PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING: HYPE OR DEMOCRATIC PANACEA?

SPECIAL REPORT | NOV 2021

https://eurac.tv/9UHd
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European cities are increasingly giving their inhabitants a voice on local matters by asking urbanites how to spend municipal budgets and engaging them on innovative platforms.

Local leaders believe engaging citizens can strengthen democracy and speed up Europe’s green transition, as most of the requests from the public relate to sustainability and the environment. Some even claim giving inhabitants more say on it can hinder authoritarian tendencies.

However, according to its critics, these tools are not enough to stop populism and could even be used to mask local leaders’ discretionary decisions.

EURACTIV takes a closer look in this special report.

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When asked, urban Europeans call for greener cities

Slovenia: Future of Europe debate should focus on resilience

Digital divide hinders European citizens’ voice in local matters

Boosting citizen engagement might not be enough to save democracy

Cities’ empowerment initiatives risk being ‘paper exercises’, experts warn
When asked by leaders about what they want for their towns and cities, urban Europeans place environmental transition, sustainable infrastructure, and green public spaces high on their agenda.

Planting new trees, improving bicycle lanes, helping pollinators, creating green parking lots, — these are just some of the proposals given to Helsinki, Grenoble and Warsaw leaders when they asked citizens how they should spend the 2021 local budget.

“Most citizens are calling for projects that have an impact on their quality of life, on the built environment and their immediate surroundings,” said Pietro Reviglio, who coordinates the work on citizen participation at Eurocities.

In recent years, European cities have started giving a direct voice to the population on how to spend part of the municipal budget. Citizens can propose and submit ideas to be voted on, adopted and implemented at the local level in a process called participatory budgeting. Ideas could cover any topic, but most city dwellers propose initiatives addressing climate issues and protecting public spaces.

“In the context of COVID-19, citizens are also understanding the value of having tactical urbanism, a more flexible way to organise the built environment and public space so as to cater to different needs and have a sustainable use of space,” Reviglio added.

Some cities are taking it a step further, saving a share of the city budget for initiatives specifically tackling the climate crisis.
Lisbon, the European Green Capital 2020, has decided to invest €2.5 million in green projects proposed by citizens to become more environmentally friendly. Members of the public submitted ideas on improving adaptation to climate change, reducing pollution, and boosting local circular economy, in line with the goals of the European Green Deal.

With 75% of the population living in urban areas, European cities will play a crucial role in cutting emissions and reaching the climate goals set by the EU.

“A climate-neutral city means a completely different city,” said Claire Roumet, director of the Energy Cities association. Roumet said that although technologies and investment potential are ready in most cities, new local governance is needed for the green transition to succeed.

“The [climate strategy] planification should be done at the local level, about exact resources, exact needs.” Participative tools could then be used to engage citizens and channel resources to implement climate measures locally.

As a “down-the-street action”, Roumet said that participatory budgeting uses readily available local resources while also creating community spirit.

When addressing the climate crisis, the city level is the right place to start, according to Tomislav Tomašević, mayor of Zagreb. He began as an environmental activist and worked as an advisor to the United Nations Environment Programme.

“I thought this is the place to change the world. If you want to change the world, go on a global level in the UN process. And then I found out this is not really the case,” he said at the Budapest Forum in September.

Tomašević went local in 2017 and was elected mayor of the Croatian capital earlier this year. He believes that local political involvement can have a much higher impact than national governments.

“You’re closer to the citizens, you can really talk with them, you can understand their issues, their problems, their struggles, and you can experiment with some institutional innovations, you can engage them, you can participate with them,” he said.

In some countries, this participative bottom-up approach is the only viable solution to implement green measures.

“In Hungary, cities are quite ambitious in terms of mitigating and also adapting to the changing environment, while the government is really reluctant to support these actions,” said Ada Ámon, chief advisor to the mayor of Budapest on climate affairs.

Last year the Hungarian capital held a climate citizens’ assembly, calling 50 randomly selected citizens to discuss and vote on proposals. The two most supported ones asked for more green space in the city and more funding to make buildings energy-efficient.

The trend is spreading, with other cities adopting participative tools that speed up the green transition. For example, in 2020, Warsaw set up a civic panel to get recommendations on energy issues to mitigate climate change.

These initiatives, like participatory budgeting, prove citizens are eager to participate in local governance and if given a chance are likely to push for faster environmental transition, while at the same time boosting democratic buy-in.
After the successive crises over two decades, a core issue for the Conference on the Future of Europe should be how to ensure the resilience of the EU and put policies in favour of European citizens first, Slovenia’s State Secretary Gašper Dovžan told EURACTIV.

“We have not developed the instruments to prepare ourselves for a future crisis, this is something that needs to be part of the discussion,” Dovžan said.

“It’s not only about health, not only about how the internal market has been struck by the pandemic, it’s also more complex issues such as we have seen now with the crisis in Afghanistan,” he added.

According to him, this would include exploring how current shortcomings could be improved by establishing cooperation mechanisms or discussing what passerelles could be used, like abandoning qualified majority voting for quicker and faster decisions.

