



Strengthening Democratic Governance
for Climate Transitions

D5.2 – THE IMPACT OF DELIBERATIVE PARTICIPATION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: LEARNINGS FROM ESTONIA AND POLAND

WP5 – Institutions for Deliberative Participation



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This deliverable is for publication for the wider public and for use within the project consortium.

3. Short summary of results (<250 words)

This report examines the impacts of deliberative mini-publics on climate action and democratic governance in Estonia and Poland. Using a framework combining the seven characteristics of climate democracy from the RETOOL analytical framework with the impact types from the KNOCA Impact Evaluation Framework, the study draws on desk review, RETOOL workshops, and 26 semi-structured interviews across both countries. In Estonia, the report examines the Tartu and Tallinn climate assemblies and the national Opinion Journey (Arvamusrännak) dialogue. In Poland, it focuses on the Narada Obywatelska o Kosztach Energii (Civic Council on Energy Costs), the first national citizens' assembly and the first organised by an NGO rather than government.

The most consistent finding across both cases is that deliberative participation processes on energy and climate generate stronger conceptual and capacity impacts than instrumental ones. Locally commissioned processes showed stronger connections between deliberation and implementation, pointing to a structural tension: deliberation is most feasible at the local level, where political authority for systemic change is weakest, and could be most consequential at the national level, where deliberation is hardest to sustain. Both cases also reveal the importance of political will and highlight a gap in the accountability infrastructure surrounding deliberative processes. They also challenge a simplistic hypothesis of younger democracies being more fragile or more receptive to deliberative innovation. Instead, the legacy of authoritarianism and the post-1989 transition to democracy shape the conditions for deliberative climate governance.

4. Evidence of accomplishment

This report.

Preface

The overall goal of the RETOOL project is to advance our understanding of how to address the twin challenges of responding to the climate imperative while strengthening and reinvigorating democratic governance. The project has four overarching objectives: (i) To deepen our understanding of the relationship between democratic governance and the climate imperative by developing a novel analytical framework and creating new empirical underpinnings, including important new open-access datasets; (ii) To understand how a variety of democratic institutions across Europe are responding to the climate challenge, including learning lessons from history and studying new and innovative democratic practices; (iii) To contribute to reinvigorating democratic governance in Europe by developing and synthesising new knowledge and insights on climate democracy, and presenting them in a range of high-impact formats; and (iv) To serve as a bridge between academic research on climate democracy innovations and policymakers and practitioners, as well as civil society and the wider public. RETOOL brings together an international and interdisciplinary consortium, with partners from Western Europe (Ireland, UK, Belgium, Austria), Northern Europe (Finland), Eastern Europe (Estonia), and Southern Europe (Italy, Greece), combining expertise in political science, political sociology, deliberative democracy, environmental law, European studies, and public administration. The consortium includes a democracy practitioner foundation (Praxis), and all partners are closely associated with practitioner and civil society networks and involved in hands-on activities. RETOOL will be undertaken by a mature, settled consortium that has significant experience of working together, with six of our nine partners core members of the EU-funded Jean Monnet Network GreenDeal-NET. The case study on Poland in this report has been prepared in collaboration with Professor Paulina Pospieszna and Dr. Marta Hoffmann, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland. Both researchers acknowledge support from the NCN Weave Unisono research grant (UMO-2023/05/Y/HS5/00027) for their contribution to this study.

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Executive Summary

Democratic decline and the urgent need to confront the climate crisis are among the most pressing challenges facing Europe today. The ability of democratic systems to respond meaningfully to the climate crisis depends, in part, on whether citizens feel that they have a say in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. While there is a growing interest in using deliberative mini publics in practice and emerging literature on their impacts in Western and Northern Europe, evidence on their role in strengthening democratic climate governance in **younger democracies**, or those that have recently transitioned from autocratic regimes, remains scarce. This report addresses that gap by examining the impacts of deliberative mini-publics on climate action and democratic governance in Estonia and Poland — two ‘younger’ democracies navigating the twin challenges of democratic renewal and climate transition.

The report also investigates whether **the age and character of a democracy** and the **multi-level nature of climate governance** shapes deliberative participation. In both countries, overarching climate policy is set largely at the national and supranational level, while local governments tend to be at the forefront of democratic innovation — creating a structural tension between where deliberation is most feasible and where political authority and resources lie.

The impacts of deliberative processes in each country are assessed using a framework that combines the seven characteristics of climate democracy from the RETOOL analytical framework — participation, representation, knowledge and expertise, accountability, deliberativeness, effectiveness, and justice — with the impact types (instrumental, capacity, and conceptual) from the KNOCA Impact Evaluation Framework. The research draws on desk reviews of academic and policy literature and evaluation documents; input from RETOOL workshops held in March and September 2025; and semi-structured interviews with 14 key informants in Estonia and 12 in Poland, conducted between February and April 2026.

In **Estonia**, the report examines **the local climate assemblies in Tartu (2022) and Tallinn**, and the **national Opinion Journey (Arvamusrännak)** dialogue developed as part of the process for the Climate Resilient Economy Act. Estonia’s climate policy became more visible and ambitious faster than the democratic routines needed to legitimate and sustain it, and deliberative formats have operated episodically and without stable institutional anchoring — reflecting a governance culture in which participation is valued but seen as politically risky. The strongest and most consistent effect of deliberative participation in Estonia is on conceptual change and capacity, strengthening deliberative skills among citizens and officials and expanding the menu of participatory methods available to public institutions, rather than on immediate policy change.

In **Poland**, the report focuses on the **Narada Obywatelska o Kosztach Energii (Civic Council on Energy Costs)** — the first national citizens’ assembly in Poland, and the first to be organised by an NGO rather than by government. The Council’s impact was broadly aligned with the more modest expectations of its organisers, with its greatest impact on deliberativeness and effectiveness: it provided proof of concept for a national-level citizens’ assembly and helped mainstream the concept of energy poverty into the Polish climate debate. Its instrumental impact on policy, however, remains hard to establish and harder still to attribute, in part because the absence of a government mandate fundamentally constrained the Council’s ability to translate recommendations into policy.

Several cross-cutting findings emerge across both cases. Deliberative participation processes on energy and climate consistently generate stronger **conceptual and capacity impacts** than instrumental ones. **Political will is central** both as an enabler and as a barrier to impact. Locally commissioned processes in Gdańsk, Warsaw, Tartu and Tallinn showed stronger connections between deliberation and implementation than nationally commissioned ones. This points to a **structural tension** whereby deliberation is most feasible at the local level, where political authority for systemic change is weakest, and could be most consequential at the national level, where deliberation is hardest to sustain.

Both cases reveal a gap in the **accountability infrastructure** surrounding deliberative processes: well-designed processes produced substantive citizen input, but follow-up remains consistently underdeveloped, and building credible, transparent follow-up mechanisms is a democratic necessity rather than a technical afterthought.

Finally, both cases challenge a hypothesis that **'younger' democracies are more fragile or more receptive** to deliberative innovation. In neither Estonia nor Poland did the chronological age of democratic institutions emerge organically as an explanatory factor; instead, interviewees in both countries pointed to the legacy of the communist regime, including memories of forced participation, distrust towards the state, and an elite-led political culture, as shaping the conditions for deliberative participation.

These findings suggest that **the history of authoritarianism and the post-1989 transition to democracy**, rather than democratic maturity as such, shape the conditions for deliberative climate governance in Estonia and Poland, and that evaluation frameworks for deliberative processes need to take conceptual and capacity impacts seriously in their own right. The report concludes by considering the extent to which these insights may apply beyond Estonia and Poland, and what they suggest for the institutionalisation of deliberative participation in the region more broadly.

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1 Introduction

Democratic decline and climate urgency are two of the defining challenges facing Europe today — and they are deeply intertwined. The ability of democratic systems to respond meaningfully to the climate crisis depends, in part, on whether citizens feel that they have a genuine role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. Yet across Europe, trust in government is declining, and the gap between representative institutions and the people they serve appears to be widening (OECD, 2026).

Europe is also facing a ‘polycrisis’ across multiple, simultaneous political rifts (Tooze, 2022) encompassing the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, migration and the climate crisis, which is exacerbated by a growing political prevalence of populism, polarisation and public disengagement (Zeitlin et al., 2019; Cesnulaityte, 2024). In Central and Eastern Europe, these pressures are compounded by the relative youth of democratic institutions, a political culture still shaped by the legacy of authoritarian rule, and in some countries — notably Poland and Hungary — a prolonged period of democratic backsliding (Alizada et al., 2021; Cesnulaityte, 2024). Although the region has seen a paradigm shift away from communist regimes over the past three decades, the implementation of reforms and the building of democratic institutions have been accomplished with varying degrees of success.

Against the backdrop of these pressures, deliberative participation has been gaining ground across Central and Eastern European cities and, more recently, at the national level. This growth includes deliberative mini-publics, such as citizens’ assemblies, citizens panels, civic councils, and related formats of engagement, which bring together randomly selected citizens to learn, deliberate, and produce recommendations on complex issues. While there is a growing literature on the impacts of such processes in Western and Northern Europe (Machani et al., 2025), evidence on their role in strengthening democratic climate governance in younger democracies or those that recently transitioned from autocratic regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond remains scarce (Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025; Cesnulaitytė, 2024; Gherghina et al., 2020). A systematic literature search on deliberative participation in young or new democracies conducted for this study in February 2026 identified few relevant academic publications, confirming that this is an under-researched topic (See Annex 2).

The broader literature on public participation in young democracies does not comment on whether the *age of the democratic regime* shapes public participation. However, it does suggest that, at least in Central and Eastern Europe, the *legacy of the communist regime* shapes participatory culture, civil-society capacity, and state-citizen relationships (Randma-Liiv and Lember, 2022), and makes democracies in this region more vulnerable to democratic backsliding (Gherghina et al., 2020). A sense of lack of agency amongst citizens, coupled with an elite-led, hierarchical, and rigid political culture, which can be traced back to regimes that denied and twisted civic rights, and perpetrated mistrust and domination, makes it challenging for people to fully exercise democratic rights (Nova, 2019; Maercker, 2023). Memories of forced political participation, and the banning of voluntary civil society organisations, have contributed towards deep distrust towards the state, shaping participatory culture across the region in ways that are not easily overcome (Randma-Liiv and Lember, 2022; Cabada, 2012). As a result, participatory mechanisms in the region tended, until recently, to be geared towards organised, as opposed to individual, interests, and to be organised by international, as opposed to domestic, institutions, struggling to reach citizens (Fink-Hafner and Kropivnik, 2006). Notably, however, these patterns have begun to change in recent years: evidence from Estonia and Poland points to widespread bottom-up activism, informal organising, digital advocacy and civic resilience that complicate any simple narrative about weak civil society in the region (McMahon and Niparko, 2022; Sagan et al., 2025).

At the same time, as was suggested by participants in a stakeholder event convened as part of the RETOOL project in September 2025, it may be that younger democracies are more receptive to democratic innovation, less encumbered by entrenched participatory norms, and therefore better positioned to ‘leapfrog’ older democracies in terms of deliberative practice. Whether *the age and character* of a democracy shapes deliberative participation — and if so, how — is therefore one of the central questions this report investigates.

