 2006; Pow 2021). Democratic innovations aim to achieve all these goals simultaneously. They must be transparent, inclusive, effective, and empowering (Dahl 1989; Escobar, Elstub 2017; Smith 2009). Only then will they constitute a real alternative to the institutions of representative democracy, which are perceived as ineffective and characterized by a democratic deficit (Caparas and Agrawal 2016; Åstrom, Jonsson, Karlsson 2017; Podgórska-Rykała 2024).

This chapter will examine the role of citizens' assemblies (CA) as a form of innovation in the Polish political context. It will analyze the distinctive features of this form of CA and assess its alignment with the good practices identified in other countries and outlined in the OECD report (OECD, 2020). Additionally, it will explore the potential for developing this innovation further in Poland, particularly at the local level. The article addresses the following questions: (1) What are the specificities of Polish citizens' assemblies and the extent to which they are consistent with good practices developed in other countries and identified in the OECD (2020) report; (2) What are the perspectives for the development of this deliberative innovation in Poland? (3) Does the local level create good conditions for the practice and development of deliberative innovations?

The argumentation will therefore proceed as follows. First section will take a closer look at the institution of citizens' assemblies, its role among other democratic innovations, and the typical uses of small-scale forums for debate. The arguments of supporters and opponents of CAs will be considered to determine whether the use of citizens' assemblies at the local level might be less vulnerable to such criticism. The next section will outline the role of citizens' assemblies in the pantheon of democratic innovations used in Poland. In the following part, the Polish experience to date with the use of citizens' assemblies will be described, focusing most attention on the citizens' assembly in Poznań. Finally, in conclusion, the authors will reflect on the perspectives for the development of such deliberative mini-publics in Poland.

### **Citizens' assemblies – Local, national, or global?**

Citizens' assemblies are among the most often used deliberative innovations. They are successfully applied on a global, national, and local scale. The range of issues resolved with their help is vast, including strictly political, social, economic, and environmental issues. This is why assemblies are analyzed by lawyers, political scientists, political theorists, sociologists, and philosophers. The first citizens' assemblies, in their experimental version, were devoted to electoral reform in British Columbia (2004), Ontario (2006–2007), and the Netherlands (2006) (see Fournier, *et al.* 2011). Subsequently, they were also applied in Australia, the USA, Germany, Austria, Estonia, Ireland, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, and Poland (Curato *et al.* 2021). Currently, citizens' assemblies are organized in more than 25 countries worldwide, and their organization is undertaken by more than 40 specialized institutions (Flanigan *et al.* 2021).

Citizens' assemblies occupy a special place among democratic innovations. They belong to the so-called mini-publics, which means that they use a random selection of participants to ensure the social representativeness of their participants and are deliberative. As a result, they are “small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic” (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 219–220). By acting as a kind of “deliberative filter” or “democratic mirror”, they represent a distinctive innovation that can contribute to the effective reform of contemporary political systems (Curato *et al.* 2021:13).

A group of citizens deliberates on solving specific public problems by consulting independent experts, interest groups, and citizens. This makes assemblies simultaneously socially representative, deliberative, empowered, competent, and transparent (Brown 2006; Setälä and Smith 2018). These are the assets in which many authors see the advantage of mini-publics over plebiscitary forms of democratic governance (Dahl 1989; Escobar and Elstub 2017; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024).

Citizens' assemblies have been successfully applied at all levels of governance, from local to global (cf. Harris, 2019a, 2019b: 47–48, 53). On the supranational level, the European Union is leading the way in this respect, with its systematic use of assemblies in the Conference on the Future of Europe. Between 2021 and 2022, 4 EU-wide assemblies have been held with 800 randomly selected citizens from across the EU. In 2021, the first global assembly was conducted by the UN. It took place during the UN COP26 climate summit on 5 October 2021. One hundred people attended it, and the deliberations resulted in the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth.<sup>2</sup> These frequent experiments with assemblies in the international arena have led some theorists to pin their hopes for the future of transnational democratic decision-making processes on the assembly method. Dryzek, Bächtiger, and Milewicz argued that assemblies could replace current transnational institutions suffering from remoteness and democratic deficit (Dryzek, Bächtiger, Milewicz 2011: 33–42; cf. Vlerick 2020). Other, more moderate scholars suggest global assemblies be held only additionally, sporadically, and ultimately depending on the emerging global problems.

