

The goal of the project is to rethink the broader functionality of some forms of deliberative democracy, so-called mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies (CA) in democratic systems of Central Eastern European countries (CEE) and ask whether they are helping to make democracies resilient and citizens more engaged. Specifically, we aim to answer the following detailed research questions: What are the problems of representative democracy that deliberative innovations aim to address in the region? How does an ideal political decision-making process look like according to citizens of CEE countries? What is the impact of mini-publics on public policies and policymaking process? How should political decision-making processes be designed to facilitate consent among citizens? What drives these process preferences? Can participatory and deliberative procedures increase citizens' perceptions of legitimacy? How? What are the effects of mini-publics on social polarization and misinformation? How do deliberative mini-publics shape perceptions regarding citizens' engagement and overall attitudes toward democracy? By answering these questions, we aim to contribute to three types of literature: on democratic recession and autocratization; civil society development and political participation; as well as studies on democratic innovations.

We aim to address the above-presented research questions by examining the specific type of mini-publics organized in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Given the size of five-year project we aim to divide research objectives into three work packages: 1. Onset, type, and design of deliberative mini-publics in CEE countries; 2. Deliberative mini-publics' impact on public policy and political decision-making process; 3: Citizens' perceptions and public responses to mini-publics. The highly diversified research objectives designed to grasp the practice of deliberative democracy, as exercised through mini-publics, require bringing together theoretical and empirical perspectives, and both qualitative and quantitative approaches. To examine the multitude of ways in which deliberative innovations interact with democracy in crisis, be it through individual citizens, public opinion or public policymaking, or the political system, we will utilize a variety of methods. We plan to conduct representative surveys including survey experimental questions (vignette); pre-and post-surveys among participants; focus groups with the organizers, local authorities and citizens; field experiments with Randomized Control Trails; interviews with local decision-makers; content analysis. Some of the activities will be conducted in four CEE countries, e.g. surveys, some will be limited to analyzing specific mini-publics, e.g. citizens' assemblies, and finally some to a specific country.

There are two main reasons to undertake this research project. First, whereas new forms of citizens' engagement are well-researched in western European countries, in Australia and North America there is still lack of knowledge coming from the region of Central and Eastern European countries, while deliberative democracy innovations become popular in the region. Second, problems with representative democracy coupled with democratic backsliding, increasing polarization, the rise of populism, nationalism, and illiberalism, which seem to be the challenges that democracies face today, call for more studies on citizens' engagement, political participation as well as perception regarding ideal decision-making process and new forms of citizens' engagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Specifically, the perceived legitimacy of political decisions comes under severe strain. Citizens are increasingly distrustful of democratic institutions and disillusioned with the functioning of the democratic process. One answer to this trend has been to implement democratic innovations, so-called deliberative mini-publics, which are increasingly called upon to consider complex and contentious political issues. Deliberative citizen forums are used to complement representative decision-making processes and have been increasingly met with support from political elites.

We expect to find that state or non-state actors engage in deliberative innovations in CEE in order to complement and account for weaknesses of representative democracy, especially at the local level, that deliberative innovations improve legitimacy for policy decisions in CEE countries, and thus trust in democratic institutions as well as have positive consequences on social and political inequalities mainly through the greater inclusion as well as empowerment of citizens.