# ACTIVISM IN HARD TIMES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

## People Power

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More than a decade ago, it would have been difficult to imagine that Poland and Hungary, new member states of the European Union[2] (EU) that joined the community in 2004, would experience problems with democratic backsliding.[3] How is it possible that in these challenging political circumstances, and when certain civil rights have been limited and the space for civil society has shrunk, we observe new types of civic participation and even innovations in democratic decision-making processes within civil society? These developments are possible because of civic activists who are courageous enough to step up, speak up, and act, advocating for issues that are important to them and their countries' democracy. Democratic backsliding in both countries, however, has had a direct impact on civil society, as discussed in Chapter 2. In particular, backsliding has negatively impacted liberal or progressive civil society organizations (CSOs) and movements such as those opposing the government's rhetoric and policies on an independent judiciary, minority rights, migration, and gender issues. But this is not the end of the story.

This chapter focuses on how civic activists in Poland and Hungary have responded to the problem of the shrinking public space for civil society actors by introducing democratic innovations. We focus specifically on these two countries where governments have taken similar but often ineffective steps to restrict civic mobilization by their critics. The aim of the chapter is to better understand the steps activists have taken not only to survive and even thrive under unfavorable conditions but also to raise public awareness of issues and strengthen citizens' engagement and "voice." The two activist stories that we present illustrate the adaptability and creativity of civic actors responding to the problem of shrinking public space as well as civil society resilience and

strength in face of the new threats and challenges which in this case come from their governments and political elites' attempts to silence critical voices. The first activist presents a local response from Poland to the increased threat to democratic quality, and efforts to establish and promote deliberative civic panels for the purpose of structured and engaged deliberation that involves inhabitants of local communities. The second activist who represents aHang (The Voice) movement in Hungary discusses new efforts to defend liberal democratic norms and implement a deliberative model at the local level and the "voice" movement at the national level.

The liberal democracy that triumphed in Poland and Hungary after the collapse of communism in 1989 is at risk today. The rise of populism and right-wing political parties can be explained in many ways: economic grievances; elite promotion of polarization, especially liberal attitudes among the population, which are perceived as a threat to social conservatives; lack of proper civic education; and not enough appreciation of democracy as a desired political system (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Suteu, 2019). Yet, these same factors have also created opportunities for civic activists to respond to shrinking public space by engaging in new forms of democratic participation. The limitations of representative democracy and the lack of an emphasis on engaging citizens in the decision-making process, as well as ensuring that people come together to discuss common problems and to agree on common solutions, have pushed activists to advocate for a revival of interest in democratic reforms in CEE (Dalton et al., 2013).

An important aspect of citizens' engagement in democracies is their participation in processes that shape public opinion (Tilly, 2007; Haerpfer et al., 2009). This is what also distinguishes citizens in democratic states from citizens in authoritarian regimes. Policy decisions in democracies, even in democracies that are fragile, can still be impacted by citizens' views and their preferences. In a healthy democracy, civil society organizations and civic engagement can enhance the responsiveness of democratic institutions and the accountability of governments, especially at the local level. In this chapter, we explain how activists in Poland and Hungary are responding to democratic backsliding and the shrinking of the public space by creating new mechanisms for greater public direct engagement and the empowerment of citizens, seeking to strengthen institutions and decision-making from the bottom-up. This is another instance of how, despite backsliding in democratization, these societies could now experience a bottom-up move toward democratic innovations, even if at a small scale, because of the availability of innovative technologies and new incentives.

We profile Marcin Gerwin from Poland, a political scientist, activist, and co-founder of the Center for Blue Democracy,[4] and Csaba Madarász from Hungary, a co-founder and Chief Technology Officer of the aHang[5] (The Voice) movement. Both activists argue that democracy should be designed to enable citizens to see others' points of view, understand others' interests

and arguments, and provide channels for effective communication between the government and citizens. Democracies should thus encourage citizens to be actively engaged and include specific mechanisms for citizen participation and deliberation. This is why, even if in slightly different contexts, these two activists promote and try to implement democratic innovations from the ground up. Despite the odds, they are borrowing solutions developed elsewhere, adjusting them to the realities and challenges in Poland and Hungary and meaningfully engaging citizens. Both activists have created what are called "deliberative mini-publics" – spaces in which citizens can engage in face-to-face discussions on political issues. These mini-publics have been praised for their high deliberative quality and democratic representativeness (Bohman, 1998; Dryzek, 2000). At these events, citizen participants, who have been selected randomly, receive expert information on some important political issues and weigh different arguments to reach recommendations on policies (Fung & Wright, 2003; Smith, 2009).