Political theorists are also increasingly advocating the establishment of permanent lottocratic institutions at the national level. Particularly popular are the ideas of replacing the upper chambers of parliaments with assemblies whose participants would be selected by lot. Keith Sutherland would gladly replace the House Commons with such an institution (Sutherland 2008, 2011). Yves Sintomer would add the third, randomly selected chamber to the two existing ones in France. Its main task would be to work on long-term planning issues, such as ecology, fundamental rights, or social reforms (cf. Van Reybrouck 2016: 131–138). Jack Mitchell proposed a similar reform of the Canadian parliament (Mitchell 2005). Marcin Gerwin proposed the Waldenia Model for Deliberative Democracy,<sup>3</sup> based almost entirely on citizens' assemblies and marginalizing the role of representative democracy (Gerwin 2022). The dominant view among theorists is that random democracy should only complement representative democracy (Richards, Gastil 2013). Mini-publics will not revolutionize the political system but slightly increase the role of deliberation in it (Curato, Böker, 2016). Some argue that instead of increasing, they reduce the level of legitimacy of the deliberative system as a whole (Lafont 2015). They are not a recipe for all the ills of democracy, a shortcut that will help achieve the ideal of a fully participatory democracy that minimizes the traditional institutions of representative democracy.

The inherent element of the discussion on citizens' assemblies is the benefits and risks associated with their use. Ironically, their most significant advantages (representativeness, deliberation, consultations with experts) are often

considered disqualifying defects. Critics see representativeness, born of a random selection of participants, as the risk of marginalization of minority groups. It is difficult to speak of the representativeness of a group of 100 people deliberating about climate change at UN COP26 (cf. Landemore 2020: 91–92; Johnson, Gastil 2015; Mackenzie, Warren 2012). During such deliberations, it is impossible to address the problems and comments of all the more numerous global social groups. Representativeness is usually constructed based on geography, sex, age, ethnicity, etc. Such a general definition of crucial variables must result in the omission of minority representatives (Parkinson 2006: 76). The common practice of selectively including representatives of certain groups (e.g. indigenous peoples) in deliberations cannot eliminate this risk.

The value of deliberations held by randomly selected citizens with experts is also sometimes contested. The organizers and advocates of assemblies assume such deliberations will increase participants' knowledge and lead to the emergence of "enlightened public opinion" (cf. Lightbody, Roberts 2019). Some researchers find it questionable whether mini-publics create the conditions for symmetrical positioning of their participants vis-à-vis experts (Gleason 2012; Price, Neijens 1998). Ordinary citizens do not have the knowledge necessary to question and sometimes even determine the relevance of the information presented to them. They do not have the competencies required to resolve expert controversies and will surely not acquire them in a brief assembly process. Several other criticisms of mini-publics can also be found in the literature. These include the difficulty of replicating the results of deliberative polls and citizens' assemblies with different group compositions<sup>4</sup> and a low level of participant accountability and motivation to make an informed decision (Warren 2008: 59; Parkinson 2006: 84; Brown 2006).

Considering the above, even advocates of mini-publics (or even democratic innovations in general) are generally skeptical about making them the core element of democratic politics (Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, 2002). There is a consensus that they should not replace but only complement representative democracy (Jacquet 2019; Mansbridge *et al.* 2012). In our view, the above objections constitute a severe challenge to be faced by the theory and practice of mini-publics. However, we think these objections are more justified in the case of deliberative innovations organized at national and international levels. For several reasons, those operating at the local level are much more resilient to the above drawbacks.

First, the risk of social unrepresentativeness of assembly composition is minimized at the local level. In this respect, local assemblies are closer to the ideal of stakeholder democracy and realizing the "all affected principle" (Goodin 2007: 43; Dahl 1970: 64). In such a case, the risk of critical social groups being left out is much smaller than in the case of assemblies organized at the national level. In a similar vein, Joshua Cohen has argued that using democratic innovations at the local level constitutes the most effective method to combine the ideals of participatory and deliberative democracy (Cohen 2009).

Secondly, the epistemic value of deliberations held in local assemblies is usually higher than in supranational ones (cf. Lowndes, Sullivan 2008; Andrews, Rhys *et al.* 2018). The objects of consideration are the real problems participants

face daily. Knowledge about the local conditions of the problem under consideration enriches the decision-making process and creates an opportunity for empirical verification of expert claims (cf. Irwin 1995). As a result, there are much better chances for symmetrical positioning of panel participants in terms of competence. In assemblies held at levels higher than local, laypeople's acquisition of the necessary competencies requires too much effort or is simply impossible (cf. Smith 2009: 89; Blue 2017).

When it comes to local citizens' assemblies, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Poland is the perfect example of a country where democratic innovations operate almost exclusively locally (Podgórska-Rykała 2024). Such a location provides an opportunity to use the unique potential of deliberation of a representative group of citizens with "insiders' wisdom" (Shapiro 2003).