We investigate the role of deliberative participation in Central and Eastern Europe through empirical research on Estonia and Poland. Both countries are navigating the twin challenges of democratic renewal and climate transition, and both have been active sites of deliberative experimentation. Estonia has conducted local climate

assemblies in Tartu (2022) and Tallinn (2023) and developed a national dialogue format, the Opinion Journey (*Arvamusrännak*), deployed as part of the process for developing the Climate-Proof Economy Act. Poland has been a pioneer in deliberative participation in the region, with citizens' assemblies now held in many of its major cities, and the first national citizens' assembly — the *Narada Obywatelska o Kosztach Energii* (Civic Council on Energy Costs) — organised in 2022. Together, these cases make it possible to examine the impacts of deliberative mini-publics across different political contexts, different levels of governance, and different models of commissioning — from government-led municipal processes to a bottom-up, NGO-led national assembly.

We assess the impacts of these processes on democratic climate governance using a framework that combines the seven characteristics of climate democracy from the RETOOL analytical framework (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2025) with the impact types from the KNOCA Impact Evaluation Framework (Demski et al., 2024). This makes it possible to track not only whether deliberative processes influence policy outcomes, but whether they shift thinking and build the capacity needed for sustained democratic climate action.

As well as the role of democratic age, and impact on climate democracy, we also explore how the *multi-level nature of climate governance* shapes deliberative participation. Estonia and Poland represent particularly interesting case studies, since local governments in both countries were significantly overhauled in line with efforts to decentralise after the collapse of the communist regime; they now have considerable governance powers and are at the forefront of efforts to modernise governance. Both countries are also significantly shaped by the EU and are making concerted efforts to comply with EU standards for participation, and, to some extent, meet EU climate goals.

In both Estonia and Poland, overarching climate policy is set largely at the national level — and to some extent the supranational level, under Articles 191–193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) — with national governments holding responsibility for climate targets and frameworks, funding mechanisms, and regulatory levers. Smaller local governments largely lack the mandate and institutional capacity for climate action. By contrast, local governments tend to be at the forefront of innovation in democratic governance, trialling and embedding deliberative formats earlier than the national level. Broadly speaking, therefore, national-level processes create the climate policy environment while local-level processes create the deliberative environment. This creates a structural tension — one that Estonia and Poland illustrate particularly well — between where deliberation is most feasible and where binding political authority and resources lie.

Our findings contribute to the evidence base on deliberative democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and to broader debates about the conditions under which deliberative mini publics generate democratic and policy impacts. In the conclusion we explore the extent to which these insights may apply beyond Estonia and Poland and what they suggest for the institutionalisation of deliberative participation in the region more broadly.

2 Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case-study methodology to analyse the impacts of deliberative and participatory practices in climate policy in Estonia and Poland. The impact of processes for deliberative participation in Estonia and Poland is evaluated using a framework designed to capture impacts on both climate action *and* democratic governance. The framework draws on the seven characteristics of climate democracy outlined in the RETOOL analytical framework, namely, i) participation, ii) representation, iii) knowledge and expertise, iv) accountability, v) deliberativeness, vi) effectiveness, and vii) justice (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2025). It also draws on the types of impact outlined in the KNOCA Impact Evaluation Framework, namely, i) instrumental impact, meaning impact on action, ii) capacity impact, meaning impact on expertise or resources, and iii) conceptual impact, meaning impact on thinking (Demski et al., 2024). The analytical matrix for evaluating impacts that we apply is set out in Annex 1.

The research combines desk reviews of academic and policy literature, evaluation documents, and surveys from the relevant national and local participation processes; input from RETOOL workshops with leading experts from academia and practice, held in March and September 2025; and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in each of the case study countries.

In Estonia, we have reviewed documents and evaluation reports from the Tartu and Tallinn climate assemblies, from the Opinion Journey (*Arvamusrännak*) national dialogue, Climate Law consultation materials, other policy documents, and 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and April 2026. The interviewees include actors involved in commissioning, designing, facilitating, participating in, or responding to deliberative processes, including national-level policymakers and officials, local government representatives from Tartu and Tallinn, civil society intermediaries, and NGOs. Overall, 9 of the interviews cover mini-publics, 7 cover the Opinion Journey national dialogue, and 6 cover the participatory and deliberative process of the Climate Act.

In Poland, the study draws on academic and grey literature related to deliberative participation, including an independent evaluation of the *Narada Obywatelska o Kosztach Energii* (Civic Council on Energy Costs) (2024), as well as 12 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and April 2026. The interviewees included 5 people involved in organising the Civic Council on Energy Costs or local-level citizens' assemblies; 4 NGO and 2 government actors who informed or observed a national or local-level citizens' assembly, and 1 academic who was closely involved in a local-level citizens' assembly.

The semi-structured interviews in both countries explored the perceived impact of deliberative processes on climate action and broader democratic governance, the interaction between deliberative and climate governance processes across multiple levels and considered to what extent the nature of being younger democracies that have undergone a regime change has a bearing on those perceived impacts and interactions.

3 Estonia

3.1 Introduction

Since regaining independence in 1991, Estonia has undergone a rapid and far-reaching transition from a Soviet-era command economy to one of Europe's most liberalised and digitally advanced states. This transformation was driven by a strong neoliberal reform agenda and the dominance of New Public Management (NPM) principles, which placed efficiency, technological innovation, competitiveness, and a customer-oriented understanding of public administration at the centre of governance. Digitalisation became both a political priority and a project of national identity. The Estonian context is primarily marked by a combination of stable liberal-democratic institutions, coalition government changes, relatively modest electoral participation, and an advanced digital participation infrastructure. Parliamentary election turnout has remained around the low-to-mid 60% range: 63.5% in 2023 (Valimised.ee, 2023); turnout in the 2025 local elections rose to 59.2%, described as the second-highest local election turnout on record (Valimised.ee, 2025).

Although these reforms enabled exceptional economic growth and rapid digitalisation, they also produced structural blind spots. Social cohesion, equality, and inclusive public participation remained secondary concerns; public debate became increasingly dominated by narratives centred on growth and efficiency; and civil society did not develop into a strong societal coordination mechanism alongside the state and the market. Trust in the national government has also been in decline: in 2023, 38% of Estonians reported high or moderately high trust in the national government, while trust was higher in the police, courts, civil service and local government, and lower for Parliament and political parties (OECD, 2024).

Estonia's status as a young democracy raises a further question about its capacity to renew democratic practices. Does the limited historical depth of deliberative and participatory institutions make the system more flexible and open to experimentation, or rather more fragile and vulnerable when confronted with reforms that require sustained public deliberation? Contemporary Estonian climate governance operates in a context where the institutional foundations of participatory and deliberative democracy are weak or only partially developed, while public narratives continue to be shaped by decades of techno optimism and market-oriented policymaking (Jonsson, 2015). Justice and social cohesion have been entering public discourse relatively recently.

The sociocultural context further amplifies these tensions: Estonian identity oscillates between a technocratic, modernist mindset and a deeply rooted cultural relationship with nature, expressed through the *maarahvas* (people of the land) tradition with everyday connections to forests and the natural environment. Yet this

nature-based identity does not automatically translate into substantive demands for political action. Environmental values provoke emotional reactions and impact personal lifestyle choices. But there is a lack of strong institutional and deliberative channels through which these feelings could be translated into sustained collective climate governance. When environmental issues do enter public debate, they tend to provoke rapid polarisation rather than deliberation. This was illustrated by the ‘Forest War’, the highly polarised Estonian forest-policy conflict that escalated in the mid-2010s around logging intensity, biodiversity protection, and competing understandings of forests as economic resource, ecosystem, and cultural landscape. Although collaborative arenas existed in that policy-process, they still failed to generate shared understanding, reciprocal trust, and cross-group learning. (Vihma and Toikka, 2021)

These dynamics compound the inherent challenges of climate change as a super-wicked problem (Levin, et al., 2012), which no single actor possesses sufficient resources, authority, or knowledge to address alone, and which requires long-term, inclusive, and knowledge-based deliberation. Estonia’s participation infrastructure is digitally advanced but socially fragile. Digital tools enable rapid consultation but are poorly suited to sustained and structured deliberation, particularly where deep value conflicts collide. The result is a dual problem — narrative and institutional. Narratively, Estonia’s neoliberal and NPM-oriented legacy has shaped a governance logic that frames climate measures as matters of personal responsibility or technological modernisation rather than collective decision-making, justice, or long-term societal negotiation. Institutionally, Estonia lacks stable and anchored mechanisms for deliberation, and deliberative formats have emerged episodically. (Avatud valitsemise eksperidirühm, 2023). Together, these interwoven problems generate a democratic deficit in climate governance: participation is rhetorically encouraged, but its structures are inconsistent, its impact uneven, and its legitimacy fragile. This tension — between a young, digitally advanced and efficiency-oriented democracy with relatively thin deliberative traditions, and the democratic demands of the climate transition — makes Estonia a critical case for examining how deliberative instruments can— and cannot — strengthen legitimacy, justice, and accountability in climate governance., and where they struggle to, strengthen legitimacy, justice, and accountability in climate governance.

This case study focuses primarily on local DMPs in Tartu (2022) and Tallinn (2024) in order to analyse how deliberation functions in Estonia’s local politico-administrative and cultural context; the Opinion Journey (*Arvamusrännak*) for the Climate Act is introduced as a contextual case in order to study the advantages and disadvantages of a new and alternative approach to citizen engagement.

The findings are organised in three parts. Sections 3.2.1 – 3.2.3 set out the broader context, tracing the timeline of Estonian climate policy and democratic innovation, perceptions of democratic legitimacy and participation, and multilevel governance dynamics. Sections 3.2.4-3.2.6 form the core of the case study, examining deliberative participation in practice, the perceived impacts of local DMPs vs the Opinion Journey on climate democracy, and the factors shaping those impacts. Section 3.2.7 addresses the question of what it means for Estonia to be a “younger democracy” in this context.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Climate policy outpaced democratic legitimisation

Deliberative and participatory climate processes emerged in Estonia at a moment when climate governance was becoming more institutionalised, but also more politically contested. Estonia’s climate policy has developed in close connection with EU climate policy, especially the European Green Deal, Fit for 55 and related regulatory and funding frameworks. Since 2019, climate policy has become more visible in national politics, local government planning and public debate. Early national frameworks, such as the Climate Change Adaptation Development Plan 2030 (2016) and the General Principles of Climate Policy (2017), were followed by municipal climate and energy planning, the establishment of the Climate Ministry, and the preparation of the Climate Resilient Economy Act — about which one interviewee said “the initial message that we would draft it transparently, inclusively and publicly was positive. But that optimistic transparent plan gradually faded” (Interviewee 4). Several interviewees saw the creation of the Climate Ministry as an important step but also stressed that institutional restructuring did not resolve political contestation, unclear goals or implementation challenges, with the cross-cutting nature of the climate response being seen as a particular

issue.

At the same time, Estonia also experienced an expansion of democratic innovation practices and civic participation channels. Since the 2010s, these practices have included participatory budgeting, collective petitions, digital civic platforms, citizens' assemblies, and dialogue-based engagement methods. Climate-related issues increasingly entered these channels through youth climate activism, climate litigation, public campaigns, advocacy by environmental NGOs, and collective initiatives — covering clean and just energy transition, biodiversity and environmental protection, forestry, circular economy policies. By the early 2020s, deliberative and dialogue-based formats such as the Opinion Journey national dialogue, the youth climate assembly in Ida-Viru County, the Tartu climate assembly and the Tallinn citizens' assembly on urban green spaces, had become part of Estonia's wider experimentation with participatory governance (see Table 1). Estonia's climate policy evolved alongside a broader experimentation with participatory and deliberative governance, but climate policy became more visible and ambitious faster than the democratic routines needed to legitimate and sustain it.

