

Civic participation and elements of deliberative democracy in decision-making processes in Slovakia

The involvement of people in decision-making processes in Slovakia is regulated by various laws. The Constitution, according to which citizens have “the right to participate directly in the administration of public affairs”, provides the public administration with the space to introduce and use elements of deliberative democracy. At the level of municipalities or self-governing regions, it also allows for decision-making at deliberative forums: “Territorial self-government takes place at assemblies of the inhabitants of the municipality...”¹. Also other laws establish opportunities for citizens’ participation – from the right to receive information to the possibility to comment on drafts of legislative proposals. However, independent decision-making via citizen assemblies is rare, and participation is largely limited to consultations, the outcome of which is non-binding for public administration institutions. Deliberative forums, where the public takes decisions independently, can be encountered primarily in participatory budgeting processes².

¹ Constitution of the Slovak Republic, <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1992/460/20230126> (accessed 03.02.2023).

² The introduction of participatory budgeting in Slovakia was initially mainly the result of the activities of the NGO Utopia which considers deliberation to be an essential element of democratic decision-making. When working with local governments, it was therefore always recommended that deliberation should become part of the participatory budgeting mechanism. However, many municipalities have tried to avoid decision-making at deliberative forums for various reasons. Within a few years, participatory budgets have become a normal part of local politics, but at the same time it has become clear that decision-making processes are often not only devoid of deliberation, but also of other key elements of the original concept of participatory budgeting. Even so much so that some

There are many definitions of deliberation. One of the shortest states that deliberation is “the act of thinking about or discussing something and deciding carefully”³. Usually, deliberation takes place at deliberative forums that “create a space for affected parties to discuss an issue or problem in a constructive manner. The naming and framing of the issue must be done in such a way as to prompt thoughtful consideration and discussion. Ideally, a consensus is reached on the best or 'most agreeable' option”⁴. The selected case studies describe how deliberative forums can be successfully integrated into decision-making mechanisms dealing with the allocation of resources from public budgets or the planning of public spaces. Each of the following three examples is a result of collaboration between Utopia and one public institution: a borough, a higher territorial unit (region) and the Slovak Academy of Sciences. The main criteria for their selection were the quality of the decision-making mechanism itself and the result it produced. For the development of democratic participation, also the high quality of the implementation of the decisions taken is extremely important. The implementation of decisions are often the battle arena of political power struggle that has managed to sink many good ideas. However, this fact does not impact the process and quality of deliberation *per se*, and it was not taken into account as a cases selection criterion.

of these would undoubtedly be more appropriately described as grant schemes. For more on attempts to introduce participatory budgets in Slovakia, http://pbv4.civitas.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/REPORT_BRATISLAVA_PB.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deliberative> (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁴ <https://participedia.net/method/4345> (accessed 03.02.2023).

The Participatory Budget of the Bratislava-Nové Mesto municipal district

The Bratislava-Nové Mesto municipal district (borough) is located in the north-eastern part of the city of Bratislava, with 43 thousand people living in the area of 37,5 km². The introduction of the participatory budget (PB) was preceded by the creation of the Office for Public Participation (OPP) at the Borough Council. It was established as the initiative of the NGO Utopia in 2013 as a separate department whose main task was to involve the public in decision-making processes in the territory of the municipal district. It was also tasked with designing, managing and facilitating participatory mechanisms. In 2014, a PB pilot was carried out, for which the borough allocated 20,000 EUR. 15 projects applied for funding, of them 11 were supported. Part of the decision-making process was also a deliberative forum. On the basis of the pilot year, the first regular edition of PB was held in 2015, for which the municipality allocated 240,000 EUR.

The whole process of project preparation and evaluation takes one year and can be divided into four phases⁵:

Table 1. Timetable of activities

Period	Description of activities
January – February 2015	Evaluation of the previous year and monitoring of implementation of projects.
March – May 2015	Gathering of project ideas (questionnaire, email, phone calls, public meetings).
May – September 2015	Selection and processing of project ideas, internal consultations with other departments

⁵ For a more detailed description of the participatory budgeting mechanism in Bratislava – Nové Mesto see: http://pbv4.civitas.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/REPORT_BRATISLAVA_PB.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023).

	at the Borough Council (the possibility of implementation of suggested projects, implementation costs, legal issues and compatibility of project ideas with other binding documents such as the Plan of Economic and Social Development).
October – November 2015	Decision-making and processing of results.

Source: own elaboration.