### **Deliberation or aggregation? A short history of democratic innovations in Poland**

Currently, both deliberative and non-deliberative democratic innovations are used in Poland. As long as until the early 21st century, only the latter were used, in the form of referendums. In Poland, the institution of a referendum is regulated both by law and the Constitution. The Constitution of the Republic of Poland sets different rules regarding national<sup>5</sup> and local<sup>6</sup> referendums. Both are used rather sporadically and in addition, the turnout is often too low for their results to be binding. At the national level, after 1989, only six referendums were held, and only two of them (in case of access to the EU in 2003 and passing the Constitution in 1997) were binding, as the required turnout threshold was reached. Local referendums are used more often.<sup>7</sup> However, also in their case, the threshold of turnout needed (usually 30% of those entitled to vote<sup>8</sup>) makes them mostly non-binding.<sup>9</sup>

Deliberative democratic innovations appeared in Poland only in 2009. At that time, deliberative opinion poll was organized in Poznań<sup>10</sup> on how the municipal football stadium should be managed after the UEFA Euro 2012.<sup>11</sup> As an isolated case, it did not play a significant role from the perspective of the Polish political system. The genuine "participatory revolution" was caused by the participatory budget (PB), first organized in Poland in Sopot in 2011. It was soon voluntarily adopted by other Polish cities, Poznań (2012), Łódź and Wrocław (2013). Currently, the organization of PB is enforced by a 2018 law.<sup>12</sup> It obliges all major Polish cities to distribute in this way no less than 0.5% of their budget resources.

However, the Polish practice of PB considerably differs from the one known from Porto Alegre (cf. Ganuza, Baiocchi 2019; Smith 2009). The Polish PB embezzled most of the principles constitutive for the Brazilian original. They abandoned inclusive deliberations in favor of a plebiscitary formula. The role of residents was reduced almost exclusively to voting on the presented projects. These projects were usually initiated by activists or interest groups, rarely by ordinary citizens. Moreover, sometimes local governments use the PB to achieve their own statutory goals. For example, they encourage their subordinate units

to submit projects related to implementing infrastructure or investment tasks at schools, public libraries, etc. The process of vote aggregation also has serious shortcomings, as in practice, it often discriminates projects submitted in smaller districts.<sup>13</sup> Although interest in participation in the PB on the part of the inhabitants is high in Poland (compared to other forms of participation), it is still relatively modest,<sup>14</sup> considering that voting takes place only once a year.

Some cities (e.g. Dąbrowa Górnicza, Legnica, Gorzów Wielkopolski) have tried to implement PB in the deliberative formula (Podgórska-Rykała 2019). The best-known example is Dąbrowa Górnicza, whose plebiscitary methods of PB have been gradually replaced with deliberative ones since 2016. First, the aggregation system was supplemented with deliberative neighborhood Residents' Forums. In turn, since 2017, Dąbrowa Górnicza has made its PB completely deliberative, implementing it in workshops with the local community. The role of voting was reduced to a minimum. The focus was on working out compromises, cooperation, and dialogue, first between the residents of individual districts and then between them and the city authorities. Unfortunately, these positive changes were stopped by the 2018 amendment to the Local Government Act,<sup>15</sup> which imposed a rigid legal framework for PB. As a result, the single deliberative democratic innovation currently used in Poland is citizens' assemblies and their smaller-scale forms (e.g. various types of citizens' meetings promoted by NGOs).

### **Citizens' assemblies in Poland as an example of self-learning processes**

In Poland, nine citizens' assemblies have been held between 2016 and 2021 in seven largest Polish cities: Gdańsk<sup>16</sup> (three times: in 2016, 2017, and 2018), Lublin<sup>17</sup> (2018), Wrocław<sup>18</sup> (2020), Kraków<sup>19</sup> (2021), Łódź<sup>20</sup> (2020), Warszawa<sup>21</sup> (2020), and Poznań<sup>22</sup> (2021). After 2021, the organization of CAs was also undertaken by Rzeszów, while Kraków and Łódź reached for this innovation again. The smaller cities are also preparing to run CAs. Despite growing interest in CAs, the institution remains unregulated by law. As a result, they are organized based on regulations concerning public consultations. This formula has its advantages and disadvantages. The lack of a rigid framework (as in the case of PB) allows one to freely follow global trends while considering the needs and assets of a given community. However, on the other hand, decisions made in non-binding public consultations may have a small impact on decision-makers and their final decisions (Podgórska-Rykała 2020). As a result, in the case of assemblies organized so far in Poland, percentage thresholds of support (80%) for the discussed solutions were set, after exceeding which the authorities undertook to implement them.<sup>23</sup>

The forerunner of Polish citizens' assemblies is the city of Gdańsk, whose experience has been an important reference point for other Polish cities organizing assemblies. From the perspective of developing this innovation in Poland, initial organizational mistakes resulting from the lack of experience were fundamental. Among the evaluation conclusions developed in the first Gdańsk CA (2016), it was pointed out, among others, that insufficient time was planned for

free deliberation by participants and the development of recommendations (Gerwin, Pancewicz, Haas 2016). Minor organizational changes were also implemented, e.g. increasing the number of reserve assembly members (initially, these were only four) and the variety of teamwork methods for small groups and the plenary session. It was also acknowledged that the choice of specific citizens' assembly topics must be open and preceded by discussion among experts. The main weakness that emerged with the second Gdańsk CA (2017) was the over-dependence of the assembly coordination team on the commissioning city authorities. As a result, it was recommended that the city hall representatives should constitute a minority in the steering team and that such issues as the arrangement of the program of the panel, the selection of experts, the identification of stakeholders, the preparation of educational materials, the choice of moderators – be in the hands of entities independent of the city authorities.

