



Common Ground

Transnational Perspectives

A Cross Border Exploration of Citizen Participation in Poland, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany

Summary and Cross Comparison of the Country Reports in the Common Ground Program

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1. Citizen Participation on the Rise

Over the last years, many European countries have experienced a considerable surge in citizen participation, marking the emergence of what the OECD has recently termed a “deliberative wave.”¹ This trend is also evident in the countries participating in the **Common Ground: Shaping Regions Across Borders Program**, funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung. The program aims to promote citizen engagement in the border regions between Germany and its neighboring countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

As a central component of the **Common Ground** program, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has commissioned concise country reports that shed light on the culture and landscape of citizen participation in all program countries. The goal of commissioning these reports was to develop a nuanced understanding of citizen participation within these countries. Taken together, these reports allow the reader to unravel the commonalities and idiosyncrasies within the diverse fabric of citizen participation across these countries. In doing so, they contribute to facilitating a better understanding and the tailored design of participatory processes and the establishment of sustainable structures for citizen involvement in the border regions of the **Common Ground** program.

The country reports were compiled by renowned experts in the field of citizen participation from the respective countries. The analyses are based on desk research, three to four interviews with policy and academic experts from each country, and the author’s own expertise. The reports do not purport to provide a representative or encompassing overview of the citizen participation landscape and culture of the countries, nor do they claim to adhere to the highest scientific standards. Instead, they are meant to provide a snapshot in time on the topic of citizen participation in the respective countries.

In the following, the country reports are briefly summarized and juxtaposed. The comparison of the reports reveals that, despite the growing prominence of citizen participation as a common theme in all partner countries of the **Common Ground** program, each country exhibits distinctive features in its citizen participation culture and landscape. These differences can be attributed to different historical processes, political systems, legal frameworks, and a diverse range of actors supporting such participatory initiatives. The following sections briefly compare

- (1) the different understandings of citizen participation,
- (2) the significance and status of citizen participation within each country,
- (3) the challenges and barriers to the further development of citizen participation, highlighting the commonalities and particularities across the different countries.

2. Understanding of Citizen Participation

Comparing the country reports shows that there is no uniform understanding of citizen participation among the countries of the **Common Ground** program. However, in most of the analyzed countries, citizen participation is broadly understood as the involvement of ordinary

¹ OECD (2020), *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>

citizens in policy- and decision-making processes. This broad conceptualization is shared, at least, in the Benelux countries, Germany, France, and Poland.

In these six countries, citizen participation takes on a wide array of forms. Various processes, carried out at different governmental levels, fall under the umbrella term of “citizen participation”. These include, amongst others, participatory budgeting, consultative councils, local plebiscites, citizen interpellations, referendums, petitions, and deliberative mini publics, such as citizens’ assemblies, planning cells and citizens’ forums. It is notable that not all these citizen participation processes necessarily entail deliberation – that is, the informed dialogue of citizens that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern. Instead, citizen participation is generally understood more broadly as citizens’ involvement in political decision-making, which may also entail instruments usually seen as elements of direct democracy. Nevertheless, deliberative participatory processes, in which citizens are brought together to learn, deliberate, and collectively develop recommendations on a matter of public concern, are an integral element in the citizen participation culture of all these six countries – even though to a lesser degree in Poland (cf. next section for more details).

Switzerland and the Czech Republic stand out in the comparison of the understanding of citizen participation. In the Czech Republic, there appears to be a less nuanced understanding of citizen participation, with elections being perceived as the primary mode of participation, and citizen involvement seen as concluding at the ballot box. Terms such as deliberative processes, citizens’ assemblies, or citizens’ juries are often unfamiliar to both political actors and citizens, or they are mistakenly considered a form of direct democracy. Sometimes, they are also misunderstood as a form of stakeholder engagement, which refers to the involvement of actors with specific interests or stakes in a particular issue, as opposed to citizen participation which is commonly understood as the involvement of members of the general public without a focus on specific affiliations or interests. This lack of awareness regarding the distinction between stakeholder and citizen participation is also shared to some extent in Poland.

In contrast, Switzerland presents a unique case in terms of citizen participation compared to other European countries. In Switzerland, political rights, political freedom, and the self-responsibility of cantons and municipalities are constitutive for the nation. Comprehensive opportunities for direct political participation are an integral part of Swiss identity, and citizen participation is not merely a complementary element but a core component of the political system. Given this context, deliberative citizen participation is often viewed skeptically as an unnecessary form of engagement, and its concept is more diffuse in Switzerland compared to other European countries.

The analyses reveal that divergent understandings of citizen participation often stem from the distinct political histories of the countries. Switzerland’s direct democratic system, dating back to the Middle Ages, serves as a prominent example. In the Czech Republic, influenced by its Communist history, citizen participation is mainly viewed as a tool for promoting social cohesion rather than as a means for engaging people in political decision-making processes. In France, citizen participation has historically been associated with social conflict and is rooted in municipal action groups who wanted to challenge political authorities. The Dutch citizen participation culture is shaped by the history of institutionalized stakeholder participa-

tion, known as the polder model. Belgium, on the other hand, resisted citizen participation for many years, perceiving it as a threat to national unity, with laws allowing citizen participation only enacted in the 1990s.

