

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Citizens' Assemblies: Democratic Responses to Authoritarian Challenges in Central and Eastern Europe

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Amid the decline of democracy around the world, citizens' assemblies are increasingly being employed to tackle complex policy issues, counteract populism, and rebuild trust. Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, faces internal democratic challenges and external threats that exploit societal disillusionment through disinformation and interference. Despite these challenges, the region's strong tradition of civil society and innovation offers a foundation for democratic resilience.

Citizens' assemblies can contribute to addressing authoritarianism in the region. Implemented well and more systematically, they can do so in two ways: by building more resilient democratic systems, and by protecting from techniques that divide and fracture. This can be true even in illiberal contexts, where assemblies have a different role of opening up a critical, contestatory public sphere, and strengthening civic agency.

An analysis of 40 case studies reveals a growing "deliberative wave" in the region since 2016, with the number of countries implementing assemblies expected to double by 2025. Qualitative interviews with practitioners highlight that even though contextual challenges to citizens' assemblies persist, such as difficulty to secure political will, limited perceived legitimacy as well as limited resources, overall, the remarkable resilience and adaptability of the region presents a fertile ground for democratic innovation and uptake of citizens' assemblies.

*“If we had tools like this in the 1990s, we might have avoided the Yugoslav wars.”*

*— Member of the 2024 Kosovo Citizens' Assembly*



*Hungarian Assembly Members. Credit: Mate Podlussany, DemNet*

# Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is in a vulnerable moment as it faces a wave of populism, polarisation, and growing public disengagement against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. Over the past 15 years, the region has been gripped by a "polycrisis," present in Europe more broadly, including the eurozone and migration crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the climate crisis, all of which have strained democratic institutions.

## Threats

### Internal power capture

*elected politicians seizing opportunities to entrench themselves in power*

### Foreign interference

*designed to destabilise democratic processes and institutions*

### Democratic erosion

*due to neglect of democratic institutions and culture and failure to innovate and adapt it to evolving societal norms and needs*

## Tools

### Disinformation

*manufactured and spread*

### Division, polarisation, distrust

*fuelled and exploited*

### Anti-democratic movements

*ignited and supported*

### Weakening of democratic institutions

*judicial independence, electoral bodies, restricting media freedoms and the activities of civil society organisations*

## Weaknesses

### Democratic institutions

*relatively young and malleable*

### Engagement

*limited avenues for citizens to play a part in decision making*

### Corruption

*present to various extents*

### Political culture

*elite-led, hierarchical, and rigid*

### Citizens' agency

*sense of agency in citizens is limited*

## Strengths

### Alertness

*due to geopolitically unstable nature of the region*

### Wisdom

*from recent historical and lived experiences of oppression*

### Openness to innovation and ambition

*to make up for the years lost under oppression*

### Everyday activism and resilient civil society

*growing and strengthening*

## Citizens' assemblies are an important part of the solution



A citizens' assembly is a group of people who are selected through sortition (random selection) to be broadly representative of a community. They are convened with the aim of making shared, consensus-driven recommendations for decision makers through deliberation. Citizens' assemblies are sometimes called citizens' juries, panels, or councils depending on their size and the country where they are taking place.



Serbian Assembly Members. Credit: University of Belgrade

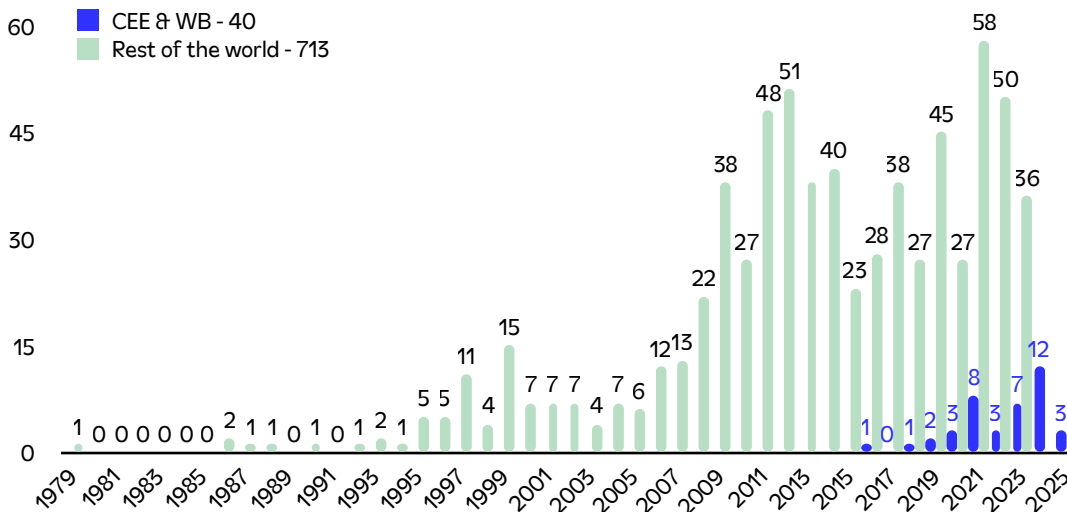
There are three main elements of a citizens' assembly that differentiate it from other forms of participation and enable its effectiveness and legitimacy - these are sortition, deliberation, and rotation.

For more details on the technical and practical considerations for running a citizens' assembly refer to DemocracyNext's [Assembling an Assembly Guide here](#).

