

Democratic Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe – The Perspective of Policymakers and Civil Society Organisations

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)
Vol. 21, No. 3
DOI: 10.2478/pce-2025-0015

Abstract: *Political representation and democracy in several European countries have faced considerable challenges in recent decades. Especially worrying are the decline in electoral turnout and party membership, along with the decline in political trust and growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy. These are all linked to the quality of democracy. Many scholars believe that a possible solution to such problems is democratic innovations, largely due to their participatory nature. Although in recent times democratic innovations have been put into practice, and analysed from multiple perspectives in multiple European countries, this has not happened with regard to Central and Eastern European countries. Based on face-to-face interviews conducted in 2024 with policymakers as well as representatives of civil society organisations in four Central and Eastern European countries, exploratory analysis reveals (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, including for maintaining/increasing political trust. The analysis points not only to differences among countries, but also between the groups of respondents.*

Keywords: *trust, democratic innovations, Central and Eastern Europe, policymakers, civil society organisations*

Introduction

The crisis of democracy is talked about a lot these days, with many researchers referring to trends in longitudinal data. In recent decades, all manner of data

have shown a decline in electoral turnout in European democracies. However, the decrease is more evident in post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries than elsewhere in Europe (see Fruncillo et al. 2023; International IDEA n.d.; Kuzina et al. 2023). At the same time, multiple sources reveal a similar trend in declining party membership, notably aggregate country-level data (see van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke 2012; van Haute, Paulis & Sierens 2018). A similar situation may be observed regarding the satisfaction of citizens with the functioning of representative democracy, as well as their confidence and/or political trust. Concerns about political trust, especially in the last two decades, are further reflected in the rise of academic articles dealing with the topic. Still, cross-nationally there have been notable differences in the decline in political trust (Brunkert et al. 2023; Tufiş, Ghica & Radu 2023). Even though satisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy and political trust are important pillars of modern democracies, it seems that trust is a more fundamental phenomenon associated with normative expectations to do with political institutions while satisfaction is more strongly connected to how citizens view policy outputs (Goldberg, Lindell & Bächtiger 2024). Norris (2023: 4) states that the conventional view has overwhelmingly celebrated the positive impacts of trust, and generally expressed deep concerns with the signs of decreasing political trust, but more recently scholars have identified blind or uncritical trust as equally problematic. Some level of scepticism/mistrust in political institutions is an inherent part of modern representative democracies. Many scholars have shown that political trust together with different forms of political participation are pivotal in modern representative democracies, although the intricate nature of the connection between the two remains a subject of debate (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024: 4). The participation/inclusion of citizens is particularly important for political trust in discussions of the process-based type of trust – namely, procedures of involvement and those processes on the input side of modern representative democracies (Kumagai & Iorio 2020; Mazeaud & Gourgues 2023; Norris 2023). Font and Blanco (2007: 558) argue the introduction of the new forms of citizen participation has (among other things) been justified by the need to create political trust, although this is not the sole reason for their development.

More recently, democratic innovations have gained attention as a popular means of restoring citizens' participation and involvement in politics and decision-making. Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) claim that different types of participatory initiatives and democratic innovations can be used to connect citizens with policy- or decision-making processes, strengthen citizens' participation in these processes, and boost their trust in political institutions and representative democracies. Indeed, democratic innovations have manifested in different variants and processes, e.g. direct, deliberative and participatory. Elstub and Escobar (2019) noted that important and considerably large variations exist among them in terms of participants, mandate, delibera-

tion techniques, etc. They referred to four groups of democratic innovations: referendums and citizen initiatives, mini-publics, participatory budgeting and collaborative governance. The issue of how democratic innovations impact participation and/or political trust, as well as policies, actors and institutions, is hardly new (Jacquet, Ryan & van der Does 2023). Still, it is necessary to first talk about democratic innovations generally, especially the views and preferences held by policymakers regarding participatory democracy processes (Mikhaylovskaya & Rouméas 2024) since the outcomes of these are linked to the impact of democratic innovations.

The aim of this article is to present an exploratory analysis that reveals different views of policymakers (politicians and civil servants) along with representatives of civil society organisations concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, specifically with respect to maintaining or increasing political trust.

Although many studies have considered citizens' views and preferences regarding democratic innovations, this article looks at the (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives of both political elites/policymakers – an aspect that has only recently received greater attention despite them being the main actors in the reform processes (Núñez, Close & Bedock 2016) – and the representatives of civil society organisations, who are simultaneously representatives of different kinds of elites. Civil society organisations are also often participants in, or a medium through which citizens become involved in, democratic innovations, which explains why their perspectives on these issues are important as well. In addition, focus in this article is given to four Central and Eastern European countries, a region that has been largely overlooked in research on democratic innovations (Gherghina, Ekman & Podolian 2019: 3). This is despite the fact that many of these countries have experienced important declines in electoral turnout and party membership coupled with a decline in political trust (or encounter relatively consistent low levels), along with increasing or persistently high levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy and/or a deterioration of the quality of democracy, with some even facing democratic backsliding (see Nations in Transit report by Smeltzer & Karppi 2024; V-Dem by Nord et al. 2025).

The (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives of policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations used while dealing with the issue of democratic innovations were revealed in an analysis of 133 face-to-face interviews conducted in 2024.

Democratic innovations

Several scholars, including Ryan (2023: 15), claim that one of the most influential and oft-cited definitions of democratic innovations is that provided by Smith (2009: 1), who defined democratic innovations as novel institutions spe-

cifically designed to increase and deepen citizens' participation in the political decision-making process. Smith (2009: 2) stresses that democratic innovations directly engage citizens and are institutionalised forms of participation that give citizens a formal role in policy, legislative or constitutional decision-making. Also frequently cited is Elstub and Escobar's (2019: 14) definition of democratic innovations as 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 their participation, deliberation and influence.

