

## There's Hope in Deliberation

Article by Irena Fiket

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Critics of democracy often point to its chronic inability to look beyond electoral cycles and to its failure to give citizens real influence over decisions that affect them. This inadequacy is particularly evident in the green transition, where the focus on measurable targets and technical goals comes at the expense of long-term thinking and questions of justice. Could spaces for collective deliberation, such as citizens' councils formed in the wake of student protests in Serbia and citizens' assemblies across Europe, mitigate these shortcomings?

**Ivan Radisavljević: Citizens can easily see how political decisions concerning the environment affect the quality of their lives, whether positively or negatively. Taking this into account, how can deliberative democracy influence a just green transition?**

**Irena Fiket:** Generally speaking, citizens can indeed best feel how political decisions affect their everyday lives. However, when we talk about environmental policies, things become more complex. In a system that rarely includes them in the dialogue and decision-making process, citizens most easily notice short-term, direct effects, whether positive or negative. For example, if a new green policy increases the economic costs of heating by switching to more sustainable energy sources, that effect is immediately visible, tangible, and, at first glance, negative. On the other hand, the long-term benefits of such policies, such as cleaner air, reduced pollution, and mitigation of the consequences of climate change, are generally not felt immediately by citizens. It is precisely in this temporal asymmetry between costs and benefits that lies one of the key challenges of adopting and implementing green policies within representative democracy.

For this reason, many of us who scientifically and practically deal with models of deliberative democracy emphasise that classical representative democracy is not the best framework for making decisions whose positive effects manifest only after a longer period of time.

The short-term logic of the electoral cycle and the pressure to achieve quick, visible results do not encourage politicians to think about long-term justice and sustainability, but rather to focus on what is politically profitable at a given moment. On the other hand, citizens in such a system are passivised and observe this dynamic from the sidelines, without real influence on decisions that directly concern them.

That is why it is important to view the effectiveness of green policies in a different way. If success is measured only through short-term economic indicators, the broader social and intergenerational context is missed. True effectiveness should mean: the ability of society to make decisions that protect the public good in the long term. And this is where the deliberative approach brings us a new perspective.

This implies a paradigm shift from a short-term, technical understanding of success to a long-term, inclusive approach that involves citizens in the decision-making process. When citizens are part of the discussion and formulation of policies, when they have the opportunity to learn, exchange arguments, and search for solutions together, decisions become both more democratic and more just. Such deliberative processes enable green policies not to be merely imposed from above, but to be jointly

shaped, with the understanding that they are an investment in the future, both ecological and social.

**In any transition, there are discussions about winners and losers. How can the principle of deliberative democracy lead to as many winners as possible in the green transition?**

Yes, like all other transitions, the green transition implies big changes, better conditions and opportunities for some, but also uncertainty or losses for others. That is precisely why there is increasing talk today about the necessity of a just transition, which means that changes must not be implemented exclusively at the expense of certain groups or communities.

The deliberative approach can play an important role here, enabling all those affected by the transition to participate in the debate over priorities and possible solutions, creating space for different experiences and needs to be heard and exchanged, and for more inclusive policies to be formulated. Deliberative processes can help ensure that the transition is not viewed merely as a technical task but as a joint social project in which everyone gains something – if not in equal measure, then at least through the feeling that the changes have been fairly formulated and implemented.

When citizens from different social groups can express their concerns and needs and discuss them in an informed and structured deliberative process, there is a chance that compromises will be found that protect the vulnerable while simultaneously enabling progress. This does not mean everyone will get everything they want, but it does mean no one will be completely neglected.

Furthermore, deliberative processes help people understand the bigger picture: that green policies affect not only them, but also the common good and future generations. Deliberative processes, therefore, cannot completely eliminate the division into winners and losers, but they can mitigate its consequences by making tradeoffs visible, subject to negotiation, and more just. In a society that decides about its own future through deliberation, the number of real winners increases because gains are not measured only by economic interest, but also by the sense of inclusion, solidarity, and trust.