Outside the formal political system, deliberative mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, and participatory budgeting can play a key role in guiding policy development. As examples from Hungary show, they can even push governments to change or adjust unpopular policies or decisions. They might also motivate political parties that face the prospect of a tough election to pay careful attention to what people say about policy proposals once they have had a chance to learn about and discuss them (Mansbridge et al., 2010). The activists interviewed stress that participatory and deliberative forms of civic action, often followed by large-scale petitions, contribute to changes in legislators' political will and greater responsiveness from the government.

These "deliberative democrats" prioritize discussion and consent, not simply an exchange of information, and they make randomly selected citizens debate their political opinions, providing them with equal access to express their views and take positions on policy problems. At the same time, deliberative democrats insist that political institutions at the local level guarantee citizens' participation in decision-making processes, which contributes to better political outcomes. This chapter discusses democratic innovations created by civic actors in Hungary and Poland as an important response to the current problem of shrinking civic space.[6] These responses provide an interesting laboratory for advancing democratic solutions when democracies are in decline. They also indicate how "voice" rather than exit or loyalty can be exercised even in difficult political or legal conditions (Hirschman, 1970).

### Marcin Gerwin – how to heal Poland's democracy?

Marcin Gerwin[7] is an activist with a PhD in political science. He wrote his dissertation on sustainable development, providing various methods

of cultivating fields and gardens in an ecologically responsible way, using renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable buildings. While writing his dissertation, he realized that many of these solutions to help build a sustainable world already exist and are available for use. If this is the case, he asked himself, "Why are so many solutions not implemented, especially if they are known and assessed positively by society?" The answer to this question, he realized, lay in inadequate decision-making processes and the fact that citizens' voices are not considered. This is unfortunately the case even in countries with strong democratic political systems. This realization gave Gerwin the impetus to alter the rules of the game, as well as to propose innovative mechanisms to meet societies' challenges, such as climate change.

Initially, Gerwin was inspired to take actions at the local level in Poland, since it was easier to act in his own community. At the national level, problems are often too complex and implementing changes takes too long. This led him to co-create the Sopot Development Initiative for the residents of Sopot, his home city. The Initiative sought to encourage residents to take part in democratic decision-making in matters related to city planning and sustainable development. It focused on activities aimed at improving local democracy and activating residents. The Initiative successfully promoted the idea of introducing participatory budgeting in Sopot,[8] a process in which community members discuss and directly decide how to spend part of the public budget. At that time, no city in Poland had such a mechanism, and Sopot was the first city to test the participatory budgeting process.

Thanks to Gerwin, among other activists, participatory budgeting is now quite popular in Poland. In fact, this mechanism has been adopted by all major cities and incorporated into local laws and local budget expenditure plans. However, Gerwin realized that this type of democratic innovation was not enough to solve pressing political and policy problems. It turned out that the formula for making decisions by a popular vote was also not sufficient for getting people to think about the future and to develop proposals or solutions. There was also no opportunity for residents to meet face-to-face and discuss the direction of development in local affairs. This first experience with participatory budgeting motivated Gerwin to explore new ways that citizens' participation could help improve their quality of life.

At the same time, a more important issue in Poland was the need to improve democratic decision-making processes in general. As Gerwin explains,

> It is not only about civic activity. It is about democratic decision-making. This, of course, means that citizens are involved. But for me it is not only important that people are activated, but that decisions are made in a sensible way; (…) adopting solutions to improve the quality of life. That is the goal – getting people in Poland to realize that being an active citizen is a means to an end, not an end in and of itself.

Recognizing that the formal opportunities for citizen participation in the political process – like voting – reinforce and amplify existing influence within society, Gerwin began to seek out mechanisms that would be more inclusive and do a better job making decisions for everyone. This thinking had a great impact on how he designed citizens' assemblies[9] in Poland. As he put it,

> (…) this democratic feature, that everyone participates, was something that I thought to be crucial. But then I realized that it can lead to compromising the overall quality of the process. So, I was moving from participatory budgeting and participatory planning to citizens' assemblies.

According to Gerwin, there are several elements that contribute to the quality of the decision-making process in democracies. First, participants should be selected at random to meet and discuss a topic they are presented with. Gerwin has devoted a great deal of his attention to sortition[10] and argues that the credibility of a citizens' assembly is partially related to how the selection process is designed and executed. Selected participants should represent the broader population rather than only the segment most likely to participate politically. Second, defining the topic precisely to develop specific solutions is also important. Gerwin emphasizes that the topic for the meetings and discussions should be an issue that is important to the local community, and, ideally, falls within the responsibilities of the local authorities. Moreover, the topic for the citizens' assembly cannot be too complicated and should fit the time allocated for the learning phase of the process. Third, the elected representatives should have the political will to implement the recommendations developed by participants in the citizens' assembly. The promise of legislative action is thus important for getting people to participate.