Jacquet, Ryan and van der Does (2023: 1) describe how fostering the participation of ordinary citizens in politics, not simply the representatives of civil society organisations or experts (apart from politicians), has indeed become a *leitmotif* of contemporary governance. Here, one should not overlook the fact that the current debates on democratic innovations build on earlier democratic theories, e.g. Pateman's theory on participatory democracy (Holdo 2017: 2), which means that ideas about increasing the political participation of citizens in various ways are not new. In fact, these ideas have now moved into the mainstream of democratic theory and inspired practices (Ryan 2023: 15) or, as Jäske and Setälä (2020: 470) claim, democratic innovations are no longer seen as alternatives to representative democracy, but are supposed to complement it (Geissel & Michels 2023: 285). It should also be noted that these democratic innovations are governance-driven.

In his seminal work, Smith (2009) was already interested in the ways these innovations contribute to the six goods of democratic institutions. Geissel and Michels (2023) mention a wide variety of (potential) impacts of democratic innovations and four types of impact: on policies, on actors, on institutions and on democratic and social performance. Indeed, one can find many discussions on the roles and impact of democratic innovations. Jäske and Setälä (2020) caution that different innovations can have different functions, and that a single innovation is clearly unable to resolve all the challenges faced by democracies, also given that different democratic innovations have varying theoretical and genealogical origins. It has been argued that even different variants and processes of democratic innovations can contribute in different ways to various aspects of democratic processes.

The issue of how they impact political trust is frequently addressed (e.g., Boulianne 2019; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016; Jacquet, Ryan & van der Does 2023; Jäske & Setälä 2020). Nevertheless, although it is precisely democratic innovations and citizens' increased participation in them that are frequently expected to impact political trust (Boulianne 2019; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell 2016; Font & Blanco 2007; Goldberg, Lindell & Bächtiger 2024; Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024), for a long time the possible link between them remained empirically unexplored (Font & Blanco 2007). Yet, more

recently, even though several theorists and practitioners have suggested that democratic innovations can positively impact political trust, thus far evidence of this in the literature remains mixed (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024). The absence of any clear pattern of the impact of democratic innovations on political trust suggests that distinct types of innovation, along with unique designs, produce different outcomes among citizens (Gonthier, Ayme & Belot 2024: 17). Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) mention another aspect in this regard, claiming that reciprocal political trust is particularly important for the successful implementation of democratic innovations. Without decision-makers' support for participatory democracy, the implementation of democratic innovation tools is unlikely to be successful or influential, or to lead to greater political trust. In this respect, decision-makers' (dis)trust in participatory democracy processes can hold major consequences for whether the implementation of democratic innovation mechanisms is successful, as well as for the impact of such innovations. When decision-makers lack trust in the mechanisms of democratic innovations, they are less likely to implement the contributions generated by participatory processes. Thus, when citizens sense that their recommendations have been disregarded, this could deepen the crisis of legitimacy, lower trust and see citizens disengage even more from political participation. Citizens need to feel that they can influence decisions by participating in the mechanisms of a democratic innovation. However, when inputs are not implemented, feedback with a justified explanation of the decision should be provided.

Further, Geissel and Michels (2023: 292) state that it is difficult to identify a causal relationship between any potentially influential variable (like democratic innovations) and subsequent changes, and there is a danger of overemphasising or even generalising particular impacts of given democratic innovations in a certain context.

Smith (2009) already found not only enthusiasm for democratic innovations, but criticism and scepticism as well, especially concerning extending participation, since democratic innovations do not affect all citizens in the same way. Jacquet, Ryan and van der Does (2023: 2) warn that democratic innovations can fail to deliver on their promise of offering truly deeper citizen involvement in policymaking and remain 'ripe for abuse' by politicians and other actors that seek to employ innovations to advance their own interests. In that sense, democratic innovations function as mere window-dressing strategies that do not genuinely empower citizens in policymaking. Here, we can add Ryan's (2023) doubts about whether we can expect incumbent political decision-makers to voluntarily give up power. In any event, they must have trust in democratic innovations if the mechanism is indeed proposed to be implemented (Yang 2006).

Mikhaylovskaya and Rouméas (2024) identified several views held by political decision-makers with respect to participatory democracy processes or democratic innovations. First, many of them feel that citizens are incapable

or not knowledgeable enough to make a valuable contribution to the process. Second, while decision-makers find interactions with citizens important, they mostly support informal interactions with them, not their formal involvement in the decision-making process. Third, decision-makers may feel that the more citizens have a say, the more their own competencies and legitimacy come into question. Fourth, decision-makers may use democratic innovation mechanisms to provide legitimacy for their policies by implementing those recommendations that align with their policies or promote their image and popularity.

Democratic innovations were primarily developed on the local level (Font & Blanco 2007) and were for the most part initially introduced there (Geissel 2009; Smith 2009). In contrast, their implementation on the national level remains scarce, notwithstanding politicians being willing to discuss the implementation of democratic innovations not only on the national, but on the supranational level as well (Núñez, Close & Bedock 2016: 342).

Methodology

The presented analysis is based on qualitative data gathered via face-to-face semi-structured interviews with policymakers (politicians and civil servants) as well as representatives of civil society organisations in four Central and East European countries: the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Data were gathered as part of the Horizon Europe project Trust in European Democracies (TRUEDEM) financed by the European Commission. All four countries have a parliamentary system and a socialist past, and have recently faced challenges to the quality of democracy (see Nations in Transit report by Smeltzer & Karppi 2024; V-Dem by Nord et al. 2025), indicating that challenges to democracy seem bigger and more serious for them than for many other European countries.

In each country, a very detailed, purposive cluster sample was used that ensured the participation of policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations active on different institutional levels (local, national, European). In addition, respondents were different types of policymakers, politicians and civil servants from legislative and executive branches, along with representatives of civil society organisations (see Table 1). According to the project guidelines, respondents were divided into two main groups: policymakers and politicians (including elected representatives of legislative bodies, representatives of executive bodies, civil servants and political party officials/leaders) and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs) (including trade unions/social partners, grassroots organisations and social movements, and democracy advocacy organisations). Altogether, 133 interviews were conducted in selected countries and analysed.