These experiences were considered in subsequent assemblies held in other Polish cities, and, thanks to such a process of “learning from mistakes”, the professionalization of the organization of Polish assemblies progressed rapidly. An example of this is the opening of assemblies to the voices of residents who do not participate directly in their work. Although this possibility was formally available since the beginning, few people used it. There was practically no interest from residents in the open consultations accompanying the assemblies organized in Gdańsk. Therefore, the following cities emphasized the importance of the involvement of residents in the ongoing assembly processes. As a result, in Warsaw (2020), 88 opinions of residents were received, in Wrocław (2020), 182, and Kraków (2021), as many as 420 comments and proposals were submitted by residents.

The evolution of procedures worked out in Polish assemblies was visible also in other aspects. First of all, the formal way of organizing assemblies has evolved. The first Gdańsk assembly (2016), although established on a public initiative, was coordinated by the team directly linked to the city authorities. It consisted of officials, representatives of the third sector, and social activists. Since 2018 (Lublin), it has become common practice to outsource the organization of civic panels to NGOs through an open tender.<sup>24</sup> This formula ensures the independence of an assembly coordinating team from the decision-makers who commission it. It is also a strong element of intersectoral cooperation (Kępa, Podgórska-Rykała 2020).

The method of selecting assembly participants has also evolved. In the assemblies held in Gdańsk (2016, 2017, 2018), the criteria were purely geodemographic, including gender, age, education, and residence. Over time, they began to be supplemented by the assembly's subject matter. For example, in the Wrocław assembly (2020) on urban transport, the criterion of most often used means of transport was considered (car, public transport, bicycle, walking, or other). The same was true in Poznań (2021), where attitudes to climate change were added to the climate panel. This increased the representativeness of the participants, and the diversity of their perspectives, knowledge, and experience.

Assembly duration has also changed, as it systematically increased. The first CAs were planned for three meetings, but it soon turned out it was impossible

to listen to experts, have a free discussion, and prepare recommendations in such a short time. Subsequent assemblies, organized in other cities, were scheduled for a larger number of meetings and days. Sessions of an educational and deliberative character were supplemented with introductory – organizational and integration meetings (Wrocław 2020), and sessions devoted to developing recommendations and summary meetings during which recommendations were prepared for the city authorities (Poznań 2021).

As for the standard features of the Polish citizens' assemblies, they were all organized in large cities. The costs of organizing each event differed, but only slightly.<sup>25</sup> In all cases, assembly participants were paid symbolic remuneration for their work.<sup>26</sup> The draw of participants was also conducted very similarly. One of the two following methods was used: random selection of specific persons (Gdańsk, Lublin) or drawing lots of households (Wrocław, Warszawa, Poznań). Draws were conducted in two rounds. Individuals or households invited in the first round could register and thus express their interest in participating in the second draw.<sup>27</sup> In subsequent cities, random selection processes were improved, and organizers attempted to avoid repeating mistakes made earlier. To participate in the Polish assemblies, adult persons aged 18 and over were invited, except for Łódź and Warsaw, where persons aged 15 and above were allowed to participate.

In terms of transparency, of all the citizens' assemblies organized in Poland, the one organized in Łódź in 2020 looks the worst and is, therefore, the most controversial. It was officially initiated by city councilors who had called on its organization by the Mayor. In response, the Mayor announced the creation of the assembly as her “advisory body”. Several disputable solutions were applied. Firstly, candidates for CA participants were selected randomly from residents who volunteered. Anyone over 15 years of age and with at least a primary school education could express their willingness to participate in the CA.<sup>28</sup> Only from this pool was a demographically representative group of assembly participants drawn.<sup>29</sup> This method significantly decreased the social representativeness of the group. Secondly, the independence of the assembly from the city authorities was deliberately given up. The Łódź Citizens' Assembly Team consisted mainly of City Hall officials. It was responsible for developing the assumptions of the CA, supervising its work, developing educational materials, preparing the schedule of meetings, approving the list of experts and stakeholders, verifying recommendations, and preparing the final report. Entrusting such key tasks to persons who de facto represented only one of the stakeholders (on top of that, the unit commissioning the CA – the city hall) is a serious breach in the catalog of good practices developed in other Polish cities. Thirdly, the automatic implementation of recommendations with the support of at least 80% of the participants of the meeting was abandoned. Such recommendations were only to be ‘presented’ to the mayor of the city.

Table 5.1 presents essential information about citizens' assemblies held in Poland between 2016 and 2021.