“In the end it comes down to strike the sensitive balance between preparing the EU to be more robust, stronger externally and internally cohesive while not competing with the member states’ national competence and responsibility,” Dovžan said.

However, according to him, it would not be necessary to primarily talk about treaty change as “there is more or less unanimity among...
member states to ensure that we debate policies and that we see how we could improve the functioning of the EU”.

“But if in turns out at the COFEU that the policies cannot be improved on the basis of the existing treaties, it will be up to the member states and EU institutions to decide of the next steps,” the Slovenian minister added.

**CITIZEN’S PARTICIPATION**

“Our main goal is to be inclusive and to have full transparency when it comes to member states wishes and that we are adequately representing the aggregate of views present in the Council and there is the need to put policies in favour of citizens first,” he said.

Dovžan’s comments come as the first European citizen’s panel sessions are due to start next weekend.

In the consultation process, there are four panels, each one including 200 randomly selected EU citizens that will discuss issues related to four topical baskets: economy-jobs-culture, European democracy/values and rights, climate change-environment/health, and the EU in the world/migration.

By the end of the year, the panels will formulate recommendations, which will be discussed at a plenary that brings together citizens, representatives of EU institutions and national parliaments as well as other stakeholders.

The recommendations will feed into a final report, which will be prepared in spring 2022 by the executive board of the Conference, comprised of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

Speaking about what he expects to happen to the final results of the consultation phase, Dovžan pointed towards the agreement achieved between member states that it will be up to the political leadership of all the three institutions to draw the conclusions from the input given.

“This is the fairest and reasonable approach, since from the outset it was agreed that the whole process is not aimed at treaty change,” he said.

Asked whether he is concerned that the process could lead into a dead end, like the French consultations once conducted by President Emmanuel Macron, Dovžan said he “doesn’t believe the project will fail, because it’s also about the process itself, and the process will be definitely a success”.

“We should not only be focused on the substance – of course, it is important – but we should take into account the process of citizen’s inclusion, which is something new and a unique opportunity to close the gap between the political elites and citizens,” Dovžan said.

**EXITS AND ADD-ONS**

Asked whether the potential disintegration of the bloc, after the UK decided to leave the EU, should be part of talks about the future of the EU, Dovžan said Brexit had been “a big loss”.

“The EU ensures to every member state great added value, and I see no danger and am not afraid of further exits,” he said, adding:

“But the reasons that such views exist have to be taken into account, studied and responded to show the clear benefits of the integration process.”

As the EU is going through many crises, Dovžan said “the story about the EU and its successes needs to be retold for every generation, and we have to invest more in education, in studying the history of the member states and of the continent as such, to learn from this experience”.

At the same time, earlier this year, Slovenia had advocated for including the voice of citizens from countries of the Western Balkans into the future of Europe debate.

“Enlargement is a key strategic issue for the EU and the big tragedy of that policy area is that it somehow slipped off the agenda during the last decade and a half of various crisis, instead of seeing it one key answer to all those challenges,” Dovžan said.

That the last two presidencies did not achieve any progress would be “deplorable” and “open a lot of questions”.

According to the Slovene minister, the gap between the question of credibility for the EU to move forward on enlargement, despite geopolitical, economic political concerns, and the pace of reforms in the region on the other, is closing too slow.

“We are definitely among those that saw the opportunity for the conference to debate this question to persuade others that we really have to put this geopolitical question as our key priority,” Dovžan said.
European cities are using online tools to engage their inhabitants, but a lack of digital skills and access could amplify existing inequalities.

With digitalisation on the rise, online technologies are increasingly used by local governments to boost civic participation.

“Over the last 20 years now, institutions have more and more tried to insert features into their service delivery, administrative and democratic processes that enable people to have a say,” said Rebecca Rumbul, head of research at mySociety.

Barcelona, for example, has put in place a platform called Decidim. Barcelona (Catalan for “we decide”) to empower citizens and engage them in the decision-making process. The website enables users to submit ideas and comments on how to spend the city budget and is part of the administration’s plan to become fully digital.

Other European cities have introduced similar tools, like CONSUL, a software enabling public participation currently used in Madrid and Turin.

Studies have shown that these digital tools can benefit local democracy by widening the number of participants. Citizens might also be keener to take part in local consultations through platforms that require less time commitment.

However, this digital transition risks backfiring on local governments. According to Rumbul, digital tools are deeply flawed, because they only...
enable a “self-selecting” type of participation.

“It’s still disproportionately the more affluent, the more educated, the more ethnically dominant people in those cities that are participating in this way,” she said. Digital portals would then only boost engagement for those people who are already participating offline.

Lack of inclusiveness is not the only downside, said Pietro Reviglio from Eurocities, as these platforms often struggle to fully engage the population.

“Most participatory approaches have a strong digital element. The problem is that they are not managing to engage as many citizens as other players that compete for people’s attention,” he said.

Reviglio believes that cities should be more ambitious in the way they use social media and digital media platforms.

Some cities are trying to address this shortcoming, experimenting with digital tools. For example, Murcia in south-eastern Spain has launched a mobile app called “Tu Murcia” where citizens can send suggestions to improve their town.