The remaining conditions for generating high-quality decisions made by people during citizens' assemblies involve the learning and deliberation phases. Informational panels should involve experts who aim to educate assembly participants. Finally, the fifth feature for holding high-quality assemblies includes deliberation, or an opportunity to discuss the topic openly and with facilitation that encourages a comfortable conversation. In Gdańsk, Poznań, and Kraków, Poland, citizens deliberated on the nuts and bolts of climate change policies. They first listened to experts, then read the materials given to them, and finally they reached a consensus on proposals that they then provided to their local governments. Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not stop Poznań's citizens from engaging in deliberation; they moved their decision-making online.

Gerwin organized the first citizens' assembly in Poland in Gdańsk in 2016, only a few years after the wave of enthusiasm for popular deliberation arrived in Europe (see Photo 3.1).[11] His idea to promote and organize

**PHOTO 3.1**    Marcin Gerwin and Citizens' Assembly in Gdansk on the topic "How to Improve Rainwater Retention in the Tricity Landscape Park?", 2016

*Source:* https://www.gdansk.pl, used with permission of Marcin Gerwin

citizens' assemblies in Poland as a more advanced form of participation was inspired primarily by experiences from Australia, where the New Democracy Foundation[12] organized citizens' juries (CJs).[13] CJs are a form of deliberative mini-publics where a small group of citizens is randomly selected (usually ranging from 12 to 25 people); they are particularly suitable for addressing complex issues where deeper understanding is required. This experience with democratic innovations also encouraged him to create the organization Center for Blue Democracy,[14] which promotes processes that put citizens at the center of decision-making. The organization is currently involved with both capacity building and improving the model for citizens' assemblies. It builds capacity by organizing training camps for the coordinators of citizens' assemblies, inspiring others to take up such activities elsewhere around the world.

There is still little knowledge and understanding of what this process entails because it is still a new process, and there is not much awareness of it in Poland. Furthermore, there is no formal education in schools on what deliberative democracy is. Gerwin points out that there is a certain paradox associated with representative democracy – that those who are elected representatives sometimes do not want to share power with the people, while those who choose to do so share power only when it is convenient for them.

For example, the local authorities might turn to citizens' assemblies when the issue they are addressing is controversial or politically sensitive. Then, it is advantageous for officials to transfer responsibility to the public to settle the issue instead of being punished by their constituents for whatever decision they make.

For Gerwin, citizens' assemblies are a good laboratory for Poland as well as other countries, building solid ground for more and more complicated democratic initiatives. Right now, a citizens' assembly is a single ad hoc process that deals with a given issue, and its role is to develop recommendations. Once it has done so, the assembly is dissolved. However, Gerwin believes that this form of decision-making should eventually be institutionalized, either in the form of a citizens' chamber or as a full-scale model of deliberative democracy. When asked about the future, he mentioned that the plan is for citizens' assemblies to enter the parliament, as a citizens' chamber, with the power to legislate:

> [T]he goal is to create a full-scale model of deliberative democracy,[15] which allows for a departure from general elections, and for basing the entire way of managing the state on citizens' assemblies.

Gerwin concludes that changes are desperately needed, not only to improve representative democracy in Poland but eventually to move toward a fully deliberative model of democracy. He believes that deliberative democracy ensures higher quality decision-making while reducing polarization. This is because decisions lie in the hands of citizens, rather than politicians. And politicians are unfortunately able to fight for a mandate in today's competitive political system and have daily incentives to fuel differences and conflicts. Gerwin is aware that plenty of work must be done before the mechanism of deliberative democracy can be institutionalized. Citizens' assemblies give society an opportunity to correct politicians' decisions and serve as an accountability mechanism between elections. Gerwin compares this mechanism to a referendum,[16] a mechanism that is used in Switzerland, as well as in other democracies. Yet, decisions made by a citizens' assembly can be better and they are less costly than organizing referendums. For Gerwin, a citizens' assembly is a basic democratic mechanism that is sorely needed in Poland.

## Democratic innovations and deliberative democracy

There are many definitions and examples of democratic innovations, but their goal is simple: to increase and deepen the ways in which ordinary people can participate in and influence polices directly (Fung & Wright, 2003). These mechanisms are beyond or complement "traditional" modes of democratic

political participation, like voting, campaigning, contacting politicians, engaging in communal activity, and protest. Despite their differences, scholars and practitioners agree that democratic innovations are needed to enhance democracy, support citizens' participation, and to facilitate a more inclusive or responsive political decision-making process. Some additional examples of democratic innovations beyond those described by Gerwin include: neighborhood governance councils, habitat conservation planning, decentralized planning, deliberative polling,[17] and citizens' initiative reviews. Some of these have been developed by practitioners and activists while others emerged from scholarly research. Databases like LATINNO,[18] the database created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),[19] describes a handful of democratic innovations that have been developed worldwide.

