



**Common Ground**

# **Country Report: Czech Republic**

The Significance of Citizen Participation in Politics and Society

*By Andrea Culková*

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# 1. How is citizen participation in politics and society understood in the Czech Republic?

In the Czech Republic, citizen participation in democratic life begins and ends at the ballot box, and this way of involvement has long been perceived as the most important. The interviews carried out with experts corroborated the results of the recent OECD report, which recommended that the Czech Republic significantly improves the insufficiently developed culture of participation and the lack of its incorporation in legislation. The Czech Republic has a long tradition of testing various participation methods and yet, 30 years on from its inception, it still does not have an overarching vision for citizen and stakeholder participation in public affairs. Public decision-making at central level lacks participation culture and a widely shared understanding of its nature and benefits. This is related to the fact that the government bodies have no clear guidelines as to why, how, what and whom (what organizations, networks or citizens themselves) to engage and how to manage this cooperation.

Civic organizations are not the subject of this report, but in order to understand the cooperation culture between national/local government authorities and the citizens and stakeholders, one must realize that there is still very little information available on the different types and social roles of non-governmental not-for-profit organizations (NGOs). This is most apparent in funding where almost 40% of the budget goes into sport and physical education. Some departments do not distinguish between the civic society, experts and academics, or economic (trade, industry, finance) and social partners. As a result of this, the roles of the individual players are marginalised and any participation processes are significantly obscured. In the future implementation and institutionalization of citizens' deliberative processes in the Czech Republic it is also necessary to systematize and make transparent the role and involvement of stakeholders in the entire policy-making ecosystem because stakeholders play a potentially important part both in formulating the deliberative process topics and questions/dilemmas, in the educational stage and in the review of the recommendations gathered at citizens' assemblies. So far, in many areas, the missing conceptual approach with appropriate methodological support from the government has been replaced by ministerial departments' and regional authorities' own interpretations.

My investigation and the OECD report both suggest that civil servants from various ministries define participation in different ways. They often do not distinguish and see a big difference between citizens and stakeholders and confuse citizen/stakeholder participation with terms such as informing people about policies, transparency, lobbying, influencing or surveys. Terms such as deliberative processes, citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries are completely unknown to most or they are misunderstood as involving NGOs in the policy-making dialogue. The reason why many referred to NGOs in connection with participation and deliberation may be that a new methodology for the participation of NGOs in advisory and working bodies and in the creation of government documentation is currently being tested at selected ministries. The methodology was prepared by the Government Council working group for NGOs.

This is how the OECD reacts when it recommends the Czech Republic adopt a uniform definition for citizen/stakeholder participation. The following recommendations give a quick overview of how much needs to be done to improve the environment for citizen participation in

the Czech Republic and to ensure the transition from ad hoc procedures to institutionalized mechanisms.

The OECD recommends the creation of an expert centre for citizen and stakeholder participation, which will ensure a greater use of participation, harmonize procedures across all government bodies and provide support (management and technical tools) for them and public officials. In line with this recommendation, the OECD then proposes expanding the scope and composition of the existing Council for NGOs and transforming it into the Government Council for Citizen and Stakeholder Participation. Furthermore, in line with strategic documentation, the OECD recommends to consider the creation of an integrated open governance strategy, in which significant emphasis would be placed on participation with the aim to incorporate the participation agenda within a wider context and make full use of synergies with initiatives that support transparency and accountability. It also recommends the establishment of a specialist department or post to support citizen and stakeholder participation in all government institutions.

## **2. What are the most common forms of citizen participation in the Czech Republic and what institutional structures are there to support deliberative citizen participation at national, regional and/or local level?**

If we encounter citizen participation, it will only be at local level; participation deliberative processes at national level are totally non-existent. Historically, participation is perceived as a suitable instrument for keeping local communities together and much less as a way of proper policy and decision-making together with citizens. In the past, various NGOs would put participation instruments into action and test them on a local level (Agora, Na Zemi, Edutica, Ekumenická akademie (Ecumenical Academy), CEDU, Pražské matky – Pěšky městem (Prague Mothers - Walking in the City)). Over time, these were joined by private companies specialising in participation, architects and urban planners actively working with participation such as OnPlan, Norm-A, Architekti ve škole (Architects at School), Participation Factory, and also sociologists and anthropologists (Anthropictures, Socionaut). Many of the above have attended the participation coordinator training provided by Prague's Institute of Planning and Development (IPR).