Table 5.1 Citizens' Assemblies in Poland, 2016–2021

<i>City</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Number of Assembly Participants (Basic Participants + Substitutes)</i>	<i>Selection Criteria</i>	<i>NGO Coordinator</i>	<i>Meeting Form</i>
<b>Gdańsk</b>	2016	Heavy rains in the city and adapting to climate change	63 + 4	Gender, age, district, and education	The team established upon mayor's decision	Stationary
	2017	Methods of improvement of air quality in the city	56 + 8	Gender, age, district, and education	The team established upon mayor's decision	Stationary
	2018	Methods of supporting civic engagement in the city	56 + 8	Gender, age, district, and education	The team established upon mayor's decision + community representation coordinators	Stationary
<b>Lublin</b>	2018	What should we do to breathe clean air in Lublin?	60 + 12	Gender, age, district, and education	Lublin Research Group, "Shipyard" Social Research and Innovations Laboratory	Stationary
<b>Łódź</b>	7 March–18 July 2020	Green areas in our city	67 + 6	Gender, age, district, and education	Public Policy Institute Foundation	Mixed
<b>Wrocław</b>	3 September–3 October 2020	How to improve transport around Wrocław, considering life quality and climate protection?	75 + 10	Gender, age, district, education, and the most often used mean of transport	Peace House Foundation, European Studies Foundation	Stationary

(Continued)

Table 5.1 (Continued)

<i>City</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Number of Assembly Participants (Basic Participants + Substitutes)</i>	<i>Selection Criteria</i>	<i>NGO Coordinator</i>	<i>Meeting Form</i>
<b>Kraków</b>	10 April– 12 June 2021	How can Kraków and its residents limit energy consumption and increase energy consumption from renewable sources?	60 + 10	Gender, age, district, and education	Public Policy Institute Foundation	Mixed
<b>Warszawa</b>	3–28 November 2020	How to increase energy effectiveness in Warszawa and the share of renewable energy sources in the city energy balance?	80 + 10	Gender, age, district, and education	“Shipyard” Social Research and Innovations Laboratory, Foundation of the Space for Dialogue, Civis Polonus Foundation	Online
<b>Poznań</b>	18 February–22 May 2021	How can Poznań authorities counteract and adapt to climate change and the climate crisis?	65 + 10	Gender, age, district, education, and attitude toward climate change	Association of Natural-born Initiatives	Online

*Source:* own compilation based on data provided by organizers.

### **Poznań citizen's assembly**

In terms of professionalization, at the opposite pole to the Łódź assembly is the Poznań assembly of 2021. Undoubtedly, it is the closest to the ideal defined by OECD<sup>30</sup> and will be an essential benchmark for future Polish assemblies. It was held from February to May 2021 and devoted to countering and adapting to climate changes and the climate crisis. Two specific topics were identified: the adaptation of forests and green areas in Poznań to climate change and the issue of giving up coal heating for city households.

The Poznań Citizens' Assembly was organized as public consultations and commissioned as an open tender. In this mode, it is fundamental to precisely characterize the task, which is to be assigned to an NGO to carry out. This is all the more important as the citizens' assembly is not a standardized and institutionalized tool that could be easily replicated in any place at any time. For this reason, in Poznań, the tender description contained detailed requirements for potential organizers, including the development of the Rules of Procedure of the Citizens' assembly and a detailed presentation on assembly topics and schedule for its realization, as well as rules and procedures for the selection of participants, the mode and time of work of participants, the manner of preparation of the final recommendations, and voting on them. Presentation of the rules on the participation of experts and stakeholders was also expected. It was underlined that the rules of procedure needed to consider the organization and conduct of the assembly in the form of face-to-face meetings and allow participants to attend online sessions. Future organizers were also supposed to plan and run information and promotion campaigns for residents of Poznań and communicate with those interested in the work of the assembly (e.g., via social media).<sup>31</sup>

The organizers were obligated to recruit participants from among those who registered for assembly works after the preliminary draw (conducted by the Poznań City Hall) in a way that assures transparency, geodemographic representativeness (gender, age, education, district), and considers factors relevant to the assembly's subject matter (attitude toward climate change). It was also decided that the assembly was supposed to:

- involve no fewer than 65 participants and no fewer than 10 reserve participants, but no more than 150 persons (including experts and representatives of stakeholders),
- last no less than 25 hours,
- provide opportunities for online participation,
- involve facilitators and experts provided by the bidder and include stakeholders,
- provide remuneration for participants (allowances of no less than 500 PLN net per person).

The bidders were obligated to prepare and deliver the final report and the assembly recording to the Poznań City Hall. Moreover, after the assembly had

finished, the bidder was obligated to organize, in cooperation with the City Hall, a summary meeting at which representatives of the participants would present their recommendations to the Mayor and the City Council representatives. The purpose of such stringent requirements was to maintain the high quality of the assembly process, including its representativeness, deliberativeness, and independence.