Various studies have emphasized the importance of increasing and deepening citizens' participation through democratic innovations in political decision-making to improving the quality of democracy.[20] Deliberative democrats, for example, value participation as the most effective defense against arbitrary power and consider it as a virtue on its own, paying particular attention to the process by which decisions are made (Smith, 2009). Numerous democratic innovations thus rely heavily on deliberation and the decision-making process itself. Deliberation involves mutual communication and weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Deliberative democracy is thus defined as a form of democracy in which deliberation is central to decision-making.

Research on deliberative democracy suggests that when citizens are given the opportunity to learn and engage with a diverse group of people in a space where expressing their opinions is safe, they will carefully consider the complexity of the problems and weigh the possible consequences of alternative solutions (Chambers, 2018). And for democracy to really work, people must be engaged and thinking deeply and in an informed way (Fishkin, 2018). Such a process seeks to improve political decision-making, increase the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the decisions made, and hopefully solve or ameliorate political and social problems. Various centers, labs, and networks have been established to promote, enhance, and help institutionalize mechanisms of deliberative democracy.[21] Studies conducted by the popular media that look at output and impact suggest that that deliberative democracy is indeed desirable for societies, because it can combat rising polarization (Financial Times, 2019).

Citizens' assemblies are a type of deliberative mini-publics, like those facilitated by Gerwin, which means that they are carefully designed forums, where "a representative subset of the wider population comes together to engage in open, inclusive, informed and consequential discussion on one or

more issues" (Curato et al., 2021, p. 3). The fact that they are composed of a representative subset of the wider population ensures that a range of voices is considered in deliberation, unlike consultations or participatory budgeting, where only citizens who volunteer take part. Overall, the important point is that conventional forms of participation are not enough in democracies, because participation is strongly positively correlated to income and education. Those without income or education are usually left out of the process. In citizens' assemblies, participants are selected through random selection, ensuring greater representation and diversity. Open and inclusive deliberation in citizens' panels is also enforced by trained facilitators selected by the organizers.

Although these democratic innovations are new to CEE, there are many different examples of deliberative mini-publics throughout the world. In fact, the OECD[22] identified 12 models, though there are many other databases that also categorize mini-publics. Like many deliberative mini-publics, citizens' assemblies conclude with recommendations or the write-up of a report that is given to policymakers or the wider citizenry to inform their decisions about an issue. From some studies, we know that politicians can and often do follow the recommendations provided by citizens (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). Importantly, many democratic innovations like citizens assemblies combine lay citizens with representatives of civil society organizations, academics, experts, and interest groups. Representatives of organizations are usually invited to participate in the panels, together with local or national authorities, experts, and some professional organizations. They also take part in the learning phase that is meant to educate citizens before participants engage in deliberations. Digital communication adds opportunities for how deliberations can be offered.[23]

Citizens' assemblies alone do not create a deliberative democracy, but through enforcing norms of deliberation, they can contribute to building deliberative democracy and supplementing institutions of representative democracy (Setälä, 2017; Smith & Setälä, 2018). Many organizations are engaged in the promotion of this form of democracy and institutionalizing it. In Europe, for example, the Council of Europe[24] and the European Union (EU) are well known as promoters of deliberative democracy mechanisms, both inside and outside its borders. These international organizations, especially the Council of Europe, supported Gerwin's work in Poland. Acknowledging the crisis of democracy that many member states face, the EU encourages deliberative mechanisms to improve representative democracy and decision-making processes at the local and national levels.[25] Given the positive consequences of these innovative solutions, particularly citizens' assemblies, the EU chose to introduce them also within its own structures.

Building on the success of the Conference on the Future of Europe,[26] which took place in 2022, the Commission decided to use citizens' panels to facilitate

policymaking in certain key areas. Thus, recently, the European Commission organized the first citizens' panel, consisting of randomly selected EU citizens to consider the issue of food waste. After learning about the problem from experts, citizens were asked to formulate recommendations regarding the policies that the EU should endorse as well as the actions that the EU member states, as well as citizens and private and public stakeholders, should take to reduce food waste.[27] By taking such a step, the EU seeks to promote citizens' participation and greater inclusion to strengthen democracy at the local, national, and supranational levels.

