



RETOOL

Strengthening Democratic
Governance For Climate Transitions

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Deliberation without delivery: what Estonia and Poland's climate assemblies got right, and wrong

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The EU's 2040 target is now law. Delivering it will require a whole-of-society transformation that cannot be achieved without public buy-in. Estonia and Poland's experiments with deliberative participation reveal both its promise and its limits: in both countries citizens' assemblies have changed the way citizens and decision-makers think but have stopped short of significantly shaping policy, pointing to the dependency of deliberative participation on durable political commitment. In a context where political cycles are short, that kind of commitment can only be built by treating deliberative participation as a necessary, long-term investment.



Implementation requires legitimacy

The EU's legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040 entered into force in April 2026. As we continue to move from an era of target setting to an era of target implementation, the conversation is no longer about the what, but about the how. And the how, put simply, is a deep and rapid economic and social transformation that will have a significant impact on people's lives – from the way they heat their homes, to what they eat, to the way they travel.

Transformation of this nature requires legitimacy, not just legislation. The challenges of implementing regional

climate policy without public buy-in are perhaps most evident in Central and Eastern Europe where resistance to climate action has compounded with rising living costs and historically low trust in democratic institutions to produce widespread backlash against the EU's Green Deal. Poland saw thousands of people protest against the closure of coal power plants, arguing that the EU's climate policies threatened their livelihoods, while Estonia saw a 14 percentage point drop in support for a 2050 net-zero target between 2019 and 2023; backlash has been particularly strong in areas that are heavily reliant on fossil fuels, such as Ida-Virumaa – Estonia's oil shale mining region.

Poland and Estonia have caught the deliberative wave

Against this backdrop, Poland and Estonia have caught the “deliberative wave” that has been building since 2010. Both countries have experimented with deliberative participation as a tool to build public trust and legitimacy for green policies. In Estonia, citizens’ assemblies, bringing together people who are randomly selected to be representative of the wider population to learn about, deliberate, and make recommendations on climate change, have been trialled in Tartu (2022) and Tallinn (2024). Poland has gone further: citizens’ assemblies on climate-related issues have been held in most major cities, and a nationwide Civic Council on Energy Costs was organised in 2022 by the Shipyard Foundation, a civil society organisation with a strong track record of citizen engagement. Between them, these processes can offer an insight into what deliberative participation can, and cannot, achieve when it comes to building support for climate action.

Citizens’ assemblies changed how people think, not what governments do

Research for the RETOOL project, which investigates the relationship between climate change and democratic governance, explored exactly this. Speaking to those who

organised and engaged with citizens’ assemblies, we found that citizens’ assemblies in Poland and Estonia produced strong capacity and conceptual impacts – that is, they changed how people think and built expertise and resources – but rarely shaped policy directly. In Tartu and Tallinn, and through the Civic Council in Poland, citizens learnt about complex climate and energy issues, and decision-making processes, in some cases passing on the knowledge they gained to the wider community. Decision-makers at the local and national level also learnt, enhancing their understanding of and ability to deliver future participatory processes.

More broadly, the Civic Council helped to mainstream the concept of energy poverty in the climate debate, highlighting the justice dimensions of energy transitions, and provided citizens and decision-makers with a working template for national-level citizens’ assemblies. These are, by no means, small achievements, but they are different to instrumental impacts, in which citizens’ assemblies directly shape policy decisions. Across both countries, this type of impact was harder to establish.

Deliberation without delivery erodes trust

The lack of instrumental impact in Estonia and Poland is not only a missed opportunity. It is a significant risk. When citizens deliberate then

watch the recommendations they produced in good faith disappear, it can have an adverse effect on trust. Citizens' assemblies aimed at building legitimacy for climate action can, therefore, undermine it further. One government official from Poland who was involved in organising deliberative processes highlighted this risk, admitting that they felt embarrassed that people trusted them with their time and insights, to little effect.

The key question, then, is why does conceptual change so rarely translate into policy change? We found one recurring factor: poor links between what citizens recommend and what institutions of authority do with these recommendations.

Where these links were built, the impact story was different. In Gdańsk and Warsaw, for example, mayors made formal declarations to implement recommendations with over 80% approval, meaning more of the recommendations made by citizens' assemblies were implemented than elsewhere – especially at the national level, where there was no political mandate for the Civic Council on Energy Costs. In Tallinn too, strong institutional anchoring, including a steering group composed of agency heads and the deputy mayor to respond to the proposals, helped to create a perception of transparency and credibility.

In both countries, however, the links

between deliberation and decision-making were much stronger at the local level than the national level, pointing to a major 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.

The need to invest in deliberation – and make it count

If deliberative participation is to fulfil its promise to build trust in democratic institutions and support for green policies in Poland and Estonia, and beyond, two things need to change. First, deliberative participation needs to be treated as a long-term investment in democracy, not as a series of one-off exercises. Interviewees in both countries pointed to the legacy of communist-era institutions, which stifled citizen participation, as a key barrier to democratic climate governance. As one Polish interviewee put it “awareness that democracy...needs to be nurtured, reinvented, kept alive... is very low”. Building that awareness, and the institutions for meaningful citizen participation, takes sustained commitment, not a single high-profile assembly.

Second, when deliberative processes do take place, they need to be designed to be consequential from the outset. This means securing a political

Imandate, establishing structured and well-resourced follow-up processes, and, at a minimum, clearly communicating expectations of the process to participants. Failure to implement these measures threatens to further erode citizens' trust in the institutions that govern them.

References:

For the full analysis see the RETOOL report: Averchenkova, A., Machani, A., Luring, M. & Kadri, K. (2026). The Impact of Deliberative Participation in Central and Eastern Europe: Learnings from Estonia and Poland. Zenodo. [D. T. & Keuschnigics and Political Science.](#)

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