3. Significance of Citizen Participation

The analysis of the country reports shows that over the last few years, citizen participation, in general, and deliberative participatory processes, in particular, have played an increasingly important role in most of the partner countries of the **Common Ground** program. Nevertheless, notable variations exist among the countries in terms of the number, quality, and significance of these processes. In the Benelux countries and France, deliberative citizen participation has been on the rise since the 2000s (Belgium) and the 2010s (Netherlands, Luxembourg, France), and these processes play a crucial role in public decision-making. In Germany, deliberative participatory processes have also gained momentum in the second half of the 2010s with the introduction of citizens' assemblies. However, the country has a long history with the implementation of planning cells dating back to the 1970s. In Poland, the Czech Republic, and Switzerland, on the other hand, deliberative citizen participation plays a less important role, though for different reasons and to different degrees.

In the Benelux countries, deliberative processes have been widely implemented in many different forms. In these countries, there is a broad support across the political sector and society for the use of deliberative citizen participation, and deliberative processes are widely accepted as a complement to representative democracy. In these countries, most political parties have a positive stance towards citizen participation in general and the implementation of citizens' assemblies in particular. This position is also shared by the majority of the citizens, even though studies show that there is still a substantial part of society that is not aware of these processes or has no deeper knowledge about their potential and benefits.

Belgium in particular has emerged as a pioneer in implementing lot-based deliberative participatory processes. The country not only stands out in terms of the number of mini publics conducted but also for its innovative and ambitious process designs and the way they are integrated into the decision-making processes of public administrations.

France has also witnessed an increase in deliberative participatory processes in recent years, marking a clear shift in perception on citizen participation over the last 30 years. However, the picture of citizen participation in France is more ambivalent than in the Benelux countries. On the one hand, the country has experienced unprecedented and high-quality participatory processes, such as the Citizens' Convention on Climate in 2019/2020 and the Citizens' Convention on the End of Life in 2022/2023. On the other hand, spaces for deliberation sometimes seem limited in a political system dominated by strong executive and presidential powers. The French report highlights that many politicians remain wary and sometimes even hostile towards citizen participation processes, arguing that they alone possess the legitimacy to make decisions. While a majority of the population supports participatory democracy, disillusionment and fatigue among citizens and associations have led to a gradual shift towards direct action, challenging the legitimacy of participatory democracy in certain regards.

As the report on citizen participation in Germany points out, Germany was the first country in the world to test deliberative democracy with randomly selected citizens with the invention and implementation of the first planning cells in the early 1970s. Even though the number of planning cells in Germany remained rather small until the late 2000s, the experience with such processes facilitated the introduction of citizens' assemblies in the late 2010s and supported detailed discussions on quality standards. With the experimentation of citizens' assemblies at all political levels since 2019, the political discourse on deliberative citizen participation has significantly changed. In 2023, the German Bundestag commissioned the first national citizens' assembly to directly advise parliament on the topic of nutrition, a process that attracted enormous public attention and shifted the public perception of deliberative democracy.

In Poland and the Czech Republic, the picture is markedly different. In these countries, citizen participation in public decision-making is less well common and the significance of citizen participation seems to fundamentally differ on the local and national governmental levels. On the local level, participatory processes are used in different contexts. However, as the Polish report points out, the processes are often employed for gaining acceptance for public policies or for building an innovative or democratic image of the local government. On the national level, the number of participatory processes is very limited in Poland, and they are non-existent in the Czech Republic. In both countries, political actors are traditionally rather opposed to deliberative participatory processes, or they show only limited support for them. At the same time, there is also comparatively little public interest in citizen participation.

In Switzerland, the picture is also markedly different. As mentioned before, the concept of deliberative democracy is fundamentally more diffuse in comparison to other European countries, which can be understood as a consequence of the large number of political and social participation opportunities. While initial experimentations with new deliberative and lot-based procedures have taken place in recent years, these practical efforts and the theoretical discourse remain highly fragmented. Moreover, there is no widespread support for deliberative participatory processes among political actors nor the general population.

4. Challenges and Barriers

While deliberative citizen participation has become increasingly significant in almost all partner countries of the **Common Ground** program, a range of challenges and barriers hinders the further development and impact of such practices.

Across the examined countries, deliberative participatory processes sometimes appear symbolic or tokenistic. Elite capture is a prevalent concern, with such processes being implemented not to authentically engage citizens in public decision-making but rather to pacify dissenting voices or legitimize predetermined political decisions. This tendency has been pointed out, for instance, in the analyses of Poland, the Czech Republic, and France.

A further challenge lies in the insufficient integration of deliberative processes into the decision-making structures of public administrations. Recommendations arising from participatory initiatives are frequently neglected or cherry-picked, leading to a limited impact. Many experts as well as citizens fear that deliberative processes therefore end up as window

dressing and fig leaves. This is also due to a notable lack of institutionalization of citizen participation in many partner countries of the **Common Ground** program. In countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and France, the incorporation of participatory practices into the governance framework remains fragile and is subject to the short-term strategies of political decision-makers.