Table 1. Key developments in Estonian climate governance and democratic innovation (2016-2024)

Year	Climate governance developments	Democratic innovation / participation developments
2011		Participatory budgeting began spreading in municipalities
2013		The first national People's Assembly on Estonia's electoral laws, political party law, and other issues related to the future of democracy in Estonia.
2014	Estonian national strategy and action plan for adapting to climate change.	Legal amendments introduced collective petitions to Parliament
2016	Climate Change Adaptation Development Plan 2030 drafted	Rahvaalgatus.ee launched
2017	Parliament approved General Principles of Climate Policy	
2018	Tartu began drafting municipal climate and energy transition plan	Public debate intensified around the gradual phase-out of oil shale energy and a transition to renewable energy ('PÕXIT'). Collective petition advocating PÕXIT discussed in Parliament
2019	Climate and Energy Committee established; NECP preparation began; forestry strategy process intensified	Fridays For Future Estonia climate strikes
2020	Financial support introduced for municipal climate plans	First climate litigation case; Green Tiger (<i>Rohetiiger</i>) platform launched;
2021	National strategy Estonia 2035 adopted; local election programmes included climate issues; Green transition coordination strengthened; Regulation for Tallinn's Plan for Sustainable Energy Management and Adaptation to Climate	National dialogue format Opinion Journey (<i>Arvamusrännak</i>) developed; youth climate assembly in Ida-Viru; lobby transparency measures

	Change adopted	
2022	Green transition coordination expanded	Tartu climate assembly; NGO People with purpose (PwP) formed by participants of Ida-Viru assembly
2023	Climate Ministry established; Climate Law process launched; NECP updated; climate neutrality target strengthened	Tallinn climate assembly during European Green Capital year
2024	Climate Resilient Economy Act draft publicly contested	Continued public debate and participatory experimentation
2026	In May, the Government submitted the draft Climate-Resilient Economy Act to the <i>Riigikogu</i>, marking the start of the long-awaited parliamentary debate. In May, the parliamentary deliberation on a bill to amend the Forest Act was put on hold, following strong public opposition.	National Citizens' Panel on Good Life

3.2.2 Democratic legitimacy and participation

The general sentiment regarding Estonian democracy seems to be “in general, our democracy works, but ... there are many examples where democracy is largely formal” (Interviewee 2). Interviewees linked the expansion of democratic innovation to a broader perception that participation practices were no longer sufficient for handling complex and contested policy issues, highlighting the need for more structured, discussion-based and legitimate forms of engagement in climate governance. They argued that deliberative formats were expected to create spaces where citizens, experts and policymakers could engage with complex issues in a more constructive way, to bring together people with different perspectives and to help amidst declining trust, increasing polarisation and dissatisfaction with procedural forms of participation. In this framing, deliberation was seen as a condition for implementing ambitious climate policy, since “the lower the trust, the lower the legitimacy, the less you can do” (Interviewee 11).

While interviewees generally did not describe Estonia as a democracy in crisis, they noted that democratic quality of institutions varied across decision-making processes and highlighted the gap between participation and its influence: participation happened, but it was often symbolic. Several interviewees argued that crisis-style decision-making compressed the time and institutional space devoted to deliberation and presented decisions as already settled. As one interviewee put it, “after the Covid crisis, that experience of rushing somehow remained, or that button stayed switched on” (Interviewee 1). Combined with the absence of clear feedback loops, the interviewees argued that this “emergency governance” approach weakens legitimacy-building potential of participation and reduces trust, leading some actors to become more selective and strategic about their engagement in participatory processes: “We simply decided that we would not allow our name to legitimise this process if we had no real possibility to change anything.” (Interviewee 3).

The cross-sectoral, abstract and technocratic nature of climate policy also made it difficult for people to connect unless policy issues were translated into concrete local concerns such as streets, mobility, parks, heating, waste or local infrastructure. Several interviewees also referred to culture-war dynamics, ideological positioning and distrust towards expertise because of growing polarisation, making climate appear as a conflict between opposing camps rather than a shared societal problem, with media dynamics, disinformation and organised opposition all making climate deliberation more difficult. Estonia was not isolated from broader international patterns of polarisation around climate and expertise: “we have exactly the same struggles going

on: populism versus science” (Interviewee 7).

Finally, representation within climate governance was perceived as uneven; business actors were more institutionally embedded and able to influence policy than environmental or social justice actors. As one interviewee noted, “if you look, for example, at the lobbying meetings register, at who gets access to ministers or chancellors to defend their interests, business representative organisations are at the top” (Interviewee 3). Together, these deficits created a perceived need for more structured and meaningful forms of participation.

3.2.3 Multilevel governance and institutional dynamics

EU climate targets, funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks shape national policy direction in Estonia. National climate policy involves “clear pressure from above,” with EU-level objectives carried “to the state and from there to the local government” (interviewee 2). Municipalities are expected to translate these goals into practical decisions concerning mobility, energy, waste, spatial planning, green spaces and local services. However, responsibility and accountability often remain blurred across governance levels. The local level was consistently described as the place where climate policy becomes concrete and understandable for people’s everyday lives — around streets, parks, transport or heating solutions — rather than abstract national targets. As one interviewee put it, “the local level can kind of boost a lot of this development or it can slow down most of the development” (interviewee 6). Municipalities therefore play an important role not only in implementation, but also in making climate policy socially meaningful and publicly discussable.

This helps explain why the Tartu and Tallinn climate assemblies appear more democratically meaningful than their formal policy authority alone would suggest. In this polarized and politically contested context, “the citizens’ assembly was an opportunity to test how positively or negatively people responded to these ideas” and these experiences have raised hope that “problems could be solved more easily if the solutions had gone through the citizens’ assembly filter” (interviewee 2). Local citizens’ assemblies translated abstract climate policy and heated ‘green transition’ debates into questions of urban space and green areas, sustainable mobility and everyday quality of life. However, their instrumental impact remained limited. For this to improve, outputs would need to be anchored in municipal planning, budgets and implementation systems, or travel upward into national policy processes.

Interviewees stressed that the role of municipalities has increased significantly faster than their institutional capacity. Larger municipalities have developed climate and energy plans and participated actively in international cooperation, while smaller municipalities often lack sufficient expertise, staff or strategic awareness. Interviewees described the role of the state ambivalently: national agencies were seen as increasingly supporting municipalities through planning frameworks and methodological guidance, but several criticised what they perceived as a gradual transfer of responsibility from the national level without a corresponding transfer of resources or a sufficient increase in implementation support, potentially creating tension between these levels.

The central multilevel governance challenge identified across the interviews was the lack of stable institutional connection points between EU goals, national policymaking, municipal implementation, and citizen input. Deliberative formats were perceived as more manageable at municipal level because issues are more concrete and the connection between discussion and implementation is more visible. National climate issues, by contrast, were described as broader, more abstract and more vulnerable to politicisation, making them more difficult to deliberate on unless they are carefully narrowed, clearly framed and connected to real decision points. It was felt that for a citizens’ assembly, there has to be in place “political readiness... to implement the results” (Interviewee 12). Interviewees saw deliberative formats primarily as mechanisms for testing, validating and legitimising proposals that already existed within administrative or expert discussions. Interviewees also repeatedly pointed to the absence of clear mechanisms through which deliberative outputs move across governance levels and into formal decision-making. As one interviewee put it, “there has to be a mechanism for these changes to actually have an effect” (Interviewee 6), while another noted the absence of a clear “process or place” where such input could be directed in current policy processes (Interviewee 7). This highlights a structural tension between where deliberation is most feasible — locally — and where binding political authority often lies — nationally.

3.2.4 Deliberative participation in practice

Deliberative and discussion-based processes in Estonia emerged as institutional experiments aimed at creating more structured, legitimacy-producing and publicly meaningful forms of participation than ordinary consultations. This reflected a broader concern that participation without structure can deepen rather than resolve conflict: as one interviewee put it, “the issue is not bringing different people together; the issue is the lack of methodology” (Interviewee 4). According to interviewees, deliberative processes are not understood simply as “more participation”, but as a distinctive form of participation, which creates a structured setting for collective learning, public reasoning, and shared outputs. A citizens’ assembly can bring people to “some common basic level” and enable them to “reach a shared understanding on certain questions” (Interviewee 8). Also, while many deliberative processes featured expert presentations and co-learning, in well-designed processes participants can themselves become knowledge-holders as they are told that “your knowledge was the most valuable” (Interviewee 10).

The comparison between deliberative mini-publics and the Opinion Journey shows that different formats serve different democratic functions (Table 2). Climate assemblies allow for facilitated learning, deeper deliberation and collective proposal-making among a stratified, randomly selected citizens’ panel. The Opinion Journey, by contrast, is broader, more flexible and more scalable as a public engagement method, but its deliberative depth and representativeness are more limited. It can help gather concerns, values and ideas across specific or wider publics, but it is less suited to producing deeply deliberated, collective representative recommendations on complex policy trade-offs. This reflects a broader limitation: when people come voluntarily, “a very similar audience” tends to participate, whereas deliberative processes that use stratified random sampling for invitations also achieve the attendance of “different kinds of people” (Interviewee 7).

Taken together, the findings show that deliberative innovation in Estonian climate governance has not simply been about adding more participation opportunities. It has been about testing formats capable of producing more informed and structured public reasoning. Notably, these formats are institutionally demanding: they require facilitation, knowledge integration, clear mandates, and appropriate issue framing. As one interviewee stressed, “the question or problem formulation has to be very concrete,” and participants must understand why the issue is being addressed and why a citizens’ assembly is genuinely needed (Interviewee 2). Also, “the missing part has always been a clear mandate and a process of taking the output [and] making it relevant for actual policymaking” (Interviewee 6). Thus, deliberative processes in Estonia are specific democratic practices; deliberation is not simply a new label for general for discussion and consultation.

Table 2. Deliberative mini-publics and national dialogue formats in Estonian climate governance

	Deliberative mini-public	National dialogue
Processes in focus:	Local deliberative mini-publics in Tartu (2022) and Tallinn (2024)	<i>Opinion Journey (Arvamusrännak) for the Climate Act</i>
Main design features:	The Tartu climate assembly and Tallinn Green Capital Citizens’ Assembly on green urban spaces embody internationally recognised principles of deliberative democracy (https://www.tallinn.ee/en/rahvakogu). They were designed on the basis of random selection, use facilitated deliberation, balanced expert input, and experiential practice, and commissioned by the public administration	The Opinion Journey was developed under the Open Government Partnership (OGP) program and been used in updating the strategic action plan of Estonia 2035 and in preparing the Climate-Resilient Economy Act (https://kliimaministeerium.ee/en/engagemnt-drafting-climate-resilient-economy-act).

Level of government:	Municipal	National
Mandate and policy integration:	These were intended as pilot projects of a new method. The resulting proposals were used as consultative input and as the “opinion of the public” by the municipality.	This method was developed for institutional public engagement. The fundamental values echoed in the proposals were used to focus and validate the plans for the Climate Act.

3.2.5 Perceived impacts of deliberative participation

According to the interviews, the deliberative mini-publics and Opinion Journey national dialogue generate different impacts: mini-publics go deeper but are more institutionally demanding, while the Opinion Journey is broader and more scalable but with weaker accountability and representativeness (see Table 3).