As apparent from the following two lists, the participation methods used reflect three main goals: informing the public, gathering suggestions or potentially looking for a compromise and obtaining legitimacy for a planned project. Very rarely do we see processes in real life in which citizens play the main part, whose structure includes an educational element and which lead to an informed decision or recommendation by way of deliberation. As pointed out in the OECD report and by the interviewed experts, there are no clearly defined and common quality standards for the process. Therefore, it is often a completely 'free ride' where the structure and content of the participation are completely adapted to the intentions of the contracting authority, often during the process itself. As apparent from the interviews, there is a painful

lack of quality standards and ethical principles, which would clearly distinguish high-quality processes from 'participation-washing'. This often makes the whole process non-transparent for citizens. There is also often a lack of clearly defined and described intentions of the participation process and a guarantee that the input will be taken into consideration. Participation in all processes is not paid and citizens do not even get their expenses reimbursed, plus they have to attend in their free time. Only a tiny percentage of processes take into account some demographic criteria when creating the participation group. This means that it is often the same citizens who take part in the processes, usually ones with an appropriate social capital and resources. Citizens who are marginalised and vulnerable due to their social status, gender, health, age, etc. often form a negligible percentage of the representation. The areas where participation is used the most are development strategies, land planning and design (developer projects), culture and processes that deal with the environmental impact of projects.

Historically, the implementation of Agenda 21 played a major role in participation. In 1994, an association of municipalities called the National Network of Healthy Czech Towns and Regions (Národní síť Zdravých měst a regionů ČR), modelled on Denmark, was established. It is a professional association of 135 towns/cities, municipalities and regions which has been in operation for over 30 years. The individual members (towns/cities, municipalities, regions) use participation when it comes to the Strategic Development Plan communication and presentation. Once a year, or every other year, they will organize a public forum, round tables, etc. Apart from this organization, there is also the Pakt starostů a primátorů (The Mayors Pact), which brings together spirited leaders who are interested in sustainability and have a favourable attitude towards participation.

The most frequently reported participation methods used by the Network of Healthy Towns and Regions are the following:

- public forum (often used for mutual communication between individual stakeholders, the public is only engaged in an unsystematic way)
- round table (also often used for mutual deliberation between stakeholders and the public)
- emotion maps – citizens' opinions recorded in a map (gathering of suggestions, no deliberation)
- online polls, questionnaires and sociological surveys (aimed at citizens). These do not involve any form of deliberation or informed opinion. Again, it is merely about gathering input and suggestions.
- participative budget – a participative budget combined with deliberative processes seems to be the way forward towards creating and strengthening the culture of deliberative democracy in the Czech Republic. This, too, was one of OECD's recommendations. The problem with the current practice of participative budgets is that, unfortunately, they have very limited funds available and the projects for which they are used are of marginal importance. A mini-survey (50 people) confirmed that these projects are rather insignificant (a book booth, open space improvement), and when new councillors take up their seats in the town hall after elections, these projects are often not implemented in full and sometimes not at all.

- school and youth forum – a meeting between pupils and town/city/municipality representatives. Forums apply elements of deliberation but do not include any educational components. It is a simple gathering of suggestions. The pupils are selected with the aim to represent, which means only the best students take part; socially disadvantaged pupils are rarely present.

I have chosen a specific case study for an upcoming event to illustrate the aforesaid. It is apparent from the invitation that the facilitator makes no distinction between the various actors (stakeholders, citizens) and sets no participation rules or criteria except for numbers, the maximum being 20 participants per table. The organiser allocated a very short time slot for the participation despite choosing very broad and general issues. The process does not include any educational elements or offer the public any tools to monitor how their recommendations will be incorporated.