The first pool of participants was selected as households. All people residing in the drawn household could register to participate in the assembly. A total of 19,962 addresses were drawn, of which 1,009 people (about 5%) confirmed their willingness to participate in the assembly. Then six potential assembly compositions were identified. Gender and age were considered critical criteria for representativeness (reflected at 100%). A representative reserve group (10 people) was drawn for each panel. The final selection of the assembly was made by a roll of the dice and was broadcast live on the Internet. In this way, a group of 65 primary assembly participants and 10 substitutes were selected.<sup>32</sup>

The assembly organizers took care of transparency of its works. The meetings were broadcast live, and their recordings were available on the YouTube channel.<sup>33</sup> The draw, the educational session, the summary meeting attended by the Mayor, and the discussion on implementing recommendations were also broadcast. Only the deliberative meetings were closed to the public: they were attended only by assembly participants and the facilitation team. Only appointed observers had access to the broadcast of these meetings. The assembly work materials were posted on the dedicated website and social media (Facebook). The assembly participants were provided with the optimal conditions for deliberation, both in small groups and within the entire assembly. The participants could also extend the time of meetings and increase their number.

Additionally, the independence of the coordinating team from the city authorities was guaranteed. It was also ensured that the participants could consult with additional experts, so that no potentially critical perspective was overlooked or neglected. For the same reason, the principle of including all stakeholders in the assembly's work was adopted. Each organization, informal group, or institution whose scope of activity concerned the assembly's topic had the right to present its opinion.<sup>34</sup> The assembly coordinating team only identified the stakeholders and did not select them.<sup>35</sup> All interested organizations and institutions were allowed to participate. Poznań residents were also allowed to participate by submitting recommendations, comments, or suggestions.

The Poznań Citizens' Assembly adopted a total of 77 recommendations. Similar to other Polish citizens' assemblies, it was decided that the recommendations adopted by the assembly with the majority of more than 80% support would be implemented (with the strength of support, calculated as the arithmetic average of points for each proposal, of at least 1.75). The participants voted online for several days. For each proposal, they could indicate their position by choosing one of seven options (from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree"). The results were determined by adding up the points given to the three options: strongly agree – 3 points, agree – 2 points, and agree with doubts – 1 point. There was sufficient support for adapting forests and green areas to climate

change with 46 proposals, and for moving away from coal with 31 proposals (including the previously accepted main recommendation). After deciding to move away from household coal burning, the assembly indicated how to do so. As a result, further recommendations on this issue were developed.

Among the accepted recommendations, three received 100% support. The first was that the new Study of Conditions and Spatial Development of the city should designate places where greenery planting or restoration is necessary. The second one was to increase the number of climbing plants in the city (which absorb dust, and reduce noise and ambient temperature) in locations where it is impossible to plant trees and bushes. It was indicated that climbing plants should be planted on noise barriers. The third recommendation accepted by all participants was always to analyze details of investment expenses for deep thermo-modernization.

Interestingly, the assembly also recommended requiring the current Mayor of Poznań to submit a written report on implementing the assembly recommendations three months before the next election (support – 84.2%; strength – 1.91). The recommendations were adopted in May 2021. In October 2021, the Mayor met with the assembly participants to present the first report on the implementation of the recommendations and to listen to their reservations concerning works performed by city officials. The report contained information about the costs and timing of implementing particular recommendations and the city unit responsible for the particular project. It also provided commentary explaining why the realization of some recommendations is problematic. As it turned out, 11 recommendations were being implemented at that moment, and it was possible to implement another 30. The city administration units raised their objections to other recommendations. The most frequent complaints included, among other things, a different designation of specific land areas in existing local development plans, the varied ownership structure of the land, previously prepared comprehensive development concepts for particular areas, the need to secure additional sources of funding, or the current legislation which made it impossible to implement specific recommendations.

The citizens' assembly in Poznań may be regarded as a model example of this kind of initiative. Its success, however, is directly related to earlier experiences of other Polish cities, which learned from the mistakes of their predecessors.

## **Conclusion**

We agree with those authors who claim that the future of democracy is linked to the increased use of democratic innovations. They can contribute to improving the degree of social legitimacy of modern democracies and provide decision-makers with crucial information from the perspective of effective governance. The great advantage is their high potential for adaptation. Depending on the problem at hand and the socio-political context, they can take different forms and address various issues. Innovations can play a unique role in local communities, which constitute the natural space for the activity of individuals. The subject of deliberation is then the issues that directly affect the residents.

In this context, cities become not only a convenient laboratory of innovations but also a school of deliberation (Podgórska-Rykała 2024).

The democratic innovations used in Poland have such a strictly local character. The history of the Polish use of deliberative democratic innovations is concise. If we skipped the episode with Poznań DOP in 2009, it started with the Gdańsk citizens' assembly in 2016. Therefore, in Poland, we are witnessing an accelerated evolution of a catalog of good practices in the organization of citizens' assemblies. Among the nine assemblies already carried out, we can point out the two extreme benchmarks: on the one hand, the centralized, municipality-dependent, and exclusively consultative Łódź assembly; on the other hand, the transparent, independent, and empowered Poznań assembly. All indications are that the latter assembly will serve as a model for the organizers of future innovations. This is mainly due to its compliance with international standards for organizing citizens' assemblies.