The participatory budgeting in Bratislava-Nové Mesto was conceived from the beginning as a community project. Its main goals include creating stronger links among the residents of the municipal district, and between them and their local government. It, therefore, includes a large number of open public meetings. Work on new proposals starts with the publication of a call for project ideas. The OPP disseminates it through as many different communication channels as possible to ensure the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the process. The information is published on the borough's website, social media, the borough's newspaper the Voice of Nové Mesto and on the local Bratislava TV. Since the first edition of the PB, the OPP has also been organising public meetings in different neighbourhoods of the borough. At the initial meetings, not only ideas for participatory budget projects are collected, but, for example, also complaints about the work and services of the local authority or other public institutions. All suggestions from the residents are processed by the OPP. At the end of each PB edition, three types of outputs are produced: priorities, assignments and citizens' projects. Deliberation is used to decide solely about citizens' projects, and hence in this discussion we will focus only on them. Projects allow people to make small interventions in their public spaces, innovate or create a public service, or contribute to improving the quality of life in their neighbourhood. Each project can get funding of up to 5,000 EUR.

Project ideas are being developed into projects at a series of working meetings open to the public. All projects are outcomes of the joint work of those who participate in these meetings. At the meetings, the OPP staff represents the Borough, and ensures the feasibility of the projects and their compliance with legislation and the PB rules. Each project has its coordinator responsible for completion of the project, its presentation to the public and ultimately also for decision-making at a deliberative forum. Usually there are around 15 of them. By the end of this phase, all the people involved in the process are well acquainted with the proposed projects, the needs of the involved people and the competences and development plans of the Borough Council. They thus become qualified project evaluators.

The decision-making phase starts with a public presentation of the completed project proposals at the next open meeting. Anyone can attend and there is room for questions and clarification after the project presentations. The outcome of the PB is decided at a deliberative forum of project coordinators and through public voting. Both of these forms of decision-making have their weight determined by the PB rules, according to which the overall result is calculated. In the pilot year, deliberation was weighted at 60% and voting at 40%; later, after complicated discussions, the weighting was changed to 30% for deliberation, 60% for physical voting and 10% for online voting.

The deliberative forum has a predetermined agenda:

1. Introduction.
2. Discussion of the latest updates on the projects.
3. Setting the criteria for decision making.
4. Discussion on the compliance of the projects with the chosen criteria.
5. Consensus seeking and soft voting.
6. Final discussion.

At the beginning of the forum, the project coordinators are asked not to decide according to their personal interests and preferences, but to try to find the best possible solution for the whole borough. In the first part, they jointly formulate the project evaluation criteria. In the second part, after a joint discussion, they evaluate the projects according to each criterion. The coordinators evaluate all projects except their own. Deliberation results in the ranking of the projects: the highest are those that best meet the criteria and have the best chance to be funded.

The deliberative forum usually runs one full afternoon, but it is preceded by a long and systematic preparation that started already at the stage of developing project ideas. During this process, the people involved in the PR become the collaborators and co-workers of the OPP. They acquire a wealth of information about the Borough Council, its services and plans and become qualified evaluators. Their collaboration with each other helps to create a working environment that diminishes competitiveness and fosters understanding of the needs of not only the entire “community” of the involved people, but also of the entire borough. At the deliberative forum, it is rather common to see coordinators deciding to ask for a smaller amount of money for their own project, just so that a project that would otherwise end up below the cut off line can be funded.

Participatory budget of the Trnava self-governing region

The Trnava Self-Governing Region (TTSR) consists of seven districts and has 556 thousand inhabitants. The first edition of the participatory budget in the region took place in 2019⁶ with 250 thousand EUR allocated for

⁶ Archives of implemented projects: <https://tvorimekraj.sk/archiv-projektov/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

project implementation. People can apply for funding for their projects in the amount of up to 5,000 EUR. According to TTSR, the participatory budget is “aimed at supporting civic activism of the inhabitants of the region and the implementation of authentic civic and community projects. With the vision of building a sustainable society, the aim of the participatory budget is to support building of the regional identity and to encourage creation of communities working towards the public good”⁷. TTSR collaborated with the association Utopia in the creation of the PR mechanism. Based on the proposal put forth by the association, deliberation became part of the decision-making phase of the PB – for the first time at the county level.

The PB mechanism can be divided into four phases very similarly to the case of the Bratislava-Nové Mesto district:

- collection and development of project ideas
- processing of ideas and consultation with the authority
- decision-making
- evaluation of the completed PB edition.

After the call is published, the region organises an information campaign followed by public meetings in the individual districts. The first round of meetings allows residents to “discuss their ideas and proposals, learn about the eligible costs of their proposals, or get help in writing their project before submitting it or to link their ideas with others”⁸. The second round provides residents with a chance to consult on projects in progress and to correct non-compliance with legislation and other factual errors. After that, project proposals are submitted through an electronic system on the county’s website. There are usually more than a hundred of them.

⁷ <https://tvorimekraj.sk/o-participativnom-rozpocete/#proces> (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁸ Ibid.

Decisions are made at deliberative forums and by ballot. The weight of deliberation is 50% and the weight of the vote another 50 percent. Voting is done online using an electronic form and everyone must support at least 3 projects. Deliberation has two phases. The first deliberative forum meets at the TTSR Office to set the criteria against which all projects will be judged in a given year. The forum brings together members representing each of the seven districts in the region. For one district, the following representatives participate in the forum:

- one deputy from the county assembly
- one member of staff of the county office
- three representatives of civil society.

To ensure transparency of decision-making, anyone can participate in the forum, but only 35 selected people can make decisions. Territoriality is a key criterion in the selection of decision-makers. The aim, from the beginning, was that projects from all districts would be supported. The high weight of deliberation also increases the chances of success for projects from municipalities with smaller populations. The composition of the forum is rather unusual: it brings together elected representatives, officials and citizens. Unfortunately, this kind of discussion does not usually take place, and the budget is decided by deputies according to their own preferences and behind closed doors. In fact, the request to make public comments about people's project at the forum during the first edition of the PB was for one of the deputies so uncomfortable that he does not want to be part of deliberation ever again.

In the second phase, the county office organises public meetings in each district, which are attended by members of the initial deliberative forum. At the beginning, a public presentation of projects from the district takes place. A delegation from the deliberative forum then publicly evaluates, according to

selected criteria, all local projects proposed by people and draws up a ranking of the projects. At the same time, online voting takes place. Successful projects are implemented during the following year.

Participatory planning of public spaces

Deliberation is also used to involve the public in discussion about public spaces. Among the basic documents that influence the character of public spaces are the zoning plans of municipalities and individual parts of municipalities. For example, the Building Act ⁹ obliges municipalities to involve the public in the preparation of zoning plans. Participatory planning, like PB, is a long-term process that can take more than one year. An important partner of the public in this case are experts – architects and urban planners, but also from other disciplines dealing with the shaping of public spaces. Many municipalities have detailed manuals for the involvement of the public. In principle, however, public participation planning can be divided into “four phases:

(1) pre-preparatory → (2) preparatory → (3) implementation → (4) evaluation

In the pre-preparatory phase, we structure the process, identify the objectives, actors, their roles and competences, design appropriate methods of participation, set a timetable and determine the costs of the process.

The preparatory phase is mainly concerned with collecting relevant data and documents, analysing them, identifying problems in advance, ensuring

⁹ <https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/1976/50/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

the technical issue and overall organisation of the process and informing the participants.

The implementation of participatory planning can take different forms, depending on the subject of the planning, the actors involved, the degree and tools of participation. The outcome is usually a final report that serves as a starting point for the next steps of the local government (organisation, community). This can be a call for proposals, a tender, or call for the subject of project documentation, etc. The participatory process optimally continues in the subsequent phases of the preparation and implementation of investment actions, ending with the actual use of the territory and participation in its maintenance and management”¹⁰.

The Main Campus of the Slovak Academy of Sciences

Since 2019, Utopia has organized the planning process for the entire campus of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, located in the Patrónka neighbourhood in Bratislava. The campus is a home to thirty research institutes with about 2,500 employees. The aim of the planning process was to find out what different institutes needed and to involve the staff in a discussion about the future of the campus. Based on the outputs from the process, an urban design competition was to be organised for the area.

In the first phase, a needs mapping exercise was carried out, which included a questionnaire survey addressed to all staff and semi-structured interviews with the management of each research institution. More than

¹⁰ Association Utopia published a manual *Participatory Mechanisms. Who, What, When, How?* in which it summarized its experience with involving people in decision-making about the use of public resources or in planning of public spaces. <https://nova.utopia.sk/documents/20123/0/UTOPIA+Participativne+mechanizmy+%28Kto%2C+čo%2C+kedy%2C+ako%29+online.pdf/ed16b14d-76d8-14fc-a3e6-b0af99c3ce23?t=1618766393725> (accessed 03.02.2023).

600 completed questionnaires were returned and the interviews were conducted for several months. At this stage, it became clear that the most significant issue was the planned construction of a new building to house twelve different research institutes with the future plane to employ approximately 300 people. Its construction was a source of conflict for a long time, as it was prepared without the participation of some of the institutions concerned. At the same time, the building as planned did not meet their expectations.

In the next phase, deliberative forums were held to resolve the conflict and, based on the data collected, to come up with the most satisfactory solution for all the involved parties and the whole campus. The first deliberative forum created a space to express views about the planned development, to define the needs and expectations of all research institutions and to create possible and desirable scenarios for the future development of the space. After the deliberation, each institute was granted some time to discuss the outcomes of the forum internally and to clearly articulate their long-term vision for development. Subsequently, a second deliberative forum was held, where a common consensual proposal for the development of the space was drafted on the basis of these visions. The output of the forum was processed and delivered to the Slovak Academy of Sciences management as a foundation for the forthcoming urban design competition and further development.