To preserve anonymity while maintaining analytical value, the quotes in this article specify the country and a broad role category (e.g. politicians, civil servants or representatives of civil society organisations). For clarity and read-

ability, country and role information is provided either in the text or in brackets, depending on the narrative flow. Where analytically relevant, the level of government (local, national or European) is also indicated.

Table 1: Details of the sample of respondents

	Expert interviews with policymakers and politicians*												Σ	Expert interviews with CSO representatives**												Σ	Total				
	Elected representatives of legislative bodies				Representatives of executive bodies				Civil Servants				Political party officials/ leaders					Trade unions (social partners)				Grassroots organizations and social movements				Democracy advocacy organizations					
Czech Republic	4				5				4				3				16	4				5				5				14	30
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	0		0	2	2	3	2	0	2	2	1									
Poland	4				4				3				3				14	6				5				5				16	30
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	2	0	1	2	0	1	2	0		0	4	2	2	2	1	2	2	1									
Slovakia	4				3				5				3				15	4				5				8				17	32
Loc/Nat/Eur	1	2	1	2	1	0	0	3	2	1	2	0		0	3	1	3	2	0	2	5	1									
Slovenia	5				5				7				4				21	5				7				8				20	41
Loc/Nat/Eur	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	2	0		0	3	2	2	5	0	2	4	2									
Total	17				17				19				13				66	19				22				26				67	133
* QUESTIONS:																															
- Thinking of citizens' involvement in policymaking, what role do you think citizens should play in making decisions that concern them?																															
Do you think people are ready to/willing to participate in such decision-making?																															
- Have you or your organisation been involved in any consultations or participatory democracy processes (such as citizen assemblies, local citizen councils)?																															
Do you think such processes are a useful practice to build citizens' trust in the political system?																															
** QUESTIONS:																															
- What role do you think organizations like yours should play in political decision-making?																															
How could the interests you represent be better considered in policymaking?																															
- What role do you think citizens should play in making decisions that concern them?																															
- How important is for you / your organization the involvement of citizens in policymaking?																															

Source: Authors based on Kizilova, Belot, Haerper, Gonthier & Palt 2024

All interviews were transcribed, anonymised (in the quotes below, the content in square brackets was anonymised) and translated into the English language by artificial intelligence tools like Chat GPT and DeepL. All research teams within the TRUEDEM project that opted for the AI-assisted translation approach with ChatGPT worked with the same uniform prompt, ensuring consistency and minimising variation in outputs. All translations were double checked by members of the research team. For the purposes of this article, the interview quotes were not proofread to ensure the traceability and transparency of the research process, except that the spelling was adjusted to British English. The interviews generally focused on different aspects of political trust and trustworthiness.

In the next stage, we divided the interviews into sections, selecting those dealing with the rather broad question of the (expected) role of citizens in policymaking and in decision-making processes that affect them, and a more specific sub-question about the importance of democratic innovations for maintaining/increasing political trust, i.e. trust in different political institutions (only policymakers were asked this sub-question).

The answers to selected questions were manually compiled and organised in Excel, grouped by type of actor and, where relevant, by institutional level (local,

national or European). Through careful reading of all the respondents' answers we focused on respondents' (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning the meaning and importance of democratic innovations, including for maintaining/increasing political trust. We identified eight topics: a) representative democracy vs democratic innovations and b) importance for trust; c) reservations and limitations vis-à-vis democratic innovations; d) the competencies of civil servants; e) the extent to which actors support participatory democracy; f) attitudes concerning the most common democratic innovations, referendums and participatory budgeting; g) the conditions for democratic innovations to be successfully implemented; and h) the importance of the local level for democratic innovations. All topics were inductively identified from the translated interviews transcripts. While the overarching conceptual framework influenced the design of the interview guidelines, the themes analysed in this section were mostly not derived from theoretical categories but emerged from the empirical material. This enabled us to perform an exploratory comparative analysis and identify various perspectives among the policymakers and civil society organisation representatives in (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives concerning democratic innovations, together with their importance especially for maintaining/increasing political trust in the four countries under study.

Democratic innovations in the four countries

As expected, regardless of whether they were policymakers or representatives of civil society organisations active on the local, national or European level in each selected country, the respondents in principle and/or *de facto* mostly support the idea of involving citizens in policymaking processes, yet to a lesser extent do they support including them in decision-making processes. In this section, we present several types of (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives they relied on while dealing with the issue of democratic innovations.

Representative democracy and democratic innovations

Several respondents (policymakers and civil society organisation representatives) pointed out that participatory processes via democratic innovations to complement representative democracy are seen as important and/or beneficial for democracy today from different points of view. A very broad idea was presented by a Slovak civil servant, who is simply aware that 'we need to give people the sense that they are involved. Four-year or five-year cycles are no longer sufficient. People need to have the feeling, and we need to restore that feeling, that they are engaged.'

A similar opinion was expressed in a statement made by a representative of a Slovak civil society organisation:

I think that citizens should still have a say in some way outside of elections. Also by way of some associations that represent different areas. So yes, I think that the citizen's voice should be heard because at the end of the day politicians are just elected by the citizens.

At the same time, another representative of a Slovak civil society organisation was convinced that democracy calls for tough, demanding discussions. In contrast, a Polish politician succinctly stated that 'involving citizens in decision-making makes them, as I say, feel that something depends on them'.

Further, a Slovak politician was not happy with the dominant belief in Slovakia that only parties are important, expressing that s(he) has a problem

when certain political parties today are talking about the fact that policy should only be made through political parties... And so I fundamentally disagree with that. I think that politics is a matter that concerns all of us... It is essentially a way of managing public affairs, and that is what civil society exists for, and civil associations, and interest groups, and trade unions, and just the whole of civil society. And they have a right to participate in politics because politics comes into their lives.

Similarly, a Slovenian politician referred to a link between citizens' involvement and the impact of measures on their lives: 'Indeed, involving citizens is very, very sensible. When we implement measures that, of course, impact their lives, their work, etc.'