### **Healthy Vysočina region public forum 2023**

*„I would like to invite not only representatives of public administration, the not-for-profit and business sectors and educational and professional institutions, but also the general public to the event.“*

Round tables will last 60 minutes during which the participants will pick the two most important issues. These will then be presented to the other tables. At the end, there will be a vote on the most important ones. The event outcomes will subsequently be checked against a public survey/poll with the aim to get the widest possible public audience express their opinions on the formulated problems. After the poll is analysed, the matters are submitted for discussion to the regional council and subsequently to the regional board of representatives for task assignment. At the same time, the issues in questions form the general framework for the creation and updating of the strategic development plan.

Thematic tables:

1. Research and innovation, entrepreneurship, employment (including lifelong learning)
2. Education (kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, universities)
3. Healthcare and primary prevention
4. Social issues and housing
5. Transport (infrastructure and transport services)
6. Public administration, development, large investments and rural development
7. Agriculture and forestry
8. Environment
9. Tourism and culture
10. Leisure activities and sports
11. Youth table

Another key player when it comes to participation is undoubtedly the Prague Institute of Planning and Development (IPR), a funded organization set up by Prague City Council. It is Prague's main conceptual workplace for architecture, urban planning, city development and creation which has a say in important decisions in these fields. Several important figures have swapped places in the participation centre. They introduced examples of good practice in the Czech Republic and made the city authorities start taking participation more seriously. By

offering participation planning coordinator training courses, IPR made it possible for the individual Prague boroughs to include participation in their processes. The funding available to the individual Prague borough councils is more limited than that available to Prague City Council, which means they are not very happy to spend money on participation. IPR also has a generous space in the form of the Centre for Architecture and Urban Planning, where it invites experts from abroad and shares inspiration and examples of good practice with other towns, cities and municipalities. IPR is also the first entity to have put information about citizens' assemblies on its website (in cooperation with the Platform for citizens' assemblies) and introduced this tool to active coordinators in the city boroughs. It should be emphasized that the post of participation coordinator is not permanent and many boroughs have not even set it up. If we talk about the political climate and participation, it should be noted that a number of participation centre employees have left disgruntled in the past due to excessive political pressures and a lack of willpower to institutionalize and analyse processes.

In its Participation Manual (2016), the IPR provides the following list of participation methods. It is apparent from the extensive list that only very few are aimed directly and specifically at citizens. Most of these methods do not include an educational element in the process and do not promote the demographic diversity of the region in which the participation is taking place when constructing the participation group. The scope of this report does not allow for a detailed commentary on each of the methods used.

Methods recommended in IPR's Participation Manual:

- Open Day
- Survey
- Forum on the future
- Community planning office
- Community walk/bike ride
- Consultation booth
- Round table
- Mediation
- Metropolitan sound board
- Online tools for information gathering
- Online platform
- Planning tour
- Planning weekend
- Working group
- Sociological survey
- Neighbourhood meeting over a map
- Model creation
- User groups
- Visioning
- Public meeting

### **3. How do historical and cultural factors influence the understanding of citizen participation in the Czech Republic?**

A large part of the population had a very active social life in the last quarter of the 19th century under Austria-Hungary and also after the birth of the Czechoslovakia (1918). There were many societies and associations both at local and national level – the Scouts, Sokolové (sports organization), Orli (Catholic sports organization), and a great number of active amateur theatre societies. Cooperatives were very important. Czechoslovakia, with its dense network of cooperative financial institutions, became a role model of how to stop usury. (During the First Republic, an interest of over 12 percent per annum met the definition of usury, a criminal offence punishable by a prison sentence; today, interest in the Czech Republic is over 60–70% and usury is very difficult to prove.) The roots of cooperatives go back to mid 19th century. Savings and credit cooperatives were divided into urban cooperatives (citizens' credit unions) and rural cooperatives (,kampeličky' and ,raiffeisenky'). In the financial and agricultural sectors, cooperatives played a major role and there were thousands of prosperous ones out there. The activities of savings and credit cooperatives were intertwined with those of non-credit cooperatives and their organizational network helped other cooperative sectors.