The complex institutional structure of states can also pose a significant barrier to effective citizen participation. Countries like Belgium exemplify this complexity, with numerous political levels and fragmented competencies for citizen participation. Each political level has its own legal provisions on the procedures of citizen participation, and participatory processes are often restrained by the competencies of the public authority that launches them. Recommendations are thus frequently in conflict with the competencies of other levels of authority.

In some countries, such as France and the Czech Republic, there seems to be a persistent belief in the irrationality of the masses, where citizens are sometimes perceived as ignorant and as lacking expertise in participating in public decision-making. This mindset evidently undermines support for citizen participation among political actors. Furthermore, as the analysis on the Czech Republic points out, there is sometimes even a lack of shared understanding amongst political actors of what citizen participation looks like and what potential benefits it may bring.

It can be observed that, despite varying levels of citizen participation across the partner countries of the **Common Ground** program, common challenges persist. Symbolic processes, insufficient integration of the processes into political decision-making structures, lack of institutionalization, systemic complexity, negative perceptions of citizens, and a lack of political support can impede the comprehensive development of citizen participation. In essence, the country reports on citizen participation reveal that, while citizen participation in general and deliberative participatory processes in particular play an increasingly important role in all the examined countries, there are fundamental differences in terms of quantity, quality, significance, and status of these processes among the different countries. Each country exhibits distinctive features in its citizen participation culture and landscape.

5. Impact on the Common Ground Program

The experiences made so far within the **Common Ground** program confirm many of the findings of the country reports. The reports show that there is a minimal consensus on what citizen participation is: the involvement of ordinary citizens in policy- and decision-making processes. This consensus forms the basis for the implementation of the **Common Ground** program. Nevertheless, the differences in understanding and significance of citizen participation as well as the corresponding challenges and barriers summarized above and explained in the country reports provide important information for the realization of participation processes with citizens in the pilot regions. Recognizing these divergent landscapes and cultures can serve as a foundation for fostering a more targeted and effective approach to citizen participation, both generally within these countries and specifically in their border regions. Acknowledging historical contexts, political systems, various actors shaping each country's participatory culture, as well as the challenges and barriers, the **Common Ground**

initiative can seek to bridge gaps and create tailored structures for cross-border citizen participation.

Especially the different degrees of understanding and significance of citizen participation must be taken into account in the conceptualization of participation process and the organization of events and workshops of the **Common Ground** regions.

Concerning conceptualization, one major challenge is to design participation processes and find participatory methods that are suitable and understandable for citizens of all countries involved. For the **Common Ground** pilots on the western border of Germany (French-German, Luxemburgish-German, Belgian-Dutch-German) this is a rather minor challenge, as the understanding and significance of citizen participation seem to be quite similar. For the **Common Ground** pilots on the southern (Swiss-German) and eastern borders (Polish-German, Polish-Czech-German) of Germany, however, the challenges are tangible. There we find significant differences in the understanding and significance of citizen participation between the countries involved. This means that methods that might be suitable and well established in one country do not fit for the other. Therefore, the partners try to find methods that are attractive and accepted in all countries involved. Although some experiences and knowledge are available (e. g. the experiences made in the twin town Frankfurt/Oder – Słubice), those pilots face the additional problem that administration and politics in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Switzerland have a lower acceptance for results or recommendations that were developed by citizens in a participatory process. This makes their implementation more difficult.

The same is true for the organization and implementation of participatory events and workshops. Especially the recruitment of ordinary citizens is a challenge in countries where citizen participation is not well established. For these countries, suitable ways and methods for the activation of citizens have to be found or developed. Low-threshold procedures must be found that appeal to people in the respective countries. During recruitment, the purpose of participation must be made very clear and interest and acceptance for the process must be aroused. In the regions concerned, this is made possible by the close cooperation between the project partners, which ensures that the characteristics of the countries involved are taken into account.

The reports show a development in which citizen participation is becoming an increasingly important part of the political decision-making process. This development takes place at different speeds and from different starting points, but seems to be moving in the same direction. The **Common Ground** program therefore not only implements and establishes citizen participation in border regions, but also helps to make visible existing differences in participation cultures and enables mutual learning in this area. Reflections from outside and the exchange of experiences, drawing on both successful and less successful cases, can offer new perspectives on the deliberative participatory culture and practices within the partner countries. Furthermore, participative observation among the partners within the **Common Ground** initiative facilitates the adaptation and improvement of participation practices. Finally, the cooperation between the partner countries is a fundamental cornerstone of reciprocal learning and understanding itself.

From what was been pointed out above, the follow questions have to be resolved in the further course of the **Common Ground** program:

- How can we ensure that the results of the participation processes are implemented, especially in the countries with little significance of citizen participation?
- How can we increase the acceptance of citizen participation among citizens, politicians and administrators?
- Having the differences of cultures of participation in mind, what should we consider when developing future cross-border participation processes?

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