A Slovenian civil servant saw the participation of people as a normal characteristic of modern democracies. A representative of a civil society organisation noted that solutions accepted following consultations are not seen solely as an act of the authorities:

And actually, I think that they can lead to solutions that then people are more likely to accept, because they know that this was not just some authoritative arbitrary will adopted past the opinion, or even despite social partners. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Scholars (e.g. Albareda 2018; Greenwood 2007; Kröger 2008; Putnam 1993) have often shown how the participation of civil society organisations in policy/decision-making processes brings concrete benefits because their input can provide missing knowledge and information for the process. This view was

also expressed by some respondents, including a Polish representative of such an organisation:

I think that in terms of political decision-making, our association should play the role of such, let's say, a provider of possible solutions. That is, information and ideas actually from the public. And I don't want to say a negotiator, but a voice, that of the public, a representative of that public voice in terms of shaping solutions to problems that sometimes are not apparent in advance.

A Slovenian politician similarly believed that public debate as a democratic innovation institution makes law more robust and adds to legitimacy: 'I think this system is good because then [authors' note: the law] is robust, the system is such that people believe in it and it works if it is coordinated with them.'

One can often find another argument in the literature as to why the involvement of other actors, not just state actors, in policymaking processes can prove beneficial. This includes the argument that civil society organisations have information stemming from everyday life and can help policymakers form (more) feasible policies. A Polish representative of a civil society organisation neatly summarised this by saying 'that without the participation of organisations... these political decisions, in my opinion, are sometimes completely detached from reality'.

Trust and democratic innovations

As mentioned above, building trust is just one argument used to explain the importance of democratic innovations. A Slovak representative of a civil society organisation referred to effectiveness, yet also trust, when it comes to democratic innovations:

The feeling that at least they will consult with us, that someone will listen to us, is very important from the perspective of the effectiveness of democracy or the perception of the state... If someone feels that their opinion or the opinion of a wider group is not at all interesting to the state, then they will very easily lose trust.

As exposed above, the involvement of citizens in different kinds of processes is important from different perspectives, obviously including the aspect of building trust. A Polish politician stated that 'one of the key elements of consultation and conversation, and through consultation, talking to residents, listening to residents, listening to residents' needs the whole stage, that would be key in building trust'.

In comparison, a Slovak representative of a civil society said:

I don't mean they should accept every suggestion we make, but the understanding of citizen participation – whether from our organisation or any other, including ordinary citizens – in the exercise of power outside of election periods is, in my view, what builds trust.

Also in connection with trust, another respondent pointed to the complexity of policy problems these days that cannot be addressed effectively without involving those possessing experience with the issue: 'Direct democracy isn't a cure-all, given the complexity of modern issues, but thoughtful, practical participatory tools can improve decision-making and trust' (CSO representative from Slovakia).

Even though many authors have some doubts about a link between democratic innovations and trust, two Czech politicians evidently connect the involvement of citizens in different processes as a way to strengthen trust. One argued that 'each one of us, when we are involved in a community, has much higher confidence in the whole system because we don't feel isolated, so actually indirectly just being involved in that community increases the feeling of being well'.

A Slovak representative of a civil society observed a clear link between trust and the possibilities of participation, notably on the local level:

We see this on the local government level: when municipalities operate more openly, listen to citizens, allow them to participate in processes, and involve them in co-deciding and co-creating their small community or city, citizens have much greater trust in their local government than in the national parliament.

On the other hand, several Slovenian respondents from different spheres noted the importance of including citizens as a way of assuring transparency in policy/decision-making processes, which in turn can maintain or help to build trust.

Reservations with democratic innovations

Above, we presented several critical statements concerning democratic innovations mentioned in the academic literature. In the interviews, it was also possible to detect (potentially) similar reservations regarding the (greater) inclusion of citizens in policymaking processes in general, and specifically decision-making processes. In the four countries, a number of respondents exposed obstacles that are also quite frequently mentioned by scholars more sceptical of democratic innovations, like time constraints, the complexity of issues, the lack of skills or qualifications of citizens, their low interest in participating in such processes, as well as the political culture that could prevent democratic innovations from being used more broadly. Reservations with the use of democratic innovations

were also identified by the representatives of civil society organisations, and not just by policymakers as one might expect. One civil servant in Slovenia stated:

Naively, it would be to claim that they can participate equally in all the policies we make at the European level. Sometimes the nature of the problem is such that there isn't time for all these kinds of consultations.

One Polish politician noted that decision-making powers also bring responsibility, pointing out that 'the issue of responsibility is very important; if we think only about expanding participation without creating such a field for people to feel responsibility, then it will be a bit misguided.'

Similarly, a representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation remarked:

I think here lies our biggest challenge. It's not so much that decision-makers don't understand that policies need to be created differently, as much as it is that we people are not used to the responsibility that the participatory process carries... We would of course prefer to even have a say in it, and for only us to be listened to, but then one must also take responsibility, which is the downside.

A Slovak politician referred to the significance of direct democracy and its tools, while adding a reservation concerning the excessive use of democratic innovations: 'On the other hand, I recognise that some issues are so challenging and complex that excessive trust in direct democracy tools could backfire.'

A Slovenian politician very inclined to participatory processes in any case warned that it is different if we are talking about the inclusion of individual citizens or advocacy groups because citizens are less likely to possess the competencies and skills needed for meaningful participation:

It is a fact that we need to adjust the inclusion processes to the level of competence of citizens for participation in these processes. When we have advocacy organisations that advocate, I will say and have competencies even in writing laws, ordinances, and so forth, they can of course participate in this phase of the process together with, I will say, professional services, politics, however, to create new regulations. But if we talk generally about citizens who do not have these competencies, I will say, this involvement must be at the ideational level.

A sceptical stance toward the active involvement of citizens generally or for dealing with many issues is apparent in the words of one Slovak politician:

We can actively involve people in a few things... And at some point, it may not lead to burnout, but simply people will say, 'I no longer have the capacity for this, I need to focus on other things. I have my work, my family, and my

hobbies'... And relying on people to solve everything for us through direct democracy tools, I am very sceptical about that. (politician from Slovakia)

Another Slovak politician said 'whether, to some extent, at least for certain issues, we should differentiate the phases of involvement and the degree of engagement'.