Members of cooperatives, i.e. ordinary citizens, knew what was happening and held joint responsibility. They could make joint decisions on where and how to invest the cooperative's available funds. The gradual liquidation of the system began under the Protectorate (1941) and the dismantling was completed in the 1950s. An attempted recovery in the 1990s failed due to a lack of clearly defined rules, just like in other sectors, and cooperatives became a pyramid scheme destined for failure. This did not add to people's confidence in their own abilities to make decisions on important matters and to restore pre-war traditions.

It was the general public, frustrated by the totally inadequate environment and environmental organization, who instigated the revolutionary events of 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia. Back in the early 1990s, the public perceived ecology and the support for environmental organizations' activities as a key topic. Being actively involved in the fight for a better environment seemed legitimate and desirable in the eyes of the public, whether it was individuals or not-for-profit organizations. With the division of Czechoslovakia, some key posts in institutions that supported public engagement and the building of civil society based on the principles of sustainability disappeared. Paradoxically, this happened in 1993, a few months after the Czechoslovak politician Josef Vavroušek delivered a radical speech in Rio on how to reform, streamline and democratize the UN and announced his country's determination to embark on the so-called third path, where human rights and the environment, rather than government economy and capitalism, were to play the main part. Unfortunately, hardly any of these visions have been incorporated into legislation.

A long era of devaluation of the role of citizens in shaping policies began with the unprecedented empowerment of neoliberal politicians such as Václav Klaus, and was, unfortunately, later supported by a number of social democrats led by Miloš Zeman. Democracy was reduced to elections as a key act, when the citizen entrusts everything into the hands of politicians as pragmatic experts of power, or an apparatus of experts. Historically, there is a great distrust in



the mental capacity of the ‚lay‘ non-expert public, which was boosted by Václav Klaus‘ words of mockery aimed at NGOs when he said that „non-profit organizations are often a charity for unemployable intellectuals“. The aforementioned politicians were not alone to utter such statements. Members of NGOs began to be called freeloaders, naive do-gooders and parasites, and blamed for siphoning off public funds, seemingly to no purpose and in an unprecedented way. Despite all that, it is the NGOs who have, for many decades, been providing services without which the state could not function successfully. Being engaged has taken on the meaning of being extremist, suspicious, opportunistic and a potential threat to the country’s democratic development. In this context, we hear the term zombie socialism, meaning that anything social, including calls for the involvement of citizens and NGOs in decision-making, has been interpreted by a vociferous part of the public and by the media as a harmful and dangerous sentiment hankering after communism. At the same time, taking decisions away from citizens was perceived as desirable. A citizen should concentrate on making free decisions about his consumer needs because it is the free market, along with neoliberal ideology, which will ensure the democratization of the country and its processes. The Prime Minister and President, Václav Klaus, spoke of eco-terrorists; the Prime Minister and President Miloš Zeman spoke of green fanatics. Both were referring to people who join NGOs, dedicate their lives to ecology and the climate crisis or protest publicly. A growing negative attitude towards ecology and civil society was a common trait in the long active careers of the two key politicians mentioned.

A soviet, meaning council, was the name for a socialist association of employees, working people (the workers’ council), soldiers and farmers in Russia. In the Soviet Union (USSR), which takes its name from them, soviets were political bodies that held formal power. When talking about citizens’ assemblies, part of the older generation (55+) reacts contemptuously, saying that we want to restore the soviets. This is quite paradoxical because socialist Czechoslovakia never adopted the Soviet model of administration but, instead, referred to the traditions of the First Republic. Although the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic formally called its system of management democratic centralism, it was actually a bureaucratically controlled system.

Unlike in many other OECD countries, the participation of citizens and stakeholders in specific areas of public policy-making (e. g. healthcare, transport, education, etc.) is rarely regulated in the Czech Republic. Paradoxically, one exception is Act No. 100/2001 Coll. on environmental impact assessment, which regulates participation regarding environmental policy-making. Another is the Convention on the Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (‚the Aarhus Convention‘), which the Czech Republic signed in 1998 and ratified in 2004.