Local character is the *differentia specifica* of Polish citizens' assemblies. Unlike in other countries, Polish assemblies are organized exclusively in cities. This can be seen as a result of several factors. First is the vitality of the Polish local government. Established initially shortly after Poland regained its independence in 1918, and later reconstituted after the fall of communism in 1990, the local government is responsible for meeting residents' basic needs. It takes care, among others, of education, housing, primary medical care, social assistance, culture, infrastructure, safety, environment protection, job creation, and regional development. It is also one of the main spaces for the development of civic activism. Local government politicians are among the public figures enjoying the greatest public trust. At the lowest levels, in *gmina* and *powiat* districts, residents tend to elect representatives of social movements and local authorities to local governance institutions rather than representatives of leading political parties.

Secondly, the use of democratic innovations (including citizens' assemblies) practically exclusively by local governments is due to the distrust of Polish political elites toward what they perceive as unpredictable civic participation. The consequences of this fact are all too visible in Polish political life. Representatives of the leading Polish political parties have treated all direct citizen participation instrumentally. The main political parties and movements – Civic Platform and Law and Justice – have been skeptical about referendums.<sup>36</sup> While they were eager to recommend it when in opposition, they quickly abandoned the idea after gaining power. The situation is similar in the case of the citizens' legislative initiative. Successive Polish governments invariably ignore proposals to facilitate the use of this instrument.<sup>37</sup>

It is encouraging that a country as averse to democratic innovations as Poland is systematically adopting them locally. There is still a long way to go. The condition for the existence of panels at the national level is their dissemination at the local level. However, for this to happen, there needs to be an increase in public confidence in innovations and a reduction in policymakers' fear of them.

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## Notes

- 1 Though the term “democratic innovations” is regularly used in the scientific literature, its meaning and material scope are still debated. The authors of one of the more detailed definitions state that “democratic innovations are processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence” (Elstub and Escobar 2019: 11). For this text we adopt the more straightforward definition by Graham Smith. He defined democratic innovations as “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith 2009: 1).
- 2 Cf. <https://globalassembly.org/declaration>.
- 3 <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/waldenia-model-for-deliberative-democracy/> (access on: 22.02.2022).
- 4 The two assemblies on the electoral system in Canada, in the end, proposed different solutions. See Smith 2009: 100–101.
- 5 Art. 125 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.
- 6 Art. 170 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.
- 7 The subject matter of a local referendum may be the dismissal of the executive body (only in *gminas*), the settlement of issues concerning the local government community within the scope of tasks and competencies of its bodies, other crucial matters concerning social, economic or cultural ties connecting the community, self-taxation of residents for public purposes within the scope of tasks and competencies of *gminas*.
- 8 In case of recall of a directly elected local government body, it shall be 3/5 of the number of those taking part in the body’s election to be recalled.
- 9 See Piasecki 2005; Olejniczak-Szałowska 2002, 2008; Rulka 2014; Doliwa 2014.
- 10 On the initiative of the Social Project 2012 and in cooperation with Stanford University and the Poznań City Hall.
- 11 A total of 880 people took part in it (Phase I), of whom 148 were involved in the substantive discussion (Phase II). Participants were offered four scenarios for stadium management after the 2012 European Football Championship (EURO 2012). Before the debate, the model which envisaged the involvement of Poznański Ośrodek Sportu i Rekreacji was the most popular (33.6%), while after the discussion, it turned out that the participants were much more in favour of the proposal to hand over the management of the stadium to a private or public-private company (48.6% support). See Kubiak, Krzewińska 2012: 14–15; Młynarkiewicz 2014: 809.
- 12 The act amending some acts to increase citizens’ participation in the process of selection, operation, and control of some public institutions of January 11, 2018 (Journal of Laws of 2018, pos. 130).
- 13 Polish PB generally consists of two pools of projects, city-wide (obligatory) and district (optional). In practice, projects from the first pool implemented in smaller districts are rarely selected for implementation.