Several respondents in the four countries also noted that some/many citizens do not participate and even do not want to participate, showing a lack of interest in politics altogether. One can also frequently find such reservations in the literature.

As mentioned, some actors believe that civil society organisations are better qualified to participate in policy- and/or decision-making processes than individual citizens. A Czech civil servant expressed this succinctly with 'consultations yes, but with stakeholders'. A similar view was indicated by a representative of a civil society organisation in Slovenia:

I think that especially non-governmental organisations and social partners are equipped and ready. And maybe also have the capacities for this. And when it actually gets closer to individuals, these capacities and this knowledge increasingly decrease.

Likewise, in Czechia several respondents highlighted the importance of the (civic) education of citizens and linked successful use of democratic innovations to it. For instance, 'the quality of education has to be improved at all levels, so that people are educated from an early age to be able to participate, to be able to change things' (politician from the Czech Republic).

However, it was possible to also identify a very critical stance on the inclusion of NGOs and not citizens in various participatory activities, as one Slovak politician expressed 'in favour, but not in these forms. Not always in these artificial uniforms, which actually favour only NGOs over real mass participation.'

As already noted by Mikhaylovskaya and Roumeas (2024), reservations about democratic innovations especially on the side of decision-makers may arise from scepticism concerning the competencies held by citizens. It was also exposed that decision-makers are sometimes more inclined to support informal than formal interactions with citizens and also some such statements were identified by the interviews.

In search for the competencies of civil servants

Several respondents also identified obstacles with the qualifications of policy-makers, more concretely of civil servants, to deal with democratic innovations. This is an important point, with Geissel and Michels (2023) stressing that democratic innovations are governance-driven.

Even though the question of (introducing) democratic innovations is sometimes seen as a kind of a play among two types of actors – politicians and citizens, the thinking expressed by a representative of a Czech civil society organisation also shows that bureaucracy/civil servants are important parts as well in the processes:

It's not civil society against some kind of politics, but it's like a triangle where there's civil society, politics and the bureaucracy, which sometimes has an advantage over politics and informational know-how, sometimes even a power advantage. So, it's a kind of triangular game.

A Slovenian politician even observed some:

clash between political bureaucracy and civil society... this clash between political bureaucracy and civil society is actually sometimes greater than between the political class and civil society, because political bureaucracy reacts much more difficultly to the demanding and all too often necessary changes that civil society demands. So mainly, what a responsible politician in these times should do is empower civil society to talk to the political bureaucracy.

Another Slovenian politician stated it is important for politicians or civil servants to be active in these processes:

I think it now demands a lot from the decision-makers too, to structure, lead this process in such a way that they do not demand too much from citizens, that the whole process is really transparent, in short, that it isn't just some consultation and no one can tell you... you come, express your opinion and no one can tell you what will happen with it... But the longer I am a politician and the more I see how demanding this process is and how much damage you can do if you approach it the wrong way.

Some respondents referred to the important, but in reality not necessarily positive, role/input of civil servants since they are not always very supportive in such processes:

I would turn this question around because I think the real question is whether our officials are trained to carry out inclusive processes. But this isn't just a joke; it's a serious concern when it comes to legislation preparation... So definitely, one comment is that we don't even have a bureaucracy trained to implement participatory processes. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Is there genuine support for more participatory democracy?

When talking about the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, some (more normative) stances against a too-broad inclusion in them were revealed by the policymakers as well as the representatives of civil society organisations. This issue is particularly important with Mikhaylovskaya and Roumeas (2024) who note that the successful implementation of democratic innovations not only depends on citizens' trust in the process but also the support of policymakers. A Czech politician indicated they are a fan of classical representative democracy, and along similar lines a representative of a Czech civil society organisation stated 'We have a representative democracy, we elect our representatives to represent us and work for us', as did a Slovak civil servant: 'Citizens should participate through elected representatives.'

In Slovakia, some politicians have taken a firm stance against the delegation of decision-making powers to citizens, and exposed the need to focus on elections, which are the most important for democracy and acquire such powers:

I'm not in favour of letting the people decide... I'm asking on what grounds? What's their background? What is that their expertise to be able to make a decision on any particular thing? If there is, then let them run and let them show what their ability is and then let them translate that into decision-making positions and then let them be legitimately elected and do the best they can. (politician from Slovakia).

Another politician from Slovakia commented similarly, 'but in a democratic state, citizens are always given the greatest opportunity in elections'.

In contrast, a Slovenian politician explained similar reluctance again arising from scepticism concerning the competencies held by citizens, but somewhat more broadly and in a softer way:

We were directly elected by the citizens, so we perform this decision-making function because citizens are neither trained for this nor is it their duty to decide on our behalf. Of course, we do have contact with citizens and must listen to what problems they have, what they want, how they envision things.

Another Slovenian politician agreed that decision-making should be left to politicians: 'That is, the political class must exist, some decisions must be left to it. This seems logical from the perspective of the integrity of the state', despite, as they stated, being a strong supporter of democracy and the inclusion of citizens on all levels. A representative of a civil society organisation in Slovenia also believed that decision-making powers should rest in the hands of politicians:

Political decision-making is the affair of the executive and legislative branches of government, and these are elected politicians who go to democratic elections every four years, and then they have that mandate. The non-governmental sector has no role here.

Here we can add the clear distinction between involvement in policy- and decision-making processes:

It must be understood that politician is elected at the state level. We are elected at a smaller scale. And, of course, those elected at the state level must have greater weight, that's completely clear – in decision-making. Political decision-making should remain exactly as it is today. Government, parliament, I mean... political institutions. In policy formation, however, we want to be active. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Other statements reveal similar ideas:

So let's say involvement, collaboration in the processes of creating and adopting legislation, but what is ultimately adopted is the government's responsibility. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

Coordination procedures are very important, but in the end, those who are competent decide. And that's right. (CSO representative from Slovenia)

A statement made by a Czech representative of a civil society organisation about the potential decision-making powers of citizens is very interesting, possibly even some kind of warning, and directly aimed at such powers given the current state of society: 'But the idea that the majority of Czech society would be more involved in some decision-making processes scares me to be honest.'