## **4. What laws and regulations apply in the Czech Republic to support the deliberative participation of citizens and are there any specific guidelines or initiatives that encourage citizens' deliberative participation in politics and society?**

Article 2, Paragraph 1 of the Czech Constitution adopted in 1993 sets out that „The people are the source of all state power, carried out through legislative, executive and judicial bodies.“ Articles 18 to 20 provide on the right to vote and the right to be elected. The Czech constitution, unlike those of many other OECD countries, does not explicitly define the participation of citizens and stakeholders in policy-making and/or service provision. The basis for this type of participation is the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms from 1992, which is part of the Constitutional Order of the Czech Republic. Up until now, there has been no broader social debate on the subject of citizen involvement in policy-making being a legitimate right, one that is supported by the ethical principles defined by the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. As an example we can mention the Network for the Protection of Democracy whose working groups of experts evaluate threats with regards to political parties and elections, defence, security and foreign affairs, the constitutional system, public prosecutors and the judiciary, human rights, political rights, public administration and the media and who do not have a specific group dedicated to citizen participation. As a result, the evaluation of citizen participation is not included in the annual report on the state of Czech democracy.

In its report, the OECD recommends revising the legal and regulatory framework for citizen and stakeholder participation. The only document that explicitly mentions deliberative processes that are supposed to improve citizen involvement in the public sector is ‚The Czech Republic 2030 Strategic Framework‘. It is apparent from the interviews and from the OECD report that although this framework should be operationalized, its broad implementation regarding citizens' deliberative processes has not yet taken place. The government Council for NGOs has so far only drawn up the already mentioned ‚Strategy for the Cooperation of Public Administration with NGOs‘ for 2021 to 2030. This includes supporting papers, consultation settlements and follow-on methodology, which is being tested. No one in government focuses specifically on citizen participation. Finally, the OECD also recommends the transformation of the Government Council for NGOs into the Government Council for Citizen and Stakeholder Participation and the establishment of an advisory centre that would synchronize and coordinate citizen participation efforts. As far as the composition of the new Council is concerned, the OECD suggests the new Council could include (selected) members of the existing Council for NGOs, experts for the coordination of institutional participation and randomly selected citizens. Although the Council itself supports this idea, it transpired in the interviews that the political will to make it happen is currently lacking and that the politicians currently in power do not consider it desirable, under the principles of lean governance, to start new projects or employ new officials.

The ‚Overview of the State of Public Administration in the Czech Republic‘ states that there is

a general ambition to move towards greater citizen and stakeholder participation and their involvement in public policy-making. A similar intention is mentioned in the conceptual document called 'Client-Oriented Public Administration'. The Czech Republic also joined the American Open Government Declaration by the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, committing itself to supporting citizen and stakeholder participation in decision-making and service provision. The creation of the strategy and its implementation is in the hands of the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice is also in charge of everything to do with the membership of the Czech Republic in the OECD Working Group for Open Governance. The power over participation in decision-making lies in the hands of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Regional Development, whose (limited) experience relating to participation is, again, mainly with stakeholders rather than citizens.

The Czech Republic is an expert at drafting strategic documents; alas, implementing them effectively is not the country's strong point. There exists an abundance of strategies aimed at various social groups, many of which include not only a political promise but sometimes also concrete initiatives in support of participation in public decision-making. For example, one of the objectives of the Gender Equality Strategy for 2021–2030 (objective 4.4) is „to improve the conditions for the development of a civil society actively engaged in gender equality issues“, while the Social Inclusion Strategy (2021–2030) aims „to improve the participation of socially excluded persons or those at risk of social exclusion in decisions on solutions to social exclusion“. Similar goals can be found in the National Plan for the Support of Equal Opportunities for Disabled People (2021–2025). The information collected during the OECD fact-finding missions and the interviews conducted by me show that the existing political framework faces a number of implementation problems. Public administration strategic documents and associated action plans, in particular, are often not fully implemented and sufficiently visible or there is a clear lack of awareness about them, not only across the public administration sector but also among the wider public.