A recurrent message was that all deliberative processes have the potential by design to influence climate policy, but this influence is uneven and rarely automatic. Interviewees describe direct policy impact cautiously. That impact seems to depend on whether there is a credible translation mechanism between citizen-generated input and administrative or political decision-making. As one interviewee argued, “the missing part has always been a clear mandate and a process of taking the output, making it relevant for policy making” (Interviewee 6). Interviewees noted that a good deliberative experience may initially strengthen trust and agency, but its longer-term democratic effect depends on whether institutions respond credibly. Participation that empowers citizens during the process but abandons their input afterwards can deepen cynicism.

The strongest and least contested impacts described in the interviews related to capacity and learning. As one interviewee put it, participants “learn to deliberate” and “think along together” (Interviewee 10). Several interviewees, regardless of their background, noted that citizens were capable of engaging constructively with complex and technical climate issues when provided with time, facilitation and balanced information: if “an ordinary citizen without specialised knowledge” is “given time, allowed to go deeper and allowed to communicate with experts” then they are “able to go very seriously into details and form quite complex positions” (Interviewee 2). Interviewees also noted that citizens are able to listen to and deliberate with people holding different views if they are provided with facilitation, and institutions learn the methods for organising more structured public reasoning. In this sense, climate assemblies functioned not only as participation mechanisms, but also as demonstrations of deliberative capacity — for citizens, officials and political actors alike.

These results provide complementary evidence to the results of the Tallinn Climate Assembly participant survey, that showed learning effects for participants about the role of nature and green urban spaces in climate adaptation, a better understanding of the city’s strategic objectives, and high intention to use the knowledge and skills gained in the future (Lauring, et al., 2024).

This finding is important because it points to the need to shift the evaluation of these processes away from a narrow focus on instrumental impacts. As one interviewee cautioned, “translating [recommendations] into policies is a huge difficulty, but the discussions themselves were fairly valuable” (Interviewee 7). The more robust contribution of deliberative mini-publics lies in strengthening the democratic infrastructure needed for climate governance by helping to create deliberative skills, methodological competence, trust in structured discussion, and the recognition of citizens as capable political reasoners. Over time, repeated practice was seen as creating a new “hygiene level,” where people learn to distinguish well-organised participation from poorly organised formats and ultimately begin to demand better processes (Interviewee 4) and even “develop and spread a broader understanding of what good discussion culture is” (Interviewee 9).

Table 3. Key impacts of deliberative mini-publics and national dialogue across climate democracy

Type of Impact	Deliberative mini-publics: Tartu and Tallinn climate assemblies	National dialogue: Opinion Journey (<i>Arvamusrännak</i>) for Climate Act
Instrumental	Main finding: Instrumental impact is primarily conditional on accountability and effectiveness. The proposals of mini-public can enter development plans, executive agendas or administrative audits, but only when there is a clear route from deliberation to decision-making. The strongest recurring message is that impact on policy depends on follow-up: steering groups, ownership, audits, reporting, political anchor points and contact with decision-makers. Accountability: The central weakness is weak or uncertain follow-up. Respondents repeatedly questioned proposal ownership, who reports back, and whether citizens can see what happened after deliberation. Effectiveness: Mini-publics are effective only if proposals are usable and connected to executive or council-level processes. Overly broad problem framing reduces usability. Representation: Mini-publics can function as a citizen ‘filter’ that legitimates expert-backed solutions, but this depends on whether the process is accepted as sufficiently representative.	Main finding: Instrumental impact is more ambiguous and more vulnerable to weak visibility. Opinion Journey (<i>Arvamus</i>) can feed into climate-law or strategy processes, but respondents question whether this input visibly shaped policy. It may be procedurally well organised while still having limited policy impact. Accountability: The strongest concern is that Opinion Journey may go ‘under the radar,’ lack systematic reporting, and become a box-ticking exercise. Institutional ownership of the method and infrastructure is unclear. Effectiveness: The method is more useful for concrete measures and local-level implementation than for abstract framework-law drafting. Its outputs are harder to translate into formal legal text. Participation: It can generate broad input, but that input needs a visible channel into policymaking to become instrumentally meaningful.
Capacity	Main finding: Capacity impact is one of the clearest positive effects of mini-publics. Deliberative mini-publics build deliberative and civic capacities among participants, officials and sometimes organisations. Participants learn to listen, ask, speak, regulate disagreement and move from narrow personal concerns to a broader public-interest perspective. Officials learn new participatory methods and see how design affects the quality of public discussion. Deliberativeness: This is the strongest capacity-related pillar. Mini-publics create structured spaces for reason-giving, listening, mutual understanding and constructive disagreement. Knowledge/expertise: Participants gain substantive understanding but also reveal a need for more support in understanding municipal competences, legal constraints and implementation realities. Participation: Repeated practice	Main finding: Capacity impact is centred on scalable participation and everyday deliberative skills. Opinion Journey builds reusable capacity through guidance materials, training, web infrastructure, discussion leaders and repeated practice. Its strength is that it can distribute participatory work across local organisers rather than relying entirely on state-led events. Participation: The method lowers the threshold for local discussions, but depends heavily on volunteers, non-governmental resources and methodological clarity. Deliberativeness: Training and facilitation strengthen listening, turn-taking and non-chaotic discussion culture. Knowledge/expertise: Guidance materials transfer methodological knowledge to officials and organisers. Justice: Capacity is uneven — some organisations lack resources to host discussions, and reliance on active

	improves expectations of what good participation looks like and enriches officials' methodological repertoire.	community leaders may privilege already mobilised groups.
Conceptual	Main finding: Mini-publics change how actors understand citizens, participation and method suitability. The strongest conceptual message is that ordinary citizens can deliberate seriously about complex policy issues when given time, information, expert input and facilitation. It also delivers better understanding on complex issues and wicked problems. At the same time, respondents develop a cautious view: a citizens' assembly is not a universal solution and works best for concrete, complex and information-heavy questions. Knowledge/expertise: Mini-publics challenge assumptions that only experts can handle complexity. Citizens' situated knowledge becomes visible alongside expert knowledge. Participation: Rahvakogu expands the imagined repertoire of participation beyond conventional public hearings or written consultations. Effectiveness: Conceptual impact includes clearer understanding of when the method works and when it does not: highly polarising or too broadly framed topics are problematic. Representation: Citizen input is valued as local voter knowledge, but representativeness remains contested because participants may be more motivated or articulate than average citizens.	Main finding: Opinion Journey is conceptually understood as a qualitative and interpretive input method rather than a statistically representative evidence tool. It helps policymakers understand reasoning, concerns and practical ideas, but does not produce standardised survey-like data. It also challenges fears that open public discussion necessarily becomes protest-like or chaotic. Knowledge/expertise: Its epistemic value lies in qualitative public reasoning and practical local knowledge, not in quantification. Effectiveness: It is conceptually strongest for concrete and local questions, weaker for abstract legislation or topics requiring personal behavioural self-reflection. Representation: Its representational basis is weaker than mini-publics because discussion leaders are often activists or community leaders rather than randomly selected participants. Deliberativeness: The method can support substantive discussion, but this depends on the quality and profile of discussion leaders.

Representativeness and inclusion is stronger in the case of deliberative mini publics based on random selection and demographic balancing, but it remains politically and methodologically vulnerable to incorrect and symbolic application. In Tartu, the invitation may have appealed more to people for whom climate change was already a priority, leading to a future design recommendation to include climate sceptics and people less motivated by biodiversity or sustainability arguments. The Opinion Journey faces a different representational challenge: because it relies on volunteer discussion leaders, participation is often mediated by already active citizens, community leaders or local organisers, potentially privileging those with stronger civic resources.

Political will, accountability and risk tolerance. Climate policy is increasingly polarised, and officials may fear that participatory processes will generate conflict, opposition or unmanageable expectations. Yet the empirical material suggests that well-designed deliberative spaces can also reduce conflict by creating conditions for listening, learning and substantive discussion. The problem is therefore not simply whether citizens are willing to participate, but rather if decision-makers fear a complicated process might "derail" existing plans, they may avoid it or simplify it (Interviewee 6) but whether institutions are willing to share

agenda-setting space, take public input seriously and accept accountability for what happens afterwards.

3.2.6 Factors shaping impact

Deliberative participation in Estonia remains closer to an innovative practice than an institutionalised governance norm. The interviews and document review suggest that the impact of the citizens' assemblies and Opinion Journey does not follow automatically from the use of the method itself. As one interviewee cautioned, citizens' assemblies are "certainly one thing that works," but they "do not work in every situation" (Interviewee 10). Rather, impact is conditioned by credible design that is fit for purpose and institutional embeddedness of the process.

Clear mandates, methodological support, trained facilitators, institutional ownership, adequate resources, political anchoring and transparent follow-up are all important preconditions for designing policy impact. For example, in the Tartu Climate Assembly the use of organisers, discussion facilitators and monitoring mechanisms helped align the process with international best-practice standards. Similarly, for the Opinion Journey guidance materials, web infrastructure and facilitator support were crucial for enabling officials and local organisers to apply the method with confidence. The Tallinn People's Assembly was mentioned as a positive example of a clearly defined organisational structure and institutional anchoring. The report shows that the Tallinn Strategy Centre and its Green Transition Office provided an institutional 'home' for the process, while around 30 officials from the city government and agencies were involved in preparation and organisation, alongside district-level actors who helped disseminate information. Political anchoring was also present: officials had a mandate from the city government, the deputy mayor had given clear tasks to the Strategy Centre, and responsibility for responding to proposals was clarified before the first assembly meeting. A follow-up steering group composed of agency heads and Deputy Mayor Vladimir Svet was created at the end of 2023 to respond to the proposals, with a working group of officials preparing the responses (Lauring, M., et al., 2024). Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that simply bringing people together is insufficient, particularly on contested climate issues. The democratic quality of deliberation therefore lies not in maximal openness, but in a transparent and carefully structured process that clarifies who participates, on what terms, around which questions, and toward what kind of outcome.

Both deliberative mini publics and national dialogue formats are capable of producing substantive public input, but their eventual democratic and policy relevance depends on whether public reasoning is supported, translated, owned and followed up by public institutions. The democratic value of deliberative mini-publics lies in depth and in deliberativeness: they can create informed citizen recommendations, build deliberative capacity and trust, and legitimate difficult choices. Deliberative mini-publics seem to be more appropriate when policymakers need informed, representative and deliberative judgement on complex and information-intensive questions where citizens need time to learn, deliberate and weigh alternatives. The Tallinn and Tartu mini-publics were both connected to spatially tangible issues — green areas, mobility, urban space and climate adaptation — that could be linked to residents' daily lives. Their weakness is that they require serious institutional anchoring for follow-up to avoid the risk of disappointment.

National dialogue or Opinion Journey is stronger as a participatory infrastructure and seems to be seen as more appropriate when policymakers need broad, flexible and locally grounded qualitative input. "The clearer these formats are... the easier it is to apply them and the more courage officials have to use them" (Interviewee 14). Because it was developed for institutional use by the Government Office, it is more scalable within the public sector and better aligned with national engagement needs. At the same time, its link to decision-making is weaker by design. It can map ideas, collect concerns, validate policy directions and raise awareness, but it is less suited to producing representative, science-informed and deeply deliberated recommendations on complex policy trade-offs. The method's potential is therefore not universal; it depends on whether the format matches the policy problem. Its democratic value lies in reach and adaptability: it can mobilise many small discussions, distribute facilitation capacity and gather practical concerns from diverse settings. Its weakness is that its outputs are less representative, less standardised and often harder to trace into actual decisions. Both methods contribute to climate democracy and be used as effective response to democratic deficits, but neither produces democratic impact automatically without a strong connection to accountable decision-making.