## Csaba Madarász – giving voice back to the people

Csaba Madarász is President of the small Közösségi Digitális Eszközök Alapítvány (Community Digital Tools Foundation[28]) (see Photo 3.2). His first experience with activism was related to the Club of Budapest[29] in his hometown, which encouraged him to think globally and helped him become a person who tries to do his best to understand and overcome social challenges. Later, he became a member of the Hungarian homebirth movement,[30] which opened another dimension of experience in community and activism for him. Since then and after more than 20 years, he has realized that being an activist is a "very interesting, deep and personal thing, that it is very, very close to [his] habits" and his "general personal world view." Being an activist offers the opportunity "to implement some of the dreams that we are dreaming in terms of large social changes." It is especially important to



PHOTO 3.2    Picture of Csaba Madarász.

those who realize that individuals can have an impact, particularly when they acquire knowledge of the existing challenges and try their best to overcome them. "So, I ended up somewhere around the Internet and democracy, where I found that new technologies are offering different ways to interact."

As explained in Chapter 2, civic activists in Hungary and Poland who had experienced broad democratic freedoms in the 1990s and 2000s suddenly had to face a shrinking public space and subsequently worked hard to create new ways of engaging citizens in democratic decision-making processes. Hungarian civil society has been under significant pressure since 2010 when the right-wing Fidesz party-run government restricted civil society activity and formally and informally attacked activists defending democratic norms. Consequently, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs in Hungary had to design new strategies to secure funding and interact better with their stakeholders and beneficiaries as well as the larger public. The bottom-up mobilization of citizens to act and express their voices and the ever-expanding digital and Internet technology have helped civic activists such as Madarász to design new tools of democratic participation.

Eighteen years ago, Madarász contacted Hungarian state authorities, offering to help with civic education[31] initiatives and programs that raised awareness of civic issues and promoted civic involvement. But the authorities were not interested. However, he ended up working with local governments in the field of e-democracy, and he also had the opportunity to work internationally with the Council of Europe and other larger European networks focused on e-participation and open democracy. The Hungarian government's refusal of his offer helped him recognize some of the systemic problems with communication in his country. Many of the recommendations coming from the European level were not written in Hungarian and thus were not implemented. Although efforts to improve local governments were partly due to lack of political will, they were also the result of a failure of communication. The importance of information-sharing and communication made him more aware of how the Internet and democracy might collide. These early experiences and realizations turned his interests into a new profession.

Madarász's degree in Communication Studies helped him realize some of the problems involved in democratic politics, as well as ways to address them.

> I have been working on developing local and national democratic institutional systems for almost twenty years. I am convinced that one of the best remedies for the current political crisis is developing genuine communication between decision-makers and those affected by their decisions.

When his international experience ended, he started to support many of the NGOs in Hungary, which became pioneers in bridging the information

**PHOTO 3.3**   Democratic innovations, Hungary.

gap with new software. One such initiative is the Hungarian Freedom of Information[32] portal. This helped improve transparency and democracy and encouraged other non-profit organizations to adapt to new digital means of communication. After working for several years in this area, Madarász, along with several other specialists in IT, economics, and communication in 2016 helped create the small organization Közösségi Digitális Eszközök Alapítvány (Community Digital Tools Foundation) to support the development of free digital tools necessary for transparent community decision-making: "We started to translate and develop open software for better decision-making, which is our core mission." It was a very new initiative organized on a community and voluntary basis, which focused on local democratic challenges by offering new methods and innovations that strengthen social participation at various levels including municipalities (see Photo 3.3).

At that time, the Fidesz government effectively froze or abandoned democratic institutions for citizen consultation, deliberation, and opinion formation. This, as Madarász stresses, was a big loss for the citizens and the non-profit sector. It also meant that civic activists themselves had to reinvent an alternative means of consultation and deliberation to counter official governmental propaganda. However, since it was difficult for independent NGOs to find an open channel of influence that would work at the national level, it seemed obvious that it might be easier at the local level. This is why aHang – The Voice,[33] a social enterprise (a good example of social entrepreneurship[34]), was established in 2017 by Madarász and like-minded activists. Their mission statement clarifies their values and goals:

> We take action regarding public affairs that are important for our membership, looking for new ways and means of advocacy. We hear everybody's voice, yet we are independent of politicians or party politics (…) We look at diversity as a value: in our eyes, everybody is equal and has the right to participate. Against the level of divisiveness experienced across the country, we strive to achieve concord among people with different social groups.