- 14 In large cities it varies from 4 to 5% (Kraków, Warszawa) to 16% (Łódź), while the median value is ca. 10% (Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk). See *Raport: Budżet obywatelski w polskich miastach*, <https://www.miasto2077.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Raport-Budżet%CC%87ety-Obywatelskie-w-polskich-miastach.pdf>.
- 15 The act forced cities to organize PBs in a plebiscitary formula. Therefore, for some time, Dąbrowa Górnicza implemented two PBs: one deliberative, developed independently, and one plebiscitary, imposed by the 2018 Act. However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the deliberative version of the PB was put on hold.
- 16 <https://www.gdansk.pl/panel-obywatelski> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 17 <https://lublin.eu/mieszkanicy/partycypacja/panel-obywatelski> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 18 <https://www.wroclaw.pl/rozmawia/panel-obywatelski> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 19 <https://ipp.expert/krakowski-panel-klimatyczny> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 20 <https://uml.lodz.pl/panel-obywatelski> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 21 <https://eko.um.warszawa.pl/panel-klimatyczny> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 22 <https://www.poznan.pl/panelobywatelski/> (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 23 It is worth mentioning that in Poland, the agreements mentioned above are made with the monocratic executive body of the city – the Mayor, and not with the city council, which in local government units at the basic level is a collegiate decision-making body.
- 24 The act of 24 April 2003, on public benefit activity and voluntary service (Journal of Laws 2020, pos. 1057).
- 25 In Poznań, Wrocław, and Lublin costs reached ca. 200 thousand PLN and in Warszawa 180 thousand PLN. Assemblies organized in Łódź (150 thousand PLN) and Gdańsk (120 thousand PLN) were cheaper.
- 26 For example, 600 PLN in Gdańsk, 500 PLN in Poznań, 400 PLN in Warszawa.
- 27 For example, in Gdańsk (2016), it was decided that 120 invitations were sent per one assembly participant. As a result, 8,696 letters were sent, while 896 persons submitted their applications. Sixty-three participants and four substitutes were selected. In the next Gdańsk assembly (2017), 9,042 randomly selected people were invited, among which 899 confirmed their will to participate. Sixty-six participants and eight substitutes were selected. In Wrocław (2020), the assembly was planned for 75 participants and 10 substitutes. Totally 20,000 invitations were sent, and 826 inhabitants registered for participation.
- 28 The form consisted of the following fields: name and surname, date of birth, place of residence, education, PESEL number, and contact data.
- 29 Others may have participated in the panel meetings as observers.
- 30 The catalogue of good practices regarding the organization of citizens' assembly listed in this report includes, among other things: clear definition of a topic, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, representativeness, providing essential information, deliberative nature, allowing sufficient time for participants, integrity, privacy, and evaluation (OECD 2020).
- 31 The City Hall also stressed the importance of sustainability, obliging bidders to prepare flyers, posters and invitations using FSC certified or other sustainable materials. It was also stipulated that in performing the public task, a bidder should be obligated to eliminate items made of polyolefin plastics, including tableware, chopsticks, straws, food containers, bags, nets and advertising bags, and replace them with compostable or biodegradable products; serve beverages in returnable bottles or reusable packaging; serve tap water for consumption when it meets legal standards for water quality for human consumption; use recycled or recyclable materials.
- 32 The assembly works could not be attended by managers working at the Poznań Town Hall at organizational units and city companies, as well as by city and district councilors, parliament deputies and members of the Polish government, members, employees and representatives of the assembly parties and members of the Coordinating Team and the Monitoring Team, as well as experts, observers and facilitators.

- 33 [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCf9cC\\_suXbv4YZBk9HNLElw/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCf9cC_suXbv4YZBk9HNLElw/videos) (accessed on 6.02.2022).
- 34 In this way, the following organizations were incorporated within assembly works: Polish Climate Forum, School Strike for Climate Poznań, Planetarians, Extinction Rebellion Poznań, Right to Nature Poznań, Morasko XXI Association, Centre for Promotion of Eco-Development, Left Together Poznań, Bathing Area Collective, Naturalist Club Poznań, Green Coalition, Poznań Town Hall and some city organization units.
- 35 Supervision over the procedure was performed by the Monitoring Team consisting of persons representing the town hall and each of the councillor clubs of the Poznań City Council, four social science academic lecturers and eight persons representing NGOs or informal groups. The team, among other things, monitored the panel's compliance with the adopted rules and schedule, received and handled allegations of violations of standards or other provisions of the regulations, could arbitrate in case of disputes, supervised the process of a random selection of panellists and appointed observers to participate in panel meetings during the closed part.
- 36 Symptomatic are the words uttered in 2015 by Małgorzata Kidawa-Błońska, then-Speaker of the Sejm and later a presidential candidate, who stated that "It is not the case that every issue can be decided in a referendum", while she said of parliamentarians that "These are not people by chance (...) you cannot pretend that parliament will operate in parallel alongside the referendum system". Cf. Garry et al. (2021).
- 37 For years, there have been many proposals to make the procedure less formal. For example, it is possible to collect signatures under a civic bill via the Internet and support committees in preparing justifications for submitted bills, especially in impact assessment. It is also indicated as necessary to introduce the obligation to complete legislative work on a project within a specified time and submit the commitment to hold a public hearing. Currently, many drafts are rejected too hastily at the first reading. Despite the shortcomings of the institution and the fact that since 1999 there have been several attempts to amend both the constitutional provisions regulating the legislative initiative of citizens and the statutory regulation itself, none of these attempts has been successful (see Podgórska-Rykała 2021).

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