3.2.7 Younger democracy

The Estonian case suggests that the relevance of being a younger democracy lies less in the chronological age of democratic institutions and more in whether participatory and deliberative practices have become embedded in political culture, administrative routines and citizen expectations. The findings point to a persistent distinction between democracy on paper and democracy in practice: formal procedures, consultation requirements and legally correct processes exist, but they do not always ensure that people feel heard, that public input is taken seriously, or that participation can shape policy and climate outcomes.

This makes Estonia an ambivalent case for democratic innovation. On the one hand, relatively unsettled participatory traditions can create openness to experimentation with new formats such as climate assemblies, national dialogues, and digital civic tools such as the collective proposals platform rahvaalgatus.ee. On the other hand, deliberative norms, institutional memory and expectations about how citizen input should influence binding decisions remain weak. Deliberative participation is not yet fully normalised as a routine democratic practice. Questions about who is entitled to speak, who represents whom and whether citizens have sufficient knowledge to contribute remain culturally and institutionally sensitive. Officials may recognise the value of participation and support deliberative methods, but politicians may view these processes as slow, risky or difficult to control. Democratic innovation is therefore enabled by institutional flexibility but constrained by thin deliberative routines.

3.3 Discussion

The Estonia case shows that democratic questions in Estonia are often translated into procedure and governance efficiency. Participation is considered a tool for better implementation, risk management or public acceptance, rather than a democratic value. This reflects a broader tension between deliberative democratic ideals and a governance culture shaped by efficiency, digitalisation, managerial rationality and limited administrative resources. Formats that fit existing administrative systems are more easily adopted than those requiring stronger redistribution of authority, time or resources. Overall, the Estonian case suggests that young democracy can both enable and constrain deliberative innovation. It may enable experimentation because participatory norms are not fully settled; yet it may hinder deeper institutionalisation because trust, deliberative habits and accountability routines remain comparatively thin. The key issue is therefore not democratic age as such, but whether experimental participatory practices can move from isolated projects into stable democratic infrastructure.

The strongest and most consistent effect of deliberative participation in the Estonian case is in conceptual change and capacity impacts rather than immediate policy change. Interviewees most frequently described deliberative and discussion-based processes as strengthening democratic, administrative and civic capacity, including mutual understanding, learning, legitimacy and the ability to engage constructively with complex climate issues. This suggests that deliberative participation has its strongest and most consistent value as a capacity-building and culture-shaping democratic practice rather than as a direct instrument of policy change.

Interviewees told us that through repeated use of deliberative mini publics and other deliberative methods, citizens learn to distinguish between meaningful and superficial participation, officials become more attentive to process design, and public expectations toward participation may gradually shift. This is a slower and more diffuse form of impact than direct policy change, but potentially a more consequential one for democratic renewal.

Political openness and perceptions of political risk strongly shape whether deliberative processes are used and taken seriously. While officials may value participation and know how to organise it, the mandate, timing and policy relevance of deliberative processes ultimately depend on political will. Interviewees described climate-related deliberation as politically risky because it can generate citizen expectations, complicate existing compromises or give visibility to positions that do not align with party-political narratives. The Estonian case therefore suggests that deliberation cannot be understood as a neutral administrative tool. Its influence depends on whether political actors perceive participation as a source of legitimacy and policy learning or as a threat to agenda control.

4 Poland

4.1 Introduction

The political context in which deliberative participation has evolved in Poland can be characterised by democratic decline and polarisation. Poland experienced a prolonged period of democratic decline under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), a time during which it was named the world's most autocratising country (Alizada et al., 2021). Although the 2023 parliamentary election, won by the Civic Coalition, Third Way, and The Left, marked a significant turning point, this was complicated by the 2025 presidential election, which was once again won by PiS. While this arrangement has helped to preserve a degree of plurality that was absent under PiS, it has also led to a deadlock between parliament and the presidency, potentially undermining opportunities for democratic consolidation. Notably, voter turnout for the elections in 2023 and 2025 reached a record high (over 70%), and the margin between the winner and runner up in the 2025 presidential election was narrow (50.9% vs 49.1%) pointing towards high levels of polarisation. Against this backdrop, trust in government has remained relatively low — in 2022, under 30% of people reported having confidence in the national government; this had risen to 45% in 2025, but the impact of the deadlock between parliament and the presidency remains to be seen (OECD, 2026).

Despite, — or perhaps because of — growing disillusionment with representative institutions, Poland has been a pioneer in deliberative participation relative to the region, embracing innovations such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies since the early 2010s (Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025). Possible reasons for this include: social pressure, amplified by vocal actors such as Extinction Rebellion; a growing base of experience of citizens' assemblies across Europe, demonstrating the potential benefits of deliberative-decision-making methods; and effective advocacy by a movement of individuals and NGOs at the forefront of the deliberative wave, including Marcin Gerwin, Fundacja Pole Dialogu, and Fundacja Stocznia (Shipyard Foundation) (Ufel, 2022; Andrzejewski 2020). As a result of these factors, participatory budgeting — first trialled in Sopot in 2012 — is now embedded into local decision-making processes: a law passed in 2018 under the PiS government obliges all Polish cities to distribute a minimum of 0.5% of budget resources using participatory budgeting (Kebłowski and van Criekingen, 2014; Ustawa z dnia 11 stycznia 2018 r., 2018). Citizens' assemblies have also been trialled across Poland since 2016: there have now been citizens' assemblies in many of Poland's major cities — many of which have been linked to climate change and related energy transitions (Gąsiorowska 2023; Podgórska-Rykała 2024; Pospieszna and Pietrzyk-Reeves 2024; Pospieszna and Hoffmann 2026; Ufel 2022) (Table 4).

Although citizens' assemblies are not embedded into Polish governance like participatory budgeting, evidence can be found for the institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies (Unegbu and Dupont, 2026). First, they have become increasingly professionalised over time: it is now the norm for the implementation of citizens' assemblies to be outsourced to NGOs through open tender (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024). Second, the Rules of Procedure of citizens' assemblies in Poland have converged over time, creating norms around their design and implementation, while leaving flexibility for innovation. There are now well-established, best-practice standards in Poland around demographic criteria, guiding questions, public access to the educational phase, the confidentiality of the deliberative phase, the duration of citizens' assemblies, and public releases of the final report (Pospieszna and Hoffmann, 2026). Third — albeit to a lesser extent — citizens' assemblies have been formally integrated into decision-making processes through frameworks for public consultation. Notably, authorities are obliged to respond to the results of public consultations. Gdansk has also explicitly linked their framework for public consultation to citizens' assemblies under the Gdansk Rules and Methods for Organising Public Consultations. Under these rules, collecting 1,000 signatures on a petition allows citizens to formally request the mayor to initiate a citizens' assembly. Finally, in the case of citizens' assemblies, mayors have made formal declarations to implement recommendations with over 80% approval (Pospieszna and Hoffman, 2026). This means that although citizens' assemblies in Poland are advisory, there is a high expectation that popular recommendations of citizens' assemblies will be implemented.

Although the majority of citizens' assemblies have taken place at the local level in Poland, there have also been three citizens' assemblies at the national level — the Civic Council on Energy Costs (2022), the Citizens' Assembly on Food Policy (2024), and a Youth Citizens' Assembly on digital policies (2025), as well as a regional

citizens’ assembly in the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis on public transport (2024). The reasons for the concentration of citizens’ assemblies at the local, rather than national level, including the relative vitality of local governance and the degree of openness among national political elites towards civic participation, remain underexplored in the literature and merit further exploration.

Table 4. Citizens assemblies on climate and sustainability in Poland

City	Year	Topic
Gdańsk	2016	Adaptation to rainfall (in the context of climate change)
Gdańsk	2017	Air pollution
Gdańsk	2018	Civic activity
Lublin	2018	Air pollution
Lublin	2018	Migration policy
Wrocław	2020	Transport (in the context of climate change)
Warsaw	2020	Energy transition
Łódź	2020	Urban green spaces
Poznań	2021	Climate change mitigation and adaptation
Kraków	2021	Climate change
Kraków	2023	Transport
Łódź	2023	Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
Rzeszów	2024	Climate neutrality
Sopot	2025	Parking policy
Rydułtowy	2026	Development of former mining areas

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the role of deliberative participation in Poland in strengthening democratic climate action with a focus on the *Narada Obywatelska o Kosztach Energii* (Civic Council on Energy Costs, hereafter the Council) (2022). This assembly was selected for analysis because of its significance in the evolution of deliberative participation in Poland and beyond: it was the first national citizens’ assembly in Poland and it was organised by an NGO, rather than the government.

The Council was organised by the Shipyard Foundation and supported by a Council of Experts consisting of 22 organisations, including Centrum Nauki Kopernik (Copernicus Science Centre), where the assembly was hosted. It was financed by the European Climate Foundation and cost EUR 200,000. It was not formally commissioned or endorsed by the Law and Justice (PiS) government, who were in power at the time, but its recommendations were presented at a meeting to politicians across the political spectrum, experts and selected media (Szczurek et al., 2024).

The Council was made up of three parts:

- **Local civic councils:** 45 meetings organised locally (12 by local governments and the remaining by civil society organisations) and open to everyone;
- **A nationwide citizens’ assembly:** a representative group of 100 people, selected by sortition, that

underwent a learning process, deliberated, and developed a set of recommendations; and

- **An online survey:** a platform for those who were not chosen for the nationwide citizens' assembly, and who could not participate in local civic councils, to input their ideas.

The framing question of the Council — “What should be the systemic solutions at the national level and actions at the local level to prevent the consequences of growing energy prices, while ensuring clean air and fighting energy poverty?” — was chosen in the context of rising energy costs, which were exacerbated and brought to the forefront of public debate by the then recent invasion of Ukraine; and energy poverty, which then affected about 10% of households in Poland (Belina-Brzozowska et al., 2022).

The findings are organised in three parts. Section 4.2.1 examines the perceived impact of the Council on climate democracy. Section 4.2.2 compares this perceived impact across levels of multilevel governance, contrasting the Council with local citizens' assemblies. Section 4.2.3 turns to the factors shaping this impact. Section 4.2.4 addresses the question of what it means for Poland to be a “younger democracy” in this context.

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Impact on climate democracy

The expectations of the organisers of the Council are not captured in any one place. Interviewees highlighted that the initiative was expected to enhance the deliberativeness of Polish policymaking by providing a proof of concept (4 interviewees) and securing support for deliberative participation from key public administration actors (1 interviewee); to advance the energy poverty agenda in Poland by amplifying the topic of energy poverty in public debate (2 interviewees); engaging civil society organisations around the social dimensions of this issue (1 interviewee); and pushing for policy and legislation around energy poverty (1 interviewee). The impact of the Council was broadly aligned with expectations, with its greatest impact being on deliberativeness and effectiveness (see Table 5).

In terms of *deliberativeness*, the Council appears to have had a significant — if brief — impact on *thinking* about deliberation, inspiring enthusiasm for deliberative processes among participants, representatives of local governments, and politicians. It also provided proof of concept for a national-level citizens' assembly in Poland, and generated learnings for those interested in running a similar process (with civic councils and a nationwide citizens' assembly) in the future. This has not, however, translated into *action*. Although there have been subsequent national-level citizens' assemblies in Poland, these have been one-off events with limited impact, suggesting there has been no systemic change to policymaking. The link between these processes and the Council is also unclear: one interviewee argued that the Council directly inspired subsequent national-level citizens' assemblies, while another contested this causal claim.