Madarász also realized that the Internet and new technologies offer new ways of interacting in a democratic society. This is especially important if the state is not interested in supporting mechanisms of participation in democracy or civic education. For the last five years, The Voice has been supporting civic community in Hungary thorough digital tools and by giving voice to citizens on public matters. One example is people using these tools to launch petitions to influence the authorities. Citizens' participation is higher at the local level where there is more trust in governing institutions. Therefore, there have been various attempts to find new ways for citizens to interact with their local governments and to engage local publics. The Voice also created a national digital petition platform and other participatory devices that have become important political tools for improving participation and offering an effective response to the challenge of democratic backsliding. These methods enable a larger, more representative group of citizens to influence policy change.

The movement acts on important public issues and designs new ways to find solutions, spread news about them, and address everyone concerned: "We explore areas in which joint action is needed to enact change, and use new digital telecommunication tools to expand the scope of democracy." Madarász believes that since most citizens have an idea about how to influence, change, and improve local governmental institutions, they have the right to submit their complaints or recommendations. For this to happen, however, a mechanism of communication is needed. The digital petition platform was a good way to reach a lot more people in Hungary and help with many different issues, "so we can make their voices heard and support their campaigning with tools ranging from community organizing to Facebook ads and whatever else campaigns may need."

In Hungary, the current regime has made such participatory devices important political tools. Although Hungary holds regular democratic elections and maintains other democratic institutions, it scores quite low on liberal and constitutional standards such as pluralism and media freedom according to the Freedom House[35] index. Madarász stresses that there are very few cities where citizens' participation exists because local governments have not been trained in participatory democracy and thus are not open to integrating civic engagement. Things started to change a bit in places where civic activists who do not represent Fidesz became local representatives.

A good example is the eighth district in Budapest where public consultation and other participatory mechanisms have been established. Although activists can mobilize citizens, Madarász is aware that without the political will to strengthen political participation, little will change.

Activists in Hungary have tried many tools to influence public debate, but it was difficult to reach decision makers through public debate channels and to influence legislation. Even at the more accessible level of local government, public efforts still require confronting an administrative culture that has no training or understanding of a participatory approach. Only a few cities in Hungary have a strategy for citizens' participation and consultation. Yet, with 600,000 people on their list of supporters, and good digital tools, aHang has initiated policy change by collaborating with groups involved in community organizing. The first major success occurred in 2018 with the Home Care campaign, which involved aHang's cooperation with interest groups and other NGOs to mobilize citizens for a policy change that recognizes full-time care for a sick family member at home as a job that warrants the minimum salary.[36] The campaign also helped to increase the amount of home care benefit by 200%. As the official poster had it, "With the help of aHang's mass mobilization, this was the first truly big civil society victory in eight years. It is a huge societal break."[37]

For Madarász, this joint victory was the most impactful and nearly the only authentic change that they could obtain at the national level that also had an impact on the budget of the country. It proved that there are tools to express the will of the citizens. These include a tool expressing public support for the referendum on a planned Shanghai-based Fudan University campus in Budapest in 2022 and a tool for opinion polling or helping organize primaries for the selection of a common opposition candidate for the mayor of Budapest. This last initiative resulted in 840,000 people trusting the system that included aHang's innovation and casting their votes in the mayoral primaries in 2019. This was the first version of a digital voting tool that was later used during the country-wide primaries. Citizens appreciated that activists reached out to them so that they could discuss whom to vote for and participate in choosing a common candidate to support from among the opposition. For Madarász, "The 2019 Budapest mayoral primary elections brought diverse and manifold experiences for the team of aHang. This eventually strengthened our conviction that in an irregular democratic environment, we must achieve positive change by irregular means." aHang's (2021) work engaged approximately 10,000 people, including many volunteers, and was coordinated during the two rounds of the mayoral primary election.

Other recent actions that aHang supported included nature protection in Balatonrendes[38] and a Hungarian teachers' strike. According to Madarász,

> We supported the event [teachers' strike] with around 5.000.000 HUF in part, thanks to the support of the aHang followers! We raised this amount (providing part of it from aHang's own budget) so that the organizers could use it for the strike and related actions, such as the demonstration on Saturday, so that everyone could hear the speeches with the help of professional sound and stage technology.

All these activities seek to make Hungary's democracy more transparent and more legitimate and to improve the decision-making process, giving voice to the people and engaging citizens. Madarász admits that this new civic effort is related to the current situation. Innovation happens only when there is a need for it or when there is a strong commitment and money. It might sound paradoxical, but "oppression can boost a lot of good activities as well."

When addressing challenges, Madarász first refers to his work as President of the Community Digital Tools Foundation which adopts software already developed elsewhere to provide a platform for different forms of citizen participation. The major difficulty they face is the lack of understanding of participatory culture among average local representatives. A lot of effort is needed to change attitudes among local bureaucrats and elected representatives alike. One example of such an effort that Madarász shared was a citizens' jury panel organized with the help of the Sortition Foundation. Such panels consist of a small group of randomly selected citizens representative of the given area's demographics that reach together a decision or recommendation on a policy issue through informed deliberation. Another example is participatory budgeting that has gained more prominence in Hungary. Yet, unlike in Poland, where local government administration is much more open and supportive of such initiatives, convincing local authorities and their staff of the importance of participatory potential is significantly harder.