A local politician mentioned 'organisational problems':

Which representatives are representatives of the citizens? If there were 100 in the hall, and everyone voiced their opinion, you wouldn't get anywhere. Let them choose representatives, and let these representatives decide what show they will watch next time. (politician from Slovenia)

In Slovenia, there are many institutionalised ways to involve citizens in policy- or decision-making processes, and thus one civil servant claimed 'if there were even more, then also, considering that we are a parliamentary democracy, then parliamentary democracies could no longer function. Because then we could have, if I may joke a little, direct democracy' (civil servant from Slovenia).

Referendums and participatory budgeting

While talking about decision-making processes, referendums and participatory budgeting were mostly mentioned. It seems that participatory budgeting was more exposed in Poland because the Solecki Law from 2009 has obviously placed it on the political agenda across the country. Interviews conducted in Poland revealed that participatory budgeting has generally been accepted by policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations. Moreover, a survey conducted in the framework of the DEMOTEC project showed that over 40% of Polish respondents had participated at least once in participatory budgeting (Tisserand et al. 2025: 21). Nonetheless, in the other three countries respondents also frequently referred to participatory budgeting as a well-known democratic innovation.

Referendums are also well known, even though attitudes to them vary widely, mostly across countries. This can probably be linked to legal norms or legislation but also to the historical tradition of referendums. In Slovenia, more than 20 referendums have been held on the national level since 1990. The legislation until 2013 was very favourable for the possibility of requesting a nationwide referendum, also as a remnant of the self-management system from the socialist period, and while since 2013 some limitations have been imposed, referendums on laws with obligatory consequences for policymakers can still be demanded by voters. Poland, Slovakia and Czechia have decided to limit opportunities for nation-wide referendums (in Czechia, indeed only one referendum has been held), but are more open to sub-national referendums (Tisserand et al. 2025).

It is interesting that in these three countries some scepticism about referendums among different types of respondents can be detected. For instance, a Czech politician said ‘I don’t entirely lean towards referendums at the national level because I believe that on many complex issues, it should belong to those who are involved and who understand things more.’

And as noted by a civil servant from the Czech Republic:

As far as referendums are concerned, that’s something I don’t like. Citizens don’t have objective information about what’s most important to the state... So, I really don’t think a referendum is a good tool, although it can work great in Switzerland.

While discussing referendums, other respondents also made a reference/comparison to Switzerland (and cautioned about taking the same approach to referendums). For example, one CSO representative from the Czech Republic said, ‘but I wouldn’t follow Switzerland and referendums... Until we are more intelligent about democracy, we cannot go in this direction’.

Or as a Polish CSO representative indicated, ‘in Switzerland it works, but also not for everything’. Another Polish CSO representative suggested:

Referendums, as you can see from the example of Switzerland, are an interesting tool for the receipt of certain... reaching solutions, but we are not Switzerland, but a different country. We don't have a historical continuity too long when it comes to tools of civic influence, so maybe not, though.

The representative of a Slovak civil society organisation was critical of the possibility of using referendums given the present state of affairs in their country:

Increasing direct democracy elements like referendums is not beneficial given the current political climate and public disinterest... Discussions where citizens can participate are beneficial.

Still, some cautious predictions about the need for change, regardless of the type of respondent, were seen. For instance, a Czech politician claimed 'I think that we should gradually start using referendums'. Further, the representative of a Czech civil society organisation stated that 'in terms of, say, a referendum at the national level, I think it should really be only on the most important issues, and who knows if at all'.

A statement by a representative of a Czech civil society organisation interestingly reveals greater scepticism with direct democracy tools today than was the case in the past:

Even 15 years ago, I would have said a definite 'yes' to strengthening the elements of direct democracy and introducing referendums. Today, I think no. There is a reluctance of people to try to understand the issues... But, people's initiatives look good to me.

On the other hand, a Polish representative of a civil society organisation called for as many referendums as possible, while adding some words of caution: 'I think, depending on the issue.'

It is interesting that some respondents saw referendums as a tool with which politicians can avoid taking responsibility; as noted at the start of this article, this is hardly surprising. For example:

I think we have representatives, political representatives, whom people have authorised to make decisions for them... On the other hand, in some serious questions that touch everyone... it seems right to me that people are asked. I don't know, some extreme measure that politicians resorts to [sic] when it really doesn't know [sic] how to decide. It seems to me there's too much passing the buck. When politicians can't decide, and then says, [sic] your citizens will tell. (politician from Slovenia)

Conditions for the successful implementation of democratic innovations

While generally speaking about the participation of citizens or civil society organisations in policymaking processes, the respondents agreed on the positive aspects of it even though many also identified certain obstacles or problems in this regard, as already mentioned. Before we consider them, it is worthwhile to look at a statement by a Polish politician as they referred to the importance of procedures in this regard:

Certainly, the institution of public consultation is important, only that in our experience, everything that is subject to consultation is most often not a matter of people's interest; it is a procedure.

Here, we wish to accentuate one point mentioned by several Slovenian respondents (both policymakers and representatives of civil society organisations) – namely, the need or wish to involve citizens/civil society organisations in earlier stages of policymaking processes.

Otherwise, one Slovenian politician illustratively described inclusiveness in the policymaking process:

Now, their opinions must be considered to the maximum extent possible, but the fact is, as soon as you open such a process, you'll get a salad of opinions, just opposing, diametrically opposite ones. It can't be otherwise.

A representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation warned that 'it's not just about consultation but about truly listening and finding some compromise and taking into account the proposals that come'.