# Citizens' assemblies in Central and Eastern Europe

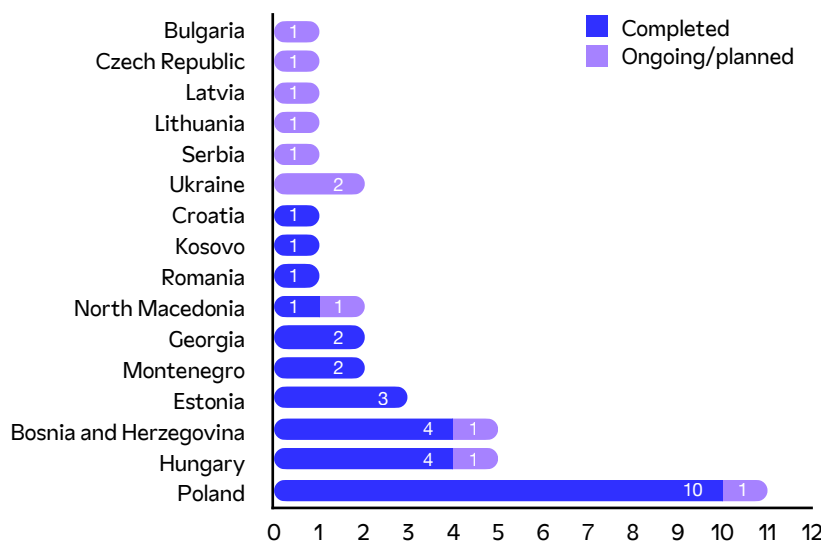
1. A “deliberative wave” is rising in the region, comprised of 40 deliberative processes far. It is gaining traction in 2024-2025, with at least 11 deliberative processes underway or planned.
2. New countries are implementing citizens' assemblies. The years 2024 and 2025 will see a doubling of countries in the region that have implemented at least one deliberative process.
3. Local government is leading the way, with 78% assemblies taking place at the local level.
4. The environment is the most popular issue, in line with the global trends.
5. Starting smaller and shorter - on average, deliberative processes have taken four days (ranging from two to six days) and brought together 53 assembly members (ranging from 33 to 90 members).
6. European institutions lead in funding assemblies. Most deliberative processes have had mixed sources of funding, almost half (42%) have benefited from financial contributions by international organisations.

## Number of citizens' assemblies and juries in the world and in CEE



Note: n=752; Data for the rest of the world for 2024-2025 is unavailable and only preliminary for CEE & WB. Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023) complemented by desk research and qualitative interviews.

## Number of citizens' assemblies and juries in CEE per country



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## In what ways can citizens' assemblies contribute to addressing authoritarianism?

### Building more resilient democratic systems

#### 1) Strengthening citizens' agency

Citizens' assemblies and juries strengthen citizens' agency - an essential line of defence against internal or external threats to democracy. A strong sense of citizens' agency is critical for any democracy to hold officials accountable.

#### 2) Modelling a cooperative political culture

Citizens' assemblies introduce and model a horizontal and cooperative political culture. Such political culture plays an important role in distributing power more evenly and poses a structural challenge to internal power capture, thus enhancing democratic resilience.

#### 3) Enhancing transparency

Citizen deliberation can enhance transparency and strengthen the integrity of public decision-making. This reduces opportunities for individuals with money or power to exercise undue influence. It also helps alleviate corruption, a legacy of the informal networks inherited from communist times in most of the region, that remains a weak spot enabling internal and external power capture.

### Protecting from techniques that divide and fracture

#### 1) Preventing weaponisation of thorny issues

Citizens' assemblies could help defuse rising tensions where polarisation is growing. By establishing them on pressing and divisive issues, governments and civil society could reduce the possibility of a thorny issue being weaponised by populist elites to entrench social divides for their political benefit, a classic move in the populist playbook, and protect democracies from internal division and fracture.

#### 2) Safeguarding against mis/disinformation

Informed citizen deliberation could, to some extent, mitigate mis/disinformation, which is routinely employed as a tool of foreign interference to cause polarisation and mistrust in fellow citizens as well as government, and creates a favourable environment for populist powers to gain prominence. Resilience to mis/disinformation is central to protecting against polarisation and maintaining the integrity of democratic processes such as elections and referendums in any democracy.

#### 3) Strengthening democracy on the local level

Organised by local authorities, academia, or civil society organisations, local level citizens' assemblies can contribute to spreading political literacy amongst citizens and create local spaces for democratic politics to develop. Strengthening local governance is often the last line of defence against democratic backsliding, with cities in particular being natural opponents of authoritarianism.

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## Challenges to implementing assemblies

Securing political will and commitment in an elite-driven political culture

Perceived legitimacy of citizen deliberation and “participation-washing”

Limited resources and capacity

## Recommendations for amplifying impact

### Resources and knowledge

Improving access to resources to run citizens’ assemblies and building the capacity of more local civil society organisations to have the knowledge and expertise to do so would amplify the benefits that citizen deliberation can bring, and would capitalise on the momentum and interest now present in much of the region.

### Ensuring quality

High-quality processes are a prerequisite because there are real risks of undue influence in some of the hybrid regimes and poorly-designed assemblies and juries can lead to co-option or misuse. Promoting high quality assemblies that meet quality standards helps to ensure their democratic rigour and neutrality.

### Systemic change

To maximise their potential benefits, assemblies could be embedded into the system of democratic decision-making in an ongoing way. This means that rather than being one-off initiatives dependent on political will, they become a normal part of how certain types of decisions are taken, often with a legal or institutional basis.

### Infrastructure for deliberation

To make it possible to run assemblies more easily and cost-effectively, and with fewer legal and administrative challenges, there is a need to develop supporting legal, administrative, physical, and technical infrastructure across the region.

Read the full paper at: [www.demnext.org/projects/cee](http://www.demnext.org/projects/cee)