In terms of *effectiveness*, the Council shaped thinking around climate change and related energy transitions, by helping to mainstream the concept of energy poverty into the climate debate and climate policymaking. Its impact on action for climate change and related energy transitions is less certain. There was alignment between the electoral programmes of the main parties and the recommendations of the Council in subsequent elections. There has also been some progress towards fulfilling the recommendations (Misztal et al., 2025). However, it is not clear whether there is a causal link between the Civic Council and these changes. This speaks to the general difficulty of measuring and evaluating the policy impact of the Council. As with any deliberative process, it is hard to secure unequivocal evidence of policy impact, and this is made more difficult in this case because it was held against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine War, and just before the 2023 parliamentary elections, making it just one of many influences on Polish energy and climate discourse.

The Council also appears to have had limited impacts on *participation*, *representation*, *knowledge and expertise*, and *justice*, albeit indirectly. Energy poverty is closely linked to distributional justice. By prompting recognition of energy poverty, and helping organisers of local councils and politicians to better understand different perspectives on this issue, the Council had an indirect impact on thinking and understanding around justice even though neither the Shipyard Foundation, the Evaluation Centre, nor interviewees directly used the term ‘justice’. That the term ‘justice’ did not organically emerge during this study suggests that it has limited salience in the Polish climate debate, and points to the need to consider alternative framings, e.g.

‘trade-offs’. This finding is consistent with previous case studies on citizens assemblies in Brussels, Ireland and Sweden (Machani et al., 2025).

Across all characteristics of democracy, it appears that the Council generated greater conceptual and capacity impacts than instrumental impacts. Although this led most interviewees to conclude that its impact had been limited, a few noted that this is in line with expectations for bottom-up deliberation. Indeed, the “Guide to the model for organisers” produced by the Shipyard Foundation excludes policy impact from the list of goals for bottom-up deliberative processes, focusing instead on shaping public debate (Belina Brzozowska et al., 2024).

4.2.2 Impact across governance levels

Some similarities and differences emerged from interviews between the perceived impact of the Council and local assemblies. While the policy impact of local citizens’ assemblies was also perceived to be limited, it was more notable than the policy impact of the Council. The Gdansk Citizens’ Assemblies (2016, 2017, and 2018) and the Warsaw Citizens’ Assembly (2020) were cited by interviewees for having significant policy impact. The Warsaw Citizens’ Assembly was particularly lauded for establishing a monitoring committee to review progress on implementing proposals and hold the local government accountable. However, for other assemblies, policy impacts were perceived to be low. A few interviewees also noted that policy congruence does not equate to policy impact and argued many of the proposed measures may have been implemented regardless of the local citizens’ assembly. One interviewee argued that local citizens’ assemblies are used for ex-post justification rather than for genuine consultation and citizen empowerment.

In terms of differences, interviewees gave the sense that unlike at the national level, the repeated use of local assemblies — at least in major cities — has contributed to a “slow and gradual” move towards more deliberative policymaking at the local level in Poland (Interviewee 1, academic). Relatedly, interviewees acknowledged that systematic change takes time, and cannot be engendered by a single assembly. Two interviewees suggested that the Council took place during a window of opportunity that is unlikely to reopen soon. That it did not have a lasting impact on policymaking at the national level, was seen by one interviewee as a missed opportunity.

Another difference highlighted by interviewees was in the depolarising effect of the nationwide assembly when compared with local citizens’ assemblies. One interviewee suggested that the nationwide assembly run as part of the Council contributed more to depolarisation than local citizens’ assemblies, at least amongst participants. This aligns with a public opinion survey conducted by the Evaluation Centre: 78% of respondents believe that deliberative processes, such as the Council, “could contribute to reducing social tensions in Poland” (Szczurek et al., 2024, p.45). Interviewees attributed the depolarising effect of the nationwide assembly to the robust sortition process run by the Shipyard Foundation, which produced a representative group of participants. The overall representativeness of the nationwide assembly is corroborated by coherence between the opinions of participants and the wider public, as illustrated by surveys conducted a few months after the assembly (Szczurek et al., 2024, p. 55). However, a couple of interviewees flagged that the assembly appeared to have an over-representation of anti-nuclear activists. By contrast one interviewee noted that the sortition processes of local citizens’ assemblies are vulnerable to manipulation by interest groups, meaning they have, on occasion, been dominated by representatives of anti-climate or far-right movements, a situation that escalated, rather than reduced, polarisation. They also noted that local citizens’ assemblies tend to be run over a short time frame, leaving little room for productive disagreement.

Notably, although several interviewees lauded the nationwide assembly for bringing together people from diverse backgrounds to develop consensual recommendations, one interview questioned whether this was possible because of the depolarising effect of deliberations or, in fact, because participants “with divergent political views... felt uncomfortable expressing them... or let others set the tone” (Interviewee 2, NGO actor). They also noted that the venue of the deliberations, in Warsaw, may have contributed to participants “with a more sceptical perspective” feeling uncomfortable (Interviewee 2, NGO actor). One interviewee also noted that the depolarising effect of the assembly did not travel outwards, shaping public debate.

The question of whether learning and impacts travelled between governance levels prompted limited and mixed responses. One interviewee noted that within the Council itself, the recommendations of the local civic councils were shared with the nationwide assembly, though it is unclear exactly what impact this had. Another

interviewee suggested that local citizens' assemblies in Poland enabled the Council, in that they provided a proof of concept and best practices. But they also constrained imagination, limiting the potential of the nationwide assembly to be truly innovative. Interviewees also suggested that the norm of recommendations with 80% approval being binding at the local level may discourage the organisation of citizens' assemblies at the national level. Somewhat ironically, therefore, it appears that the relatively high degree of institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies at the local level may be hindering the increased use of citizens' assemblies at the national level.

Finally, one interviewee argued that local citizens' assemblies related to climate change have helped to mainstream climate change as an issue in local politics. The Council did not need to do this, as climate change is already a strong feature of the national political debate. As noted above, however, the Council did help to mainstream energy poverty as part of the debate on climate change and related energy transitions. Thus, the Council and local citizens' assemblies both appear to have shaped thinking around climate change.

Table 5. Key Impacts of the Civic Council on Energy Costs on Climate Democracy

Statements in *italics* are perceived impacts, drawn from interviews. Statements not in italics are recorded impacts, drawn from grey and academic literature.

Statements in *blue* are related to the nationwide assembly only. Statements in *orange* are related to local civic councils only. Statements in black are related to the Council as a whole.

Type of Impact	Impact on the key characteristics of democracy
Instrumental	Participation: Participants’ involvement in non-governmental organisations, enterprises, local publications, and education increased (participant surveys — Szczurek et al., 2024, p.41). Representation: <i>The nationwide assembly gave a voice to a broad range of people.</i> Deliberativeness: The Council contributed to a culture of listening and dialogue (interviews — Szczurek et al., 2024, p. 65). There have been subsequent deliberative processes at the national level, <i>but these have been mostly one off, with limited impact. The link between these and the Civic Council is also contested.</i> <i>The deliberative quality of local civic councils was constrained, due to unfamiliarity with the local council method and the concept of energy poverty, and the short time frame for deliberations (interviews with representatives of local communities — Szczurek et al., 2024, p. 33).</i> Effectiveness: The average level of implementation of recommendations has been “moderate”. There has been more progress on recommendations related to energy infrastructure and development, and less on those related to support mechanisms, housing programmes, and energy efficiency (Misztal et al., 2025). <i>Not only are many recommendations not moving forward, it is hard to ascertain whether those that are would have moved forward regardless.</i> Provisions related to energy poverty were in the electoral programmes of the main political parties in the lead up to the 2023 parliamentary elections, as well as the coalition agreement. Poland’s 2024 NECP also had a whole chapter devoted to energy poverty, emphasising the importance of citizens — it is impossible to know whether these developments are because of the Council, but it was certainly one knowledge source (Szczurek et al., pp. 23-26). Organisers of local civic councils and nationwide assembly participants have used the knowledge they gained from deliberations to take action, e.g. to apply for governments through the governments “Clean Air” programme (survey for organisers of local councils, interviews with representatives from local communities and nationwide assembly participants — Szczurek et al., pp. 35 and 41). <i>Some depolarisation amongst participants, allowing them to produce shared recommendations.</i>
Capacity	Participation: Internal political efficacy amongst participants increased (participant surveys — Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025).

	Deliberativeness: <i>In the short term, the Council “exhaust[ed]” the team at the Shipyard Foundation (Interviewee 3, deliberative democracy practitioner). In the long term, consolidated the Shipyard Foundation’s reputation and capacity for running deliberative processes. This includes developing resources for deliberative democracy practitioners, such as a “Guide to model for organisers” (Belina Brzozowska et al., 2024).</i> Organisers’ knowledge of deliberation and participation methods increased; some organisers subsequently used this knowledge in their work. Representatives of local governments were also made aware of the need to equip local officials with such skills (survey for organisers of local civic councils and interviews with representatives of local communities — Szczurek et al., 2024, pp. 34-35). The deliberative capacity of participants increased: they had a greater sense of agency and confidence in speaking about public matters (interviews with participants — Szczurek et al., pp. 60-61). Effectiveness: Participants, and organisers of local civic councils, felt more informed about energy poverty (participant surveys - Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025). Participants also passed on knowledge they gained to others (interviews with participants — Szczurek et al., 2024, p.41). Politicians, organisers of local civic councils, and NGOs expert organisations gained a better understanding of the problem of energy poverty as the process allowed them to hear about the expectations of different groups and the multitude of solutions available (interviews with politicians, representatives from local communities, and experts — Szczurek et al., 2024, pp. 32, 57, and 68). The process better equipped civil society to call for action on climate change and related energy transitions: recommendations from the citizens’ assembly, including an Energy Transformation Fund, were featured in a civil society manifesto — the “Manifesto of 100 days” in the lead up to the 2023 parliamentary elections, and used by the Working Community of Social Organisations (interviews with NGOs and experts — Szczurek et al., pp. 32 and 42-43). The Council did not lead to the creation of a coalition on energy poverty (Szczurek et al., p. 11), <i>but it provided a platform for organisations working on energy poverty to share learnings with each other and the public, improving their visibility.</i> Local civic councils brought together residents, and occasionally, representatives of city hall, to develop a shared, cross-sectoral list of solutions (interviews with representatives of local communities - Szczurek et al., p.33).
Conceptual	Participation: Collective efficacy increased: more participants felt that their fellow citizens were politically competent after the assembly than before (participant surveys - Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025). Representation: <i>Participants gained a greater appreciation of politics and the difficulty of decision-making.</i> <i>Participants underwent a transformative experience, gaining hope. But there was no major change in participants’ interest in politics. (participant surveys — Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025).</i> Knowledge and Expertise: The injection of insights and from “ordinary people” was seen as valuable by politicians, and the importance of participation was more emphasised in participant discourse (interviews with experts and politicians — Szczurek et al., 2024, p.68).

Deliberativeness: Support for deliberative mini-publics amongst participants, though this was generally a reinforcement than a transformation of attitudes (participant surveys — Paulis and Pospieszna, 2025).

The Council provided proof of concept that a nationwide citizens' assembly is possible, leading to a period of enthusiasm for deliberative processes. It demonstrated to politicians and representatives of local communities that they can provide in-depth knowledge of opinions and can be constructive and conducive to consensus (interviews with politicians and representatives of local communities — Szczurek et al., p. 32) Politicians who participated in the presentation of recommendations were surprised that people can come to agreement over contested and complex issues; some went on to advocate for deliberative processes.