In its report, the OECD reflects on how to work with government bodies and how to convince them to mentally accept deliberative participation as a legitimate way of policy-making. To this effect, it recommends that specialist training in participation becomes mandatory for all current and newly recruited civil servants. This would introduce them to the subject matter and to the relevant procedures. OECD also recommends considering updating the existing Methodology and Manual for public participation in government policy-making, incorporating the latest trends and procedures into them (such as the representative deliberative process) and offering more specific advice on involving (unelected) public representatives in activities other than only regulatory impact assessment (RIA). It also recommends creating the already mentioned citizen participation centre, which would concentrate solely on issues surrounding citizen and stakeholder participation.

An amendment to the act on local referendums is seen as a possible way of how to include deliberative processes into institutionalized practices at a local level. In the Czech Republic, local referendums were first embedded into legislation by the Czech National Council Act No. 298/1992 Coll. on local elections and referendums. This was later replaced by Act No. 22/2004 Coll. on local referendums. In 2000, provisions on some special types of local referendums were included in the Municipality Act and the Capital City of Prague Act. Act No. 22/2004 Coll. increased the participation required in order for a local referendum

to be valid to 50% of eligible voters. 269 local referendums were held between 2006 and 27th February 2018. No regional referendums have been held in the Czech Republic to date. Nationwide referendums are not endorsed in Czech Republic's Constitution. The only statutory regulation related to this type of referendum was that which dealt with the Referendum on the Accession of the Czech Republic to the EU. Over fifty-five percent of people voted in it in 2003. A majority of more than three million voted that the Czech Republic would join the European Union. This is the only national referendum to have taken place in the Czech Republic. Despite long-standing calls for a law that would allow citizens to ask for a referendum if they have amassed the required number of signatures, the law is yet to be passed by both parliamentary houses.

## **5. How effective are these structures? Are there any obstacles or barriers that limit their functionality?**

The fact that local referendums have existed for decades and national referendums have not yet succeeded reflects the widespread opinion that citizen participation is only appropriate at local level and on less important or marginal issues. This was incidentally an oft-repeated argument in the surveys and interviews: „In the Czech Republic, people are only allowed to make decisions on nonsense; no one asks them about important questions and issues“. This ‚localism‘ reflects a lack of confidence in people's mental capacity to make decisions about important and system-related matters. It is also important to mention referendums for another reason. Some people, both the public and politicians, sometimes confuse deliberative processes with referendums, mistakenly regarding citizens' assemblies as a form of direct democracy. Direct democracy has long been perceived at national level as a threat to democracy and a dangerous path promoted by populists and extremist parties.

Greater integration of complex deliberative processes at local level is hindered by the fact that there are 6,254 municipalities and 206 municipalities with extended jurisdiction in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to have the required expertise and participation awareness with such small municipalities. Of course there are exceptions to the rule. However, these exceptions amount to a very small number of spirited individuals for whom participation has become a vocation. The size and fragmentation of the municipalities is also linked to budgets, another issue which makes defending and carrying out regular participation difficult. Regional authorities are not very active or helpful in this respect either at the moment. Many countries have specialist workplaces to support local authorities. In the Czech Republic, there is no institutionalized government support available to municipalities. There are also no Agencies willing to share their „know-how“, at a reasonable cost, with municipalities interested in learning how to implement systemic changes in specific areas (data, development, digitization, energy transformation) and with high-quality and long-term citizen participation. Both aforementioned forms of support could improve the environment and break ground for using deliberative processes in practice.

## **6. How is deliberative citizen participation discussed and how is it perceived in the political arena? What are the attitudes of the relevant political actors on the issue of citizen participation?**

When it comes to the implementation of the recommendations arising from the participation processes, the problem is, unfortunately, a lack of soft personnel policies that would keep quality management going. Too often, with the election of new political representatives, there is a break in continuity and a fundamental change in personnel. This means many citizens are sceptical about getting involved in participation processes because they do not feel that the energy exerted by them has the potential to change anything.