A Czech representative of a civil society organisation saw the considerable potential of participatory mechanisms in certain policy sectors and issues, but not generally:

I imagine that people can make decisions about things that are close to their hearts and that are easy to grasp. But on some issues, like macroeconomic issues, it's going to be very difficult for the majority of the population.

Several respondents in the four countries also mentioned the problem frequently exposed in the literature concerning someone opting for democratic innovations, especially those more deliberative in their nature – that is, how the active involvement of citizens and/or civil society organisations in policymaking is taken into account in the final decisions of decision-makers, or in the political reality. A Polish representative of a civil society organisation sum-

marised the problem by simply saying 'but the problem is that our comments are not being listened to'.

Another Polish representative expressed something very similar by commenting 'I definitely think that there is a lack of even adequate use of such an issue as local referendums and citizen panels, which also their findings would be binding on decision-makers'.

Another representative of a civil society organisation from Poland believed that public participation in decision-making faces an additional problem:

It is very important, and I think it's marginal. And it's not marginal because no one would probably want to listen to the public because there are such people; it's marginal because, in my opinion, there are two reasons: the first is that this public voice does not have adequate power. The second is that this social voice is rarely expressed properly.

A Slovenian politician saw a simple solution to such dilemmas by advocating representative democracy:

So, I think I would stick to the standard principles of democracy, which means that citizens still express their will primarily through elections via their elected representatives... But in directly exerting pressure on your elected representative, who then proceeds in institutions that have real power. Such a system, I see, will be the only one that will bring about serious changes. Everything else will be a nice facade of how we all co-decide, how we are all involved, but there will be no real changes.

A representative of a Slovenian civil society organisation pointed to other problems when the participation of civil society organisations/citizens is at stake – namely, that they have been competing with state actors that possess much greater resources:

That will be thousands of volunteer [sic], unpaid hours, on one side, and on the other side, a complete governmental structure with a full bureaucratic infrastructure, and these two are opposed, those are impossible conditions.

The lack of support for civil society, especially professional support in drafting legislation, can be a further problem:

I think the problem is that the legal system is very complex... But here the big problem is that civil society basically lacks the expert support from institutions that know how to write legislation. (CSO representative from Slovenia).

A representative of a Czech civil society organisation showed some inclination to involving citizens in policymaking processes, but at the same time a need to limit it, based on experience:

On one hand, more participation certainly makes sense, be it participatory budgeting or any other tool. On the other hand, I think we have to be able to draw a line... In other words, intuitively I'd say let's involve as much as possible, but since I'm already 50, I know from experience that you have to set some kind of limit.

A Slovak politician also held some strong reservations based on their experience of participatory democracy:

I have been involved in several participatory projects, including the [named programme] programme, carried out by [organisation], building capacities in municipalities and ministries for participatory public policy creation. I must say, however, that internally, I am an advocate of representative democracy.

It seems that the question of tradition can also be important while discussing deliberative democratic innovations, as one civil servant from the Czech Republic noted 'we don't have much of a tradition, we don't know how to discuss. We can often talk about these things, but I think we lack the art of discussion'.

However, for a Slovak representative of a civil society organisation some kind of hindrance in this respect is a different tradition, referring to the fact that:

We have one of the highest rates of civic disengagement in Europe. I think more than 75 percent, maybe even more, of people are not organised in anything – whether it's in unions, clubs, interest groups, anywhere, be it a fishing club or anything else. And to some extent, this affects the quality of public policies and the quality of life. Because to live a quality life, I first need to start influencing the environment in which I live, meaning my immediate surroundings.

Notably, for some politicians launching a survey can substitute democratic innovations: 'We simply ask people for their opinion, so we use the survey system to allow people to express themselves' (politician from Slovakia).

First and mostly on the local level

Given the presented importance of the sub-national, local levels for democratic innovations, it was not surprising that in many interviews it was also revealed that this is supposed to be the most appropriate level for such tools of citizens' participation in policymaking processes. Hardly any differences were found

here among respondents active on the local, national, even EU level. A Czech representative of a civil society organisation simply stated that ‘this makes sense to me at the local level’. While another respondent perceived ‘huge potential in it, especially at the municipal level, where I think it should work’ (CSO representative from the Czech Republic). Yet another representative of a Czech civil society organisation argued that ‘direct democracy has more potential at the local level than in national politics, where I am more afraid of it’.

A Slovak representative of a civil society organisation believed that ‘things could be handled much more flexibly and quickly at the local level’ and a similar opinion was seen among Slovenian politicians:

The fact is that involvement is much easier to achieve at the local level than, say, at the national level, and in this context, local levels should also be empowered, now talking about institutions for including citizens in decision-making.

Another Slovenian politician stated:

Personally, I find there is a lack of this at the national level, while at the local level, the direct influence of the population on municipal policies is greater. This is not necessarily because it’s the local level per se, but because local politicians must be more sensitive to the residents’ views due to their proximity.

On the local level, it seems that people are also more interested in dealing with politics and issues: ‘If you ask them how they live and what’s bothering them in their neighbourhood, they are interested’ (a politician from the Czech Republic).

One Slovak civil servant largely referred to challenges for democratic innovations on the EU level:

At the European level, it’s the most challenging, but at the national level, let’s say in the Slovak context, it’s more feasible and, at the regional level, even more so. And locally, it’s already being done to a large extent. [while adding] I think it’s important to work on the legitimacy of those panels. To ensure that it’s not just a consultation where a representative of a group comes to say their view, but that it should somehow have legal legitimacy, that this decision, or this opinion, becomes a legal opinion.

A Czech politician held a similar view, saying that ‘at the European level it is of course more difficult, but at the municipal level it is relatively easy to do a participatory budgeting project’.

Another Czech politician claimed it is simply easier to deal with participatory democracy in smaller communities:

I am rather in favour of the idea that participatory democracy or direct democracy can work well at the local level, where there is a certain ability of that community of a few thousand citizens to come together, to agree, to consult, to communicate with each other... But once you don't have that ability of several million voters to communicate directly with each other, then I think that the elements of direct democracy are not effective and can be more of a threat to the stability of democracy.