Rumbul, however, warns against the use of mobile apps for civic participation, as most people in the lower-income brackets don’t have smartphones. “It’s the people that have the hardware, that have the skills that are massively, disproportionately represented in these participatory exercises,” she said.

Although internet usage is widespread across the bloc, only 56% of people in Europe have basic digital skills, according to the Digital Economy and Society Index.

The digital divide affects all European cities, including those at the forefront of digitalisation, like Barcelona. A 2020 survey carried out by the administration revealed a gap in access to equipment between higher and lower-income families. The divide deepened during COVID-19, when devices turned into basic day-to-day necessities.

The pandemic has forced most local governments to rethink their strategy to reach out to and engage citizens. Speaking at the Budapest Forum last September, the mayor of Gdansk, Aleksandra Dutkiewicz, recalled her city’s efforts to digitalise public services, while also ensuring nobody was being left out.

“In Gdansk the number of people who are over 60-65 years old is growing, and they’re more and more open to new technologies. But there’s still quite a big group of people who are excluded from the digital services,” she said.

To solve the problem, the Polish city used both online platforms and more traditional tools, like phone calls, to connect with its inhabitants.

With the digital divide still being an issue in Europe, this hybrid approach to civic participation could curb inequalities, giving a say to those citizens who don’t have the skills or the equipment to participate digitally.
To fight democratic backsliding and strengthen local democracy, cities have developed creative tools to boost citizen engagement, such as participatory budgeting and regional consultations.

These forms of public participation are meant to bring democracy closer to citizens, giving them a voice in local matters.

However, most European cities are no closer to finding common ground with their national governments. This growing divide can hinder local actions to the point that some are asking for cities
Projects meant to give power to EU city dwellers risk being reduced to a box-ticking exercise unless municipal leaders can convince as many of their constituents as possible to participate.

European city leaders are sharing power with their citizens to boost their inhabitants’ trust in local administrations through a range of collaborative and citizen-driven initiatives.

“I think to sustain the trust in representative democracy, we have to extend it, especially on a local level, to participatory democracy and direct democracy,” the mayor of Zagreb, Tomislav Tomašević, said speaking at the Budapest Forum in September.

Participative tools like consultations and shared decision-making on city budgets between inhabitants and municipal governments are seen as a way to empower citizens on local issues.

However, participative processes as “a matter of power-sharing” will only work if there is the political will to go beyond “ticking a box,” according to Anna Lisa Boni, secretary-general of Eurocities, a network of large cities in Europe.

Some have even questioned whether these tools bolster local democracy at all.

These initiatives often turn out to be no more than “paper exercises”, empty of real and equal participation, said Rebecca Rumbul, head of research.

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at mySociety, a not-for-profit working on civic engagement.

“I think participatory exercises, consultations, these kinds of things, they’re often used to just legitimise the process,” she said.

Heli Rantanen, development manager for digital participation at Helsinki administration, disagrees. “That’s not the case in participative budgeting,” she said.

Finland’s capital has put in place a two-year-long participatory budgeting process called OmaStadi. Consultations ask citizens to weigh in on planned projects, and participatory budgeting gives them a say on how to spend the municipal budget, according to Rantanen.

“The city is obliged to implement the results; there’s no question about it,” she said.

However, Rantanen recognised that not all citizens are equally taking part in this participatory exercise. The 2020 city’s evaluation showed the underrepresentation of minority groups, for instance, immigrants, who often struggle with language and cultural barriers.

The city said it is now cooperating with local NGOs to bridge the divide and reach out to marginalised communities to remedy this. For example, the administration found out that people who didn’t trust the local government in their origin countries are less likely to engage when they become residents in Finland.

But a lack of trust is not the only cause for low levels of citizen participation. A 2015 report showed 41% of Europeans were not interested in active citizenship initiatives at all.

Additionally, the most affluent were twice as likely to engage than their less financially advantaged counterparts. The most educated do not participate due to time constraints, while the less educated avoid doing so for lack of interest.

“When people are only thinking about survival, having a house, health, of course, they cannot participate. How can we expect them to participate if they are thinking of survival?” said Laura Pérez, deputy mayor of Barcelona, speaking at the Budapest Forum in September.

Citizens’ proximity to the project proposals can also play a role. In her research, Rumbul found that inhabitants are more interested in local services working properly than taking part in consultations on projects that are not directly affecting their day-to-day life.

“The further away you get from where you live, the more distant that becomes,” she said.

A similar effect seems to be at play in Helsinki, where officials noticed that 12% of participants who started voting on proposals gave up halfway through.

Citizens participating in the online vote on urban development proposals quit when they got to ideas concerning the entire city.

“We have seven district areas, you choose one, and after that, you can vote for the proposals that are made for the whole city of Helsinki – and that was the critical point”, said Johanna Seppälä, head of the unit for participation and citizen information in Helsinki.

“This is a common theme in every participative process,” Rantanen told EURACTIV. “People don’t want just to participate, just for the joy of it, but only and especially when it affects you and your neighbourhood.”
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