On the other hand, it transpired in the interviews that political parties, who traditionally take a very reserved approach to citizen participation, usually open up with the approaching elections and want to show their will to communicate with the public and thus gain legitimacy. However, this is more often PR rather than a systematic effort to involve citizens in decision-making. The analysis of political parties and their support of or opposition to deliberative processes is not the subject of this report. In short, it can be said that the Green Party, who won less than 1 % of votes in the last parliamentary elections, and the very small left-wing party Budoucnost are strongly in favour of deliberative processes. Both of these parties only have representatives at a local level and did not make it to Parliament. The Social Democrats (ČSSD) are undergoing reincarnation and it depends whether the progressive wing wins and they manage to get into Parliament in the next elections. If they do, then there is a chance they will also support deliberative processes. There is currently no Green Party and no other left-wing party, by definition, in Parliament. Parliamentary parties express limited support for deliberative processes (Pirates, STAN) or are traditionally opposed to it (TOP09 and ODS), although they tend to shift their views before elections or behave differently at local level where they may support limited participation to a certain extent. As to the representatives of the ANO party, their attitude is unknown or keeps changing. Extremist parties (SPD) express support for direct democracy but do not try to put its principles into practice.

In addition to the OECD report and its specific recommendations, European efforts to implement deliberative processes into the functioning of the EU also have a bearing on the wider acceptance of deliberative processes. Interviews with members of the Platform for Citizens' Assemblies, which has been carrying out advocacy and educational activities in the Czech Republic for three years now, showed that the public and political representatives are slowly moving forward and are becoming more open to the idea of engaging citizens in political processes dealing with important issues. What is required is transparency of the organization and the design, a guaranteed quality of the process and an expression of political commitment in terms of the suggested recommendations. All the experts questioned agreed that pilot deliberative processes (citizens' assemblies or deliberative cafés) have a chance of being implemented if a suitable topic/dilemma is chosen, i.e. one that resonates at national, regional and local level. A key step towards the functional institutionalization of deliberative processes appears to be the creation of a Participation centre or Participation chamber, which would enable discussion between practitioners and the academic community about quality stand-

ards and ethical principles, and would also be able to evaluate the quality of the processes and put the ethical principles and standards into practice. The head of the Secretariat of the Government Council for NGOs expressed an interest in organizing a pilot national assembly, saying that it would be a way to build capacity and raise awareness of this tool in the Czech Republic. This requires obtaining funding from foreign sources and necessary communication and advocacy work between the government representatives and authorities in order to dispel the fears of involving citizens.

Better democracy and the systematic use of citizens' assemblies is one of the three demands of the Student Climate Strike, currently underway and organised by university students on the occasion of November 17 – the Day of the Fight for Freedom and Democracy. After the Extinction Rebellion movement and the patient efforts of the Platform for Citizens' Assemblies, this is the first louder cry demanding to involve citizens in decision-making.

## 7. Interviews

Head of the Secretariat of the Government Council for NGOs, PhDr. Ing. Pavel Mička  
Coordinator of the Network for the Protection of Democracy, Mgr. Vendula Menšíková  
Faculty of Architecture, Czech Technical University, Prague and Projects with above-tandard public involvement, Ing. arch. Petr Klápště, Ph.D.  
Platform for Citizens' Assemblies, Bc. Žofia Hobzíková

## 8. Links

<https://www.kr-vysocina.cz/blizi%2Dse%2Dverejne%2Dforum%2Dkraje%2Dvysocina%2D2023%2Dprobehne%2D23%2Dlistopadu/d-4122968/p1=122604>

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<https://iprpraha.cz/stranka/72/participace>

## 9. Author

Andrea Culková, an experienced film director, researcher, and social surgeon, has long focused on the dysfunction of the societal system, social injustice, and the climate crisis in her work (films such as „Sugar Blues,“ „Do not Take My Life,“ „Let’s Heal the Czech Republic,“ „Grief,“ etc.). These themes led to her exploration of political alternatives both by film and ongoing doctoral research. Since 2019, she has developed expertise in deliberative democracy, collaborates globally, and co-leads the Czech Platform for Citizens’ Assemblies. Her upcoming film „Arc of the Covenant“ provides a unique opportunity to closely observe Citizens’ Assemblies across Europe, exploring the continent’s journey in reclaiming ancient democratic roots for deliberative decision-making by a randomly chosen informed public.

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