The second challenge is securing sufficient funds for the implementation of participatory innovations. Cities have their own budgets, but either none of these funds are meant to contribute to such projects or there might only be funds for small pilot projects. Local governments need to rely heavily on central authorities' decisions about funds, especially taxes, which also grossly limits their capacity to support civic participation. The third challenge is the lack of trust or understanding among local representatives who are not prepared to fully support independent political or civic initiatives that would convey more voice and transparency.

In terms of the future, especially whether there is potential for organizing more citizens' assemblies and juries at the local level, the picture in Hungary, at least according to Madarász, seems much more complex and difficult than in Poland. This is because there is less openness, less support among local representatives, limited funding, and much less money for participatory

budgeting in Hungary. There is also less understanding of the benefits of participatory mechanisms and the reasons to introduce them in the first place than in Poland. Madarász admits that the political openness of Budapest is perhaps the most promising, also in terms of giving an example to other cities. But the greatest challenge seems to be increasing understanding of the importance of participation among locally elected decision makers, whether it be through formal activities or education for city representatives.

Another crucial issue is the availability of digital platforms that would serve citizens and elevate their independent voices. This is where activists like Madarász are stepping in and building such services, as they already have sufficient knowledge and case studies of participatory initiatives, though they also need support of the citizens and their willingness to participate. As Madarász explains, "It has to work in parallel, both from inside and outside, to make changes for more participation."

## Evidence of democratic innovations

In the past, many advocacy and rights organizations in Poland and Hungary have cooperated with state authorities. Once the political environment changed and the space for civic activities shrank, activists had to rethink their goals and strategies and become more innovative. Some now focus more on monitoring the legislative and constitutional process, providing legal information and analysis to the public and raising awareness about how the rule of law and civic space function under the new circumstances. At the same time, many organizations started to focus a lot more on the public, as their attention turned from policy and decision makers to the citizens, their needs, and awareness. This prompted organizations like those for which Madarász works to invest time and skills in participatory democratic innovations in Hungary. And in Poland, Gerwin embarked on introducing democratic innovations with deliberative features to provide the basis for effective and legitimate public participation. His goal is to improve the quality of representative democracy, especially at the local level.

The deterioration of the rule of law in Poland after 2015 and in Hungary after 2010 has had serious negative consequences for CSOs that tried to continue their activities in the sphere of democracy, civil rights, the environment. They faced a new style of politics for which any bottom-up impact on decision makers and cooperation with civil society on policy issues was no longer a standard. However, for many organizations that did not have to struggle financially, the challenge of a shrinking public space brought new opportunities for self-reflection and new incentives to act. They had to find new strategies for better interaction with their stakeholders, beneficiaries, and the larger public. They sought to become better rooted in their constituencies and to raise awareness and support for their work.

An important aspect of this shift, especially in Hungary, is the attempt by organizations and activists not only to fight back against the government's new anti-democratic threats and measures but also to raise awareness of their work among the public and to have better links with their constituencies. In both countries, despite all the efforts of the government and the public media to discredit the sector of independent NGOs, social support, measured by the level of trust people have in non-governmental organizations, has not been reduced. In Poland, public trust in NGOs was even higher after the smear campaign of 2016 than before.[39]

Democratic innovations seek to change the existing political culture of alienation and low participation through allowing citizens to learn, listen, reflect, and engage in discussion with others, thus bridging the gap between people who would otherwise not be acquainted.[40] The merit of democratic innovations is not only that the activists put a great effort to organizing programs meant to engage citizens, but that these programs allow citizens to get to know each other and to hear the perspective of people who are different from themselves. As a result, these individuals build trust and tolerance (Gronlund, 2010).