Deliberative/ civic participation began to feature more in expert discourse on energy policy. In several expert studies, a citizens' assembly was also proposed as a stage of lawmaking in Poland (interviews with experts — Szczurek et al., p. 68).

Effectiveness: The process contributed to greater awareness of energy poverty (and the need for systemic climate action) — a previously marginalised topic — among participants, policymakers, the media, and the broader public (media analysis — Szczurek et al., pp. 48-51 and pp. 68-70). *The concept of energy poverty is now more integrated into the climate debate and policymaking.*

Justice: The process contributed to the creation of a language for describing energy poverty and establishing a conceptual set and definition; this, in turn, contributed to the integration of social problems into discourse on energy (Szczurek et al., p. 13).

4.2.3 Factors shaping impact

4.2.3.1 Design

On the whole, interviewees were positive about the internal design characteristics of the Council, with several noting that the initiative helped to consolidate the Shipyard Foundation’s reputation as an expert in deliberative participation. But they had reservations about its integrative design characteristics — i.e., the way in which it was integrated with governance systems (Boswell et al., 2023).

Internal design: Interviewees generally lauded the deliberative quality of the nationwide assembly run as part of the Council. The key points raised were around:

- **The topic,** around which opinion was mixed. On one hand, interviewees suggested that the topic of energy poverty was well chosen, because the Russia-Ukraine war had elevated it on the political agenda. The topic was also viewed as accessible (since everyone must deal with energy costs) and memorable for the media. On the other hand, interviewees suggested that the politicisation of energy poverty as a result of the war meant that the topic was too sensitive to encourage meaningful deliberation, and may have disincentivised political support. This was especially the case because it was linked to climate change, around which there is much polarisation in the Polish public debate. Furthermore, no single ministry in Poland has authority over the issue of energy poverty; this may have created an additional barrier for follow-up and implementation.
- **The learning process,** which some interviewees who were closely involved felt was dominated by energy experts. These interviewees felt that some experts imposed their views on participants, contributing to a preponderance of technical rather than social solutions in the assembly’s final recommendations. Relatedly, although one interviewee suggested that the topic of energy poverty encouraged thinking about trade-offs, others suggested that the focus during the learning process and, consequently, the deliberations, on technical rather than systemic solutions to energy poverty undermined the potential for consideration of justice.
- **The length of deliberations,** which although longer than in local citizens’ assemblies, was still seen to be too short to cover a vast topic.
- **The outputs,** which many interviewees felt were too numerous and technical to be useful for policy advocacy. Several also argued that the recommendations were not innovative, while one questioned whether the output of the assembly should have been recommendations at all. Although valuable symbolically, they felt the recommendations obscured the nuance of the deliberations.

Commissioning bottom-up by an NGO (the Shipyard or Stocznia Foundation) for the nationwide Civic Council was distinctive from local assemblies commissioned by the government. Interviewees identified clear trade-offs in this model.

Strengths: As the main organiser of the process, without a government mandate, the Shipyard Foundation was able to independently design the process. The Foundation selected experts, set rules for politicians’ participation (e.g. requiring them to listen during the presentation of recommendations rather than speak), and operated free from the political volatility that sometimes comes with processes run by the government. Multiple interviewees praised the Shipyard Foundation for organising high-quality deliberations, with one interviewee going so far as to say “I can’t imagine any other organisation other than [the Shipyard Foundation] that could have done it that well” (Interviewee 3, deliberative democracy practitioner). Multiple interviewees also praised the Shipyard Foundation for remaining non-partisan and taking extra steps, such as building a supporting coalition of NGOs (the Council of Experts) around the initiative, to ensure it was perceived as politically neutral. In a highly polarised political context, interviewees felt this helped to communicate credibility. However, two interviewees noted that the Shipyard Foundation was perceived by some as left-leaning and liberal despite these efforts.

Weaknesses: Because the Council was organised in a bottom-up way, there was no formal mechanism for the government to receive and/or implement recommendations. This automatically limited the policy impact of the Council.

Moreover, the lack of a government mandate and support constrained the ability of the Shipyard Foundation to deliver and follow-up on the Council. Interviewees suggested, for example, that it made recruitment harder, because a relatively unknown NGO cannot match the reach of a prime minister's office, and limited the organisers' access to the media. Interviewees also noted that after the nationwide assembly developed its recommendations, the Shipyard Foundation undertook a large amount of communications and advocacy work with little to no support from relevant ministries, for example, for costing and prioritising the recommendations. This undertaking was especially significant in light of the fact that the resources of the Shipyard Foundation were already stretched. Interviewees also pointed to an additional challenge due the Shipyard Foundation not generally focusing on energy poverty, making it harder for them to advocate for the assembly's recommendations, while other organisations in the Council of Experts did not take ownership of the recommendations either.

Despite these challenges the interviewees lauded the advocacy efforts of the Shipyard Foundation. One interviewee, for example, characterised the meeting where the assembly recommendations were presented to politicians across the political spectrum as "extraordinary" (Interviewee 3, deliberative democracy practitioner). It was also noted that the Shipyard Foundation continued to engage with participants and organise informal, bilateral meetings with politicians even after the Council. Evidence from the Evaluation Centre also shows that, as a result of the communications efforts of the Shipyard Foundation, 33% of respondents to a public opinion survey were aware of the Council (Szcurek et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, there was a sense of disappointment amongst some interviewees about the initiative's limited impact on policy. One interviewee, working in public administration stated several times that it is frustrating that deliberative processes in Poland, even those organised by the government, do not have a clear impact, saying "I feel sometimes very embarrassed, I must say, because I just keep involving people and... they trust me" (Interviewee 8, government actor). Another who was involved in organising the assembly, acknowledged that "you have no clue what will happen with recommendations" (Interviewee 11, deliberative democracy practitioner). Such comments are particularly interesting given broader public opinion on the power of citizens in Poland: 55% of respondents to a public opinion survey mentioned above believe that the opinion of ordinary citizens is not taken into account in public decisions (Szcurek et al., 2024).

4.2.3.2 The political and deliberative context

According to interviewees, the political context in Poland shaped the immediate and longer-term impact of the Council. In the immediate term, as noted above, the fact that the initiative was not formally endorsed by the government constrained its policy impact and reach. And although the 2023 elections helped to elevate the concept of energy poverty in Poland's political debate, interviewees noted that it also took political attention and energy away from post-assembly advocacy.

Most interviewees emphasised the role of *political will* as an enabler or barrier to impact, arguing that citizens' assemblies succeed or fail depending on whether politicians at the relevant level of governance genuinely support them. They particularly contrasted the degree of political will at the local level in Poland, compared to the national. At the local level, mayoral buy-in has helped to transform citizens' assemblies into potent institutions (e.g. in Gdańsk and Warsaw). By contrast, at the national level the absence of a government mandate meant the Council lacked the backing needed to translate recommendations into policy. Interestingly, one interviewee noted that a change in mayor in one city caused the number of citizens' assemblies being held there to drop to zero. This example illustrates that even at the local level, these processes appear to be dependent on individual political champions, rather than system-wide, institutional support.

Interviewees attributed the lack of political will behind the Council, and citizens' assemblies at the national level more generally, to a couple of reasons. First, the novelty of citizens' assemblies at this level meant that most politicians were unfamiliar with the concept of deliberative participation, creating an uphill communications battle for the Shipyard Foundation. It also meant that there were no previous experiences upon which the Shipyard Foundation could build. Second, politicians who are aware of the

concept of deliberative participation remain sceptical of its value, both because of the high costs of citizens' assemblies, and because of an unwillingness amongst politicians to hand over power to citizens, especially on technical issues such as energy. Notably, a few interviewees attributed this unwillingness to the growing norm at the local level for recommendations with over 80% approval to be binding, since this indirectly creates pressure for politicians at the national level to implement recommendations that enjoy high levels of support. They suggested that this is one reason why there has been no top-down national citizens' assembly in Poland.

In the longer term, the high degree of polarisation in Poland means that the current government is less willing to engage with an initiative that took place under the previous government — especially not one related to the contentious issue of climate change. It also means that if a citizens' assembly were to be commissioned by a government in the future, it is likely to be criticised by those in opposition. A few interviews suggested that this risk is another reason why there has been no top-down national level citizens' assembly in Poland, though there have been many top-down city level citizens' assemblies in Poland, where polarisation is not so high.

4.2.3.3 The international context

Many interviewees suggested that the impact of the Civic Council of Energy Costs was shaped by actors and events external to Poland. For example, the Russia-Ukraine war politicised the debate around energy poverty. Also, although the major backlash in Poland against the European Green Deal began after the Council, one interviewee argued that this backlash continues to polarise opinions about the initiative, which was linked to climate change and funded by the European Climate Foundation. This last point speaks to the general influence of the EU on the role of deliberative participation in Poland. A few interviewees argued the rise of deliberative participation in Poland is, in part, a result of EU funding for participatory initiatives and of Poland's desire to align with EU policies following its accession to the EU in 2004. Indeed, many of the cities where citizens' assemblies have been held in Poland have received funding under the EU NetZeroCities project, which encourages participatory initiatives.

Similarly, interviewees noted that the EU has considerable influence over climate policy in Poland, with one interviewee contending that the recommendations of the Council that have been implemented are those that align with EU policy; more "niche" recommendations focused on household appliances, for example, were excluded, even if they were more original (Interviewee 4, NGO actor).

4.2.4 Younger democracy

The question of whether Poland's status as a younger democracy (post-1989) shapes the role of deliberative participation in the country produced some of the most diverse responses across the 12 interviews, including divergence on the statement of whether Poland can be considered a 'young democracy'. Interviewees only discussed the idea that Poland is a 'younger democracy' when prompted; the age of the country's democratic institutions did not organically come up as a factor shaping the role of deliberative participation. Moreover, when prompted, some interviewees questioned the validity of framing Poland as a 'younger democracy' at all, given that the country enjoyed a period of democratic governance going back to the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth prior to the communist regime, and/or suggested that other factors were more important in shaping the role of deliberative participation in Poland.

The responses to this question prompted a discussion on a variety of mutually reinforcing features of the broader context in Poland: a political culture that still equates democracy primarily with elections; low willingness of the national government to cultivate democracy and participation; administrative institutions that lack the incentive and capacity to run complex deliberative participation processes; low trust in institutions, which both motivates and undermines new forms of participation; and a tendency to either uncritically import or dismissively reject Western European models of democratic innovation

Many interviewees referred to the legacy of the communist regime, which contributes to a persistent deference to authority and continues to shape attitudes around participation. One interviewee argued there is "a very ingrained sense that authority can still lead us somewhere — some have positive

[sentiments], some have negative associations with the communist era, some don't know what to think — so there's this sense that authority knows best" (Interviewee 3, deliberative democracy practitioner). Another interviewee, a former public servant, echoed this, arguing that in the post-transition society, democracy is perceived as periodic elections rather than ongoing participation. This translates into limited public demand for deliberative participation, which, in turn, gives politicians little incentive to invest in deliberative processes.