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**What does deliberative democracy look like in practice?**

The mechanisms of deliberative democracy are implemented through various formats of deliberative mini-publics, in which citizens have the opportunity to thoughtfully and informedly discuss topics that directly affect them and, based on that process, provide recommendations for decision-makers.

Today, the most widespread form is citizens' assemblies. Deliberative mini-publics bring together a heterogeneous group of citizens, provide them with access to relevant information, and give time and space for moderated discussion in which everyone has the opportunity to contribute. Decisions are not formulated in simple binary terms, but in a way that leaves room for new, argument-based options that appeal to the public interest.

Research on deliberative mini-publics shows several key effects of such processes. First, participants often change their views and preferences after deliberation, and in a direction that is more thoughtful, based on the exchange of arguments rather than voting down alternative ideas or reinforcing initial prejudices. Second, participants learn new information about the topic, and changes in views are largely driven by increased awareness. Third, these processes reduce polarisation within the group and enable balanced learning by bringing participants into contact with diverse opinions.

Perhaps most important is that, by participating in deliberation, citizens feel their political engagement makes sense. Thus, the sense of personal and group political efficacy increases.

### **Can you cite a positive example of the implementation and use of such mechanisms?**

The most frequently mentioned positive example is probably the citizens' assemblies conducted in Ireland, where the results of deliberation had a concrete impact on constitutional changes, including decisions on same-sex marriage and abortion. The citizens' assembly there held five weekend sessions over about a year, bringing together 100 randomly selected citizens to deliberate on key constitutional and ethical issues.

What is especially important about this case is that the recommendations made by the citizens' assembly were then submitted to a referendum, and citizens supported them, showing that when people have the opportunity for informed discussion, their decisions can be both progressive and democratic. The Irish example also showed that deliberation can address topics that politicians traditionally avoid due to their sensitivity, and that citizens, when given the opportunity, are capable of making difficult decisions in a mature and responsible way.

In France, the Citizens' Convention on Climate was organised in 2019-2020, bringing together 150 randomly selected citizens who deliberated on measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The assembly formulated 149 concrete proposals, many of which the French government accepted and incorporated into legislation. Although not all proposals were adopted, the process showed that citizens can formulate complex, technically informed, and politically realistic proposals when given space, information, and time.

Similar practices exist in Belgium, particularly in the German-speaking community of East Belgium, where a permanent citizens' council has been established with authority to initiate discussion on topics that will then be deliberated in temporary citizens' assemblies. This model shows that deliberative democracy can be institutionalised rather than limited to ad hoc initiatives.

The biggest problem in Serbia, and in neighbouring countries, is the lack of political will to systematically implement such processes and to respect the recommendations arising from them.

### **Were there any such experiments in Serbia?**

The citizens' assembly on air pollution in Belgrade in 2020 was the first such experiment in Serbia. It was part of a research project conducted by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, aimed at understanding how citizens of Serbia would react if given the opportunity to participate in the deliberation and formulation of political decisions. Thus, the assembly itself did not have the direct goal of influencing decisions, although citizens' recommendations were sent for review to all relevant political actors.

Participants were selected using a quota sample to ensure representativeness across different social groups: gender, age, education, and the part of the city where they live. Before the assembly began, all

participants received carefully prepared informational materials designed to familiarise them with different social and political perspectives on the topic of air pollution. The first versions of these materials were prepared by researchers involved in the project, and to ensure inclusiveness of different viewpoints, the materials were sent for review and comments to all relevant and competent actors with different attitudes and opinions: civil society organisations, experts, and decision-makers. All received comments were accepted and incorporated into the final version of the materials, which was then distributed to participants.