Scholarly research on deliberative innovations in countries outside CEE shows that deliberative innovations can not only address the crisis of representative democracy but can also: improve the legitimacy of policy decisions, increase trust in democratic institutions, allow for greater inclusion; empower citizens, serve as an antidote to civil society polarization, present a way of addressing misinformation, and offer high-quality political decisions.[41] In addition to the Polish and Hungarian cases, there are other democratic innovations that have taken place in other CEE countries, specifically in Serbia: Citizens' Assembly in Valjevo[42] on pollution problems, in Bosnia: Mostar Citizens' Assembly,[43] in Moldova: IDIS "Viitorul" participatory budgeting online platform,[44] in Estonia: Democracy festivals[45] (a national citizen-initiated process), and in Georgia: Citizens' Assembly in Mestia.[46]

Since these democratic innovations are recent in CEE, it is still too early to assess their impact. However, our activists have provided several examples that show how these innovations have already improved the quality of some public decisions in both Poland and Hungary. Moreover, they have highlighted that participation in democratic innovation increases citizens' political efficacy and their trust in their capacity to change the government and have an influence on public life. This has already increased political participation in traditional politics (e.g., elections). Undoubtedly, for this to happen, the content of conclusions reached by citizens matters, as well as how responsive authorities are to their recommendations. When Gerwin (2018) was co-organizing citizens' assemblies in cities like Gdańsk and Poznań in Poland, he negotiated an agreement with local mayors that if the

established mini-publics reached a broad consensus (of at least 80%),[47] the mayors would implement the recommendations. Similarly, Madarász has designed or has been involved in designing tools and processes that improved communication between citizens and between citizens and authorities, as the Home Care campaign and other examples of aHang actions illustrate.

Most democratic innovations are not free from manipulation and cooptation by politicians who sometimes may use these mechanisms to legitimate the policy decisions they would take otherwise (Smith, 2009; Johnson, 2015). To improve external legitimacy of such new democratic innovations, it is important to have wider audiences approving of such mechanisms, though research shows that citizens are overall supportive of democratic innovations.[48] These innovations can increase non-participants' knowledge of the issue and their eagerness to participate, including by voting (Suiter et al., 2020).

Such innovations can potentially fulfill important democratic functions (Warren, 2017), when representation fails or falters, and when elections seem to be insufficient to bring change or create genuine democracies. These innovations might even improve democracy, at least at the local level. They can push the democratic system toward its lost equilibrium between the power of the government and the governed. But since such a process takes place from below, it also requires a sufficient degree of responsiveness from national and local representatives. This responsiveness, however, is worse during democratic backsliding and when the official public space has become more and more limited. As activists here pointed out, it has been difficult for independent NGOs in such countries to reach decision makers through public debate channels and influence legislation. Thus, to remain effective in their activities when implementing democratic innovations, they choose to bypass the central government where official public space has become more and more compromised and to work at the local level.

## Challenges and the future

Democratic backsliding and the decline of liberal and democratic standards in Poland and Hungary unveiled both the strength and weakness of civil society in these countries. It also prompted reflection among activists about how they can help organize collective life and create a process of communication, including deliberation, where people can make better decisions together. Democratic innovations provide a chance and, more importantly, specific ways for citizens to trust experts, engage directly in decision-making about problems, be more immune to fake news, and be skeptical of the charisma of populists.

But democratic innovations cannot be reduced to mere templates to emulate. Some features are universal, like the use of new technologies, which

can enable citizen participation, especially when offline activism is limited, as pointed out by Madarász. The widespread adoption of the Internet and social media make it easier for citizens to connect with each other and with their representatives and has opened new channels for dialogue and deliberation. This has the potential to increase the transparency and accountability of the democratic process and to give citizens greater influence over the decisions that affect their lives. However, as our activists highlight, most of the democratic innovations need to be adapted to the local context, including the political context. Thus, the activists' work reflects a diversity of formats of democratic innovations.

Such innovations, like the deliberative mini-publics described by Gerwin, can help heal and supplement local-level institutions of representative democracy, empower citizens, and strengthen local authorities in decision-making. However, they should not serve as a "democratic shortcut" (Lafont, 2019; Curato et al., 2020). According to Gerwin, who is optimistic, deliberative democracy might eventually replace purely representative democracy. Madarász is less hopeful and prefers to find a remedy for the current shrinking of public space and to strengthen participation and the role of citizens in decision-making processes wherever possible. Even during periods of democratic backsliding, democratic innovations make a difference. Despite the challenges discussed, these examples of activism and the mechanisms created and implemented in Poland and Hungary demonstrate that their civic sectors are dynamic, innovative, and self-reflective. Activists also realize better than before that the success of their efforts in the future depends on closer and more consistent interaction with citizens. These are valuable lessons in civil society resilience for activists in other countries and regions who struggle with the process of shrinking public space. The first lesson is that citizens' voices can be expanded and strengthened with the use of new technologies. The second lesson is that democratic innovations and various other forms of mobilization that activists use are more attentive to citizens than before and actions that require citizens' engagement which was often not the case with formal NGOs relying on external funding. This can be seen as anti-NGOization process (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2016). The third lesson is that activists can use new tools and incentives to mobilize and engage citizens and raise their political awareness which, as the October 2023 Polish parliamentary election shows, might be decisive for bringing about political change.

## Notes

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