Conclusion

Democratic innovations are often viewed as a cure for many of the deficiencies and challenges encountered by modern representative democracies. Multiple European countries have introduced several forms of these innovations on different levels, although they have mostly appeared on the local level. Still, Central and Eastern European countries seem to be lagging behind in this respect.

There is accordingly a need to examine (different) views, rhetorical stances, sentiments and narratives on the meaning and importance of democratic innovations of those supposed to be responsible for governance-driven processes, i.e. policymakers, but also the representatives of civil society organisations as mediating actors through which citizens may also become involved in democratic innovations. To that end, qualitative analysis of face-to-face interviews made with each type of respondent in four once-socialist countries was performed.

The use of an inductive approach led to eight elements of the attitudes held by policymakers and civil society organisation representatives concerning participatory democracy being identified: a) representative democracy vs democratic innovations and b) their importance for trust; c) reservations and limitations vis-à-vis democratic innovations; d) the competencies held by civil servants; e) the extent to which actors support participatory democracy; f) attitudes concerning the most common democratic innovations, referendums and participatory budgeting; g) the conditions for democratic innovations to be implemented successfully; and h) the importance of the local level for democratic innovations.

The presented exploratory analysis considers different perspectives of respondents from four Central and Eastern European countries (reflecting the legislation, historical tradition, political culture and current state of society), but also types of respondents and their views, rhetoric, sentiments and narratives while dealing with democratic innovations, which range from very positive to more sceptical. In the analysis, despite several similarities observed in the attitudes held by politicians, civil servants and representatives of civil society organisations to participatory democracy and democratic innovations, considerable differences also exist.

By way of a summary, we note that all respondents were generally supportive of participatory democracy tools. In particular, actors from Slovakia pointed to

the need for citizens to be involved in policymaking beyond elections and political parties. In the views of Slovenian respondents, this is important because public policies impact the everyday lives of citizens, and including citizens in policymaking adds to the legitimacy of policy decisions. Some actors in Poland regarded such involvement as meaningful since citizens and civil society may have available different information and solutions to policy problems, which may be closer to real-life circumstances. Simultaneously, such involvement also increases the responsibility and accountability of citizens and civil society organisations.

By and large, in all the countries under study we found that respondents see democratic innovations as being connected to trust. Nevertheless, we note that the ideas on this issue held by the respondents were in principle not (very) elaborated. It is interesting that respondents from Slovenia specifically also mentioned that participatory democracy increases transparency, which in the end builds trust.

When it comes to the respondents' reservations with the use of democratic innovations, it was largely the case that there was greater enthusiasm for participatory practices in policy-making than in decision-making processes, while reluctance was more evident among civil servants and politicians. Several political actors (but also some representatives of civil society) from different countries mentioned that the main tool for citizens to change policy outcomes is them participating in elections. And once representatives of citizens have been elected, decision-making should be left to politicians. It is interesting that civil society representatives from Slovenia in particular clearly distinguished policymaking from decision-making processes, and more firmly advocated the idea that citizens and civil society should participate in the policymaking process while decision-making powers should continue to remain in the hands of politicians.

A number of obstacles or reservations were detected across countries, although they were largely similar to those mentioned in the literature (which mostly focuses on other European countries). Political actors mainly hold reservations due to the lack of information and skills of citizens when complex questions are entailed. Czech respondents drew attention to the need for citizens to be given an adequate education. Slovak actors more frequently noted how including citizens in participatory democracy in an excessive way could overburden the citizens, and thus the degree to which they can be included is limited. Respondents from all countries stressed that they were strongly in favour of including civil society actors over citizens because organised civil society can have important information and competencies available. Here, Polish (and Slovenian) respondents highlighted the need for citizens and civil society organisations to be more responsible and accountable while participating in democratic innovations.

Respondents in Slovenia in particular (yet also in the Czech Republic) pointed out that civil servants – specifically at the bureaucratic level – are important when it comes to the organisation and implementation of the democratic innovations. Empowered and trained civil servants are indeed essential for the implementation of the participatory processes to be effective.

The most recognised forms of democratic innovations in all countries were shown to be referendums and participatory budgeting. Stark differences were apparent while talking about nationwide referendums. Czech, Slovak and Polish respondents were quite reluctant concerning the use of referendums, even though individual actors expressed more support for referendums provided that they are used with caution and/or on the sub-national level. While in Slovenia, with its long tradition in the practice of self-management and where nationwide referendums are more commonly used, such reluctance was not observed. However, here it was argued that politicians may be too frequently placing the responsibility for making (difficult) decisions into the hands of citizens via the referendum mechanism.

Success with implementing a democratic innovation often depends on the procedure involved. In particular, Slovenian representatives of civil society argued it is necessary for citizens and civil society organisations to become involved as soon as possible in the process, while also observing that they lack professional support and resources for them to participate in policymaking efficiently. In these conditions, state actors can easily overpower them. Slovenian and Polish representatives of civil society emphasised the importance of genuine consultations, not consultations organised just to comply with the requirements. Czech respondents in particular warned that the inclusion of citizens only makes sense for certain policy questions, typically issues that are close to the public and not too complex. At the same time, respondents from Slovakia and Czechia mentioned that for participatory democracy to be successful such a tradition is also important, while critically noting the lack of such a tradition in each country.

Finally, it is evident for various reasons that the local level is the best for attempts to introduce and/or implement democratic innovations. This was explicitly mentioned by respondents in Slovenia, Slovakia and Czechia. Some also claimed that even the national level is more appropriate than the European one.

Before concluding, we wish to express some reservations with the results revealing differences/similarities between countries since we are aware that more in-depth interviews focused solely on democratic innovations and participatory democracy in the countries under study must be conducted to arrive at any more solid conclusions.

Aware that our approach is only suitable for exploratory analysis, we still managed to obtain valuable insights into how democratic innovations are viewed. A different kind of analysis, possibly a more quantitative one, could provide for even more robust findings.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the financial support received from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No 101095237 (TRUEDEM) and the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (Research Core Funding Programme No. P5-0136).

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