During the first phase of work, citizens were divided into smaller groups where, with the help of neutral moderators, they exchanged opinions, experiences, and arguments and formulated initial proposals. This was followed by a plenary session with experts and representatives of civil society organisations, who provided citizens with additional information about the causes and possible solutions to the problem. Citizens, through their representatives, asked questions and deepened their understanding of the topic, which later helped them improve their own proposals.

In the final phase of work, citizens developed concrete policy proposals, and then had the opportunity in the second plenary session to directly ask questions of decision-makers. However, decision-makers did not show sufficient responsiveness to the process and citizens' questions, confirming a distant and irresponsible attitude toward citizens and their initiatives. Nevertheless, data collected during the process shows that the assembly had a significant educational and transformative effect on participants.

About 80 per cent of citizens stated that participation in the assembly significantly deepened their understanding of the problem, while about 85 per cent emphasised that comments and presentations by experts helped them better understand the causes and possible approaches to solving pollution. Additionally, about 77 per cent of participants said that, after discussions, they better understood those with whom they disagreed, suggesting the potential of deliberative processes to develop empathy and social understanding. At the same time, comments and responses from decision-makers were of little or no use to about 50 per cent of participants, which is a consequence of the lack of adequate answers to citizens' key questions.

The process essentially showed that citizens, when given the opportunity, can formulate thoughtful, constructive, and sustainable proposals for solving local problems and are willing to support solutions that require certain sacrifices from them.

**Since the beginning of student protests, and then citizen protests in 2024, we have witnessed assemblies (or ZBORs, local citizens' councils) spreading like mushrooms after rain in Serbia. They represent a form of direct democracy and, in recent months, have begun to address ecological problems in communities as much as possible. Can direct and deliberative democracy cooperate? What do they have in common, and where are the differences?**

What deliberative and direct democracy have in common is that both models insist on active citizen participation and opening the decision-making process to all those affected by certain policies. Both believe in the transformative potential of civic engagement: only through participation do citizens develop civic capacities, awareness of the common good, and their own political power. Also, both models strive to strengthen citizens' sense of political power and responsibility.

However, there are also some key theoretical differences. Direct democracy often relies on the aggregative principle, which means that citizens' already existing preferences are added up, and the legitimacy of the decision comes from the number of votes or support. On the other hand, deliberative

democracy does not treat political preferences as fixed or exogenous. They are subject to transformation through the process of joint discussion and reflection.

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During deliberation, citizens exchange arguments, confront different views, and become informed about the consequences of their decisions, which develops collective awareness and the quality of political preferences. Deliberative democracy also defines the very manner of participation, so it is not enough just to vote or passively attend discussions; active reflection, evaluation of arguments, and responsibility toward the common good are crucial. Voting can still be part of the process, but the legitimacy of the decision does not come only from the formal number of supporters, but from the knowledge that those affected by the decision had the opportunity to understand and justify it.

Therefore, when assemblies are organised to present different proposals, arguments, and information within a discussion that precedes voting, they represent a form of practising deliberative democracy.

**As a former councillor in the Belgrade City Assembly, how much room do you see for legal implementation of deliberative democracy mechanisms? And what are the key problems in the city that could be better addressed by such mechanisms?**

I believe that almost all existing problems at the city level can be the subject of deliberation. Of course, the agenda could be partially limited by budget considerations, existing laws, or technical capacities, but this does not mean that any topic would be completely excluded from the list of issues suitable for deliberation. Even restrictive legal regulations can be changed. The boundaries of deliberation are not rigid; they are defined by practical frameworks rather than by topics.

The greatest obstacle to legally introducing deliberative mechanisms, however, is not in the feasibility of the process itself, but in the lack of political will to expand the field of decision-making to citizens. Institutionalising deliberative formats requires authorities to be willing to allow citizens to actively participate and for their recommendations to be taken into account, which implies partially relinquishing control over the decision-making process. And with the people who currently have a majority in the city assembly, I don't see any room for something like that.

*This interview originally appeared in the first print edition of the Serbian political ecology magazine Omorika. It is republished here with permission.*

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