A few interviewees added that the Polish governance system has not yet fully internalised the idea that democracy requires active cultivation. Interviewee 3 articulated this most directly:

"By 'young democracy' I mean societies that haven't yet had quite enough time to appreciate democracy and treat it as a separate domain of public responsibility. We can easily imagine that a local government has to build roads, lay water mains, and to run schools. But the awareness that democracy is something that also needs to be nurtured, reinvented, kept alive — I think that awareness is very low in our society. We seem to think that high-quality public decisions arrive from nowhere". (Interviewee 3, deliberative democracy practitioner)

Interviewees also suggested that the communist past has contributed to the underdevelopment of a culture of consultation in public administration, although some suggested the situation was improving. An interviewee speaking from within public administration noted that "even obligatory [consultation] processes sometimes are simply omitted" and that "public servants are still not really aware how much it is to get feedback from the side of the citizens" (Interviewee 8, government actor). Another interviewee speaking from an academic perspective added that, even where processes are organised, they are "frequently captured institutionally by those organising them... which feeds into growing public mistrust... because at every turn institutions seem to be appropriating and exploiting tools that are meant to belong to citizens" (Interviewee 4, NGO actor). The same interviewee pointed to institutional capacity constraints within public administration and local governments as a result of the communist regime, which compound cultural constraints on participation.

Interestingly, a minority of interviewees suggested an alternative narrative — that the legacy of the communist regime may have increased, rather than limited, the demand for deliberative processes in Poland by increasing distrust in traditional democratic institutions and motivating a desire for alternative democratic institutions. One interviewee also suggested that actors and institutions in Poland may be more willing to experiment with democratic innovations, because democracy is less embedded, while another suggested that they are perhaps overly ready to adopt democratic innovations that have emerged in Western Europe, because they have not built a culture of healthy scepticism — though, this may also be because of the legacy of the Cold War.

Other factors that were deemed by interviewees to be more important in shaping the role of deliberative participation in Poland than the age of its democratic institutions included the advocacy of individual actors and networks interested in deliberative democracy and political will. One interviewee argued that the decisive impact factor was key individuals who were willing to promote democratic innovation: "Someone needs to dream about it. You need someone to initiate this idea. And if you have no one, then how is it going to happen?" (Interviewee 9, deliberative democracy practitioner). Another interviewee noted that what activates politicians is a "a feeling of unity and responsibility for your country" (Interviewee 5, NGO actor).

Overall, however, it seems that the age of democratic institutions in Poland has not been a significant factor in shaping the role of deliberative participation, or, at least, that the diversity of Poland's participatory landscape complicates any simple narrative about democratic maturity. Given the frequency with which interviewees mentioned the legacy of the communist regime, the relationship between authoritarian histories, post-1989 democratic transitions, and deliberative participation, stands out as a potentially interesting area for further research.

4.3 Discussion

The case of Poland illustrates both the promise and the limits of deliberative participation as a tool for strengthening democratic climate action. The Council generated meaningful conceptual and capacity impacts, by mainstreaming energy poverty in the Polish climate debate, providing proof of concept for a national citizens' assembly, and consolidating the Shipyard Foundation's expertise in deliberative practice. However, its instrumental impacts remain hard to establish and harder still to attribute. This is broadly in line with the expectations of the organisers of the Council who framed the initiative as a tool for shaping public debate rather than driving policy change. Compared to local citizens' assemblies, the depolarising effect of the nationwide assembly appears to have been stronger, even if this effect did not travel outwards into public debate. Taken together, these findings reflect a broader pattern in the literature: that the conceptual – and to a lesser extent, capacity – impacts of deliberative processes tend to be stronger, or at least more measurable, than their instrumental impacts, and that evaluation frameworks need to be developed accordingly (Machani et al. 2025). They also point to the value of investigating whether and how the transformative effects of citizens' assemblies on participants can be amplified to broader society.

A recurring theme across the findings is the centrality of political will as both an enabler and a barrier to impact. At the national level, the absence of a government mandate fundamentally constrained the Civic Council's ability to translate recommendations into policy. This points to a broader tension in bottom-up, NGO-led commissioning of citizens' assemblies: independence from government preserves credibility but comes at the cost of policy influence. How organisers of citizens' assemblies can navigate this trade-off, and under what conditions bottom-up processes can achieve impact on democratic climate governance, merits further investigation.

The Polish case also offers a nuanced contribution to the question of whether younger democracies foster deliberative participation differently to their older counterparts. Poland has been a regional pioneer in participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies, but this has not translated into systemic change, at least at the national level. Notably, the age of Poland's democratic institutions did not emerge organically as an explanatory factor in interviews. When prompted, interviewees pointed instead to the legacy of the communist regime, political will, and the advocacy of key actors as key factors in shaping the role of deliberative participation in Poland, suggesting that the history of authoritarianism and the post-1989 transition to democracy may be more analytically productive frames than democratic age itself.

On multilevel governance, Poland presents an asymmetry: citizens' assemblies have become increasingly institutionalised at the local level, while remaining episodic at the national level. Interestingly, the institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies at the local level may itself be discouraging the organisation of top-down citizens' assemblies at the national level, by raising expectations around binding recommendations that national politicians are unwilling to meet. Whether this dynamic is specific to Poland, or visible across other contexts where local deliberative practice has outpaced national deliberative practice, is worth exploring.

5 Conclusions

This report has examined the impacts of deliberative mini-publics on climate action and democratic governance in Estonia and Poland — two 'younger' democracies navigating the twin challenges of democratic renewal and climate transition. The findings point to both the potential for deliberative participation in these contexts to strengthen democratic transition and climate action but also identified common structural challenges.

The most consistent finding across both cases is that deliberative participation processes on energy and climate generate stronger **conceptual and capacity impacts** than instrumental ones. In Estonia, climate assemblies and the national dialogue strengthened deliberative skills among citizens and officials, challenged assumptions about who can meaningfully engage with complex climate issues, and expanded the menu of participatory methods available to public institutions. In Poland, the Council

introduced the concept of energy poverty in the climate debate, provided proof of concept for a national citizens’ assembly, and consolidated organisational expertise in deliberative practice. In neither case did deliberative processes produce strong, attributable policy change (with the exception of some local-level assemblies). But in both cases, they shifted how policy actors think about participation, how they can run them and what they believe citizens are capable of. This is consistent with findings from a similar study on Belgium, Ireland and Sweden (Machani et al., 2025), and suggests that evaluation frameworks for deliberative processes need to take conceptual and capacity impacts seriously in their own right.

A second cross-cutting finding concerns the **centrality of political will** as both an enabler and a barrier to the instrumental impact of deliberative participation. In Estonia, deliberative formats operated episodically and without stable institutional anchoring, reflecting a governance culture in which participation is valued but seen as politically risky. In Poland, the absence of a government mandate fundamentally constrained the Civic Council’s ability to translate recommendations into policy, even where the process itself was of high quality.

However, locally commissioned processes showed stronger connections between deliberation and implementation. In Gdańsk, Warsaw, Tartu and Tallinn, mayors and officials played an active role in ensuring that deliberative outputs were received and responded to. This points to a structural tension that both cases illustrate: **deliberation is most feasible at the local level where political authority for systemic change is weakest** — and could be most consequential at the national level where deliberation is hardest to sustain.

Another common finding highlights a gap in the **accountability infrastructure** surrounding deliberative processes. Well-designed processes — in Tartu, Tallinn, Gdańsk, Warsaw, and the Council — produced substantive citizen input, but the follow up remains consistently underdeveloped. Questions remain about who owns the recommendations, who reports back to citizens, and how deliberative outputs travel across governance levels into formal decision-making. Participation that empowers citizens during the process but abandons their input afterwards risks deepening the very cynicism it was designed to address. Building credible, transparent follow-up mechanisms is not a technical afterthought — it is a democratic necessity.

Finally, both case studies challenge a simplistic hypothesis of **younger democracies being more fragile or more receptive** to deliberative innovation. In Estonia, thin deliberative traditions and an efficiency-oriented governance culture created openness to experimentation but also made it harder to move from isolated pilots to stable democratic infrastructure. In Poland, the age of democratic institutions did not emerge organically as an explanatory factor. When prompted, interviewees pointed instead to the legacy of the communist regime, political will, and the advocacy of key actors as important determinants. Across both cases the communist legacy — with memories of forced participation, distrust towards the state, and an elite-led political culture — shaped the conditions for deliberative participation in ways that go beyond democracy’s age. This suggests that the **history of authoritarianism**, and the **post-1989 transition to democracy**, rather than democratic maturity shape the conditions for deliberative climate governance and should be investigated through further research.

Annex 1: Analytical Framework for Understanding the Impact of Deliberative Mini-publics

The impact of processes for deliberative participation in Estonia and Poland is evaluated using a framework designed to capture impacts on both climate action *and* democratic governance. The framework draws on the seven characteristics of climate democracy outlined in the RETOOL analytical framework, namely, i) participation, ii) representation, iii) knowledge and expertise, iv) accountability, v) deliberativeness, vi) effectiveness, and vii) justice (Brawley-Chesworth et al., 2025). It also draws on the types of impact outlined in the KNOCA Impact Evaluation Framework, namely, i) instrumental impact, meaning impact on acting, ii) capacity impact, meaning impact on expertise or resources, and iii) conceptual impact, meaning impact on thinking (Demski et al., 2024).

Table 6. Analytical framework designed to capture the impact of deliberative mini-publics on climate action and democratic governance

	Key characteristic of climate democracy						
Type of Impact	Participation	Representation	Knowledge and Expertise	Accountability	Deliberativeness	Effectiveness	Justice
Instrumental	Change in how/ how much citizens participate in governance processes, both within and beyond elections	Change in the ability of citizens to influence outcomes, including change in who represents them, and how, and the responsiveness of the institutions that serve them	Change in the forms of knowledge and expertise used to inform policy	Change in how a governance system responds to actors, including relationships between decision-makers and citizens	Change in the use of “respectful and reasonable dialogue” (Lindberg et al.) to reach decisions, including deliberation with and amongst citizens	Change in the extent to which the governance system achieves its intended climate outcomes.	Change in the extent to which the governance system addresses spatial, temporal, and intersectional injustices associated with climate change
Capacity	Change in the resources/ expertise of/ for citizens to participate in governance processes.	Change in the resources/ expertise dedicated to ensuring that diverse citizens have influence over outcomes	Change in the resources/ expertise dedicated to ensuring that diverse forms of knowledge and expertise are used	Change in the resources/ expertise dedicated to the relationship between decision-makers and citizens.	Change in the resources/ expertise dedicated to deliberation with and amongst citizens	Change in the resources / expertise available for a system to achieve its intended climate outcomes	Change in the resources/ expertise dedicated to promoting climate justice

			to inform decision-making				
Conceptual	Change in thinking about the participation of citizens beyond elections	Change in thinking about citizens' influence over outcomes	Change in thinking about the forms of knowledge and expertise that are used to inform decision-making	Change in thinking about the relationship between decision-makers and citizens	Change in thinking about deliberation with and amongst citizens	Change in thinking about climate change and climate action	Change in thinking about climate justice

Annex 2: Literature on deliberative participation in young democracies (February 2026)

Database: Google Scholar

Initial Boolean search string:

citizens' assembl OR citizens' juries OR mini public OR minipublic OR deliberative participation OR deliberat**

AND

young democrac OR new democrac* OR emerging democrac* OR democrac* in transition OR transitional democrac**

Additional search term: participat*

Key findings:

- No papers on citizens' assemblies in young/ new/ transitional democracies
- Few relevant papers on deliberative participation in young/ new/ transitional democracies (n≈14)
- More relevant papers on political participation in young/ new/ transitional democracies (n≈60)

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