

## ESSAYS AND PAPERS

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### Expanding Deliberative Democracy Across Governance Levels: A Supralocal Case from Poland

#### Introduction

Citizens' assemblies, composed of randomly selected citizens who learn from experts, deliberate in facilitated groups, and collectively develop evidence-based recommendations, represent one of the most advanced forms of public participation. What distinguishes them from other participatory instruments is their emphasis on inclusive, reasoned debate grounded in mutual respect and informed by balanced evidence (OECD, 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2023; Elstub, Escobar, 2019; Smith, 2024). In recent years, they have emerged as a significant democratic innovation across Europe, operating at local, supralocal, national, and supranational levels. The European Union (EU) has shown a growing commitment to these deliberative democracy instruments as a means of restoring public trust and enhancing citizen engagement, particularly in relation to climate action and digital transformation (European Commission, 2023). This commitment is exemplified by initiatives such as the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and other EU-level citizens' assemblies, which aimed to include ordinary citizens in shaping the Union's future policy directions (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, Kinski, 2024; Costa, 2020, pp. 295–299).

Citizens' assemblies, as instruments of deliberative democracy, have gained traction across EU member states as responses to multiple democratic challenges



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(Bächtiger et al., p. 18; OECD, 2020). These include declining voter turnout, growing public distrust in representative institutions, and the broader phenomenon of democratic backsliding and the rise of populism (Norris, 2011). In this context, both scholars and practitioners have promoted deliberative democratic mechanisms in the hope of reinvigorating weakened liberal democracies and fostering more legitimate, inclusive, and effective policymaking (Dryzek et al., 2019, pp. 1144–1146; Elstub, Escobar, 2019, pp. 11–31; Smith, 2009). Notably, the majority of citizens' assemblies held in EU countries in the past decade have been climate-focused, reflecting both the urgency of the climate crisis and the EU's own prioritization of the Green Deal (Elstub et al., 2021, p. 11272; MacKenzie, Caluwaerts, 2021, pp. 317–332; Smith, 2024).

Poland has joined this broader deliberative wave more recently, with the first local citizens' assembly held in Gdańsk in 2016 (Gąsiorowska, 2023, pp. 1–10; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024; Pospieszna, Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2024, pp. 47–70; Ufel, 2022, pp. 95–114). Since then, more than a dozen assemblies have taken place, with a notable focus on climate-related issues. Cities such as Lublin, Kraków, Poznań, Warsaw, and Wrocław have all experimented with citizens' assemblies, typically organized at the municipal level and initiated by either local governments or civil society actors (Pospieszna, Hoffman, 2025). While these processes have not been directly funded or coordinated by the EU, they have clearly been inspired by the increased visibility of deliberative innovations in countries such as Ireland, France, and Germany, and shaped by broader EU discourses on participatory and inclusive governance.

Despite the growing body of research on citizens' assemblies, most empirical insights continue to be drawn from local-level experiments, leaving the dynamics of supralocal deliberation comparatively underexplored. However, in 2024, a significant milestone was reached when the Upper Silesia-Zagłębie Metropolis (Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia, GZM) launched Poland's first supralocal citizens' assembly. This assembly focused on transport, an urgent issue of regional importance requiring meticulous inter-municipal coordination (Podgórska-Rykała, 2025b, pp. 24–26). What is particularly noteworthy about the GZM assembly is its potential to test and stretch the limits of Poland's still-nascent deliberative infrastructure. This case is especially important because it represents the first and only supralocal citizens' assembly in Poland, moving beyond the traditional municipal scale of deliberative experiments. Moreover, GZM itself is the first metropolitan governance structure in the country, which adds institutional significance and provides a unique context for examining the challenges and opportunities of coordinating deliberation across multiple municipalities. Studying this case can contribute to understanding how citizens' assemblies can operate at a supralocal level but also can serve as a benchmark for evaluating the potential of metropolitan-scale deliberation to enhance regional governance. It offers a rare opportunity to observe how deliberative democracy can be scaled up in settings where civic engagement traditions are still developing, and institutional frameworks for public participation are evolving (Česnulaitytė, 2024; Gherghina et al., 2020). Thus, the central research questions are: *How does scaling deliberative practices from the local to the supralocal level*

*affect inter-municipal coordination, participant representativeness, and the potential for implementing assembly recommendations?*

To address the research question, we adopt a qualitative approach that combines in-depth case study analysis with participant observation, as well as the examination of official documents, public communications, and final recommendations. Second, we draw on insights from the expert workshop “Deliberative Innovations: A Step Further. Experiences from Poland’s First Regional Mini-Public and Future Challenges”, held on 11 April 2025 at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków.<sup>2</sup> Organized by the authors, the event brought together nearly forty scholars, practitioners, and civil society representatives involved in previous citizens’ assemblies across the country.

The study shows that as citizens’ assemblies expand beyond municipal boundaries into metropolitan, regional, or cross-jurisdictional settings, they encounter new institutional and political complexities – from coordinating between multiple authorities to ensuring fair territorial representation and securing shared ownership of recommendations. These processes not only reshape how deliberation is organized but also influence the scope, legitimacy. Thus, the study offers valuable lessons for both scholars interested in deliberative democracy in Central and Eastern Europe and for practitioners working to embed citizens’ assemblies across multiple governance levels in the EU (Ruszkowski, Wojnicz, 2013).

### **Citizens’ Assemblies Across Levels of Governance**

Deliberative democracy instruments have been perceived as a response to the crisis of representative democracy and the erosion of public trust in political institutions (Fishkin, 2009; Smith, 2009). Rather than relying solely on elections or elite negotiations, deliberative democracy instruments introduce opportunities for structured citizen dialogue that can enhance the legitimacy of decision-making and lead to more reflective and publicly supported outcomes (Papadopoulos, Warin, 2007, pp. 445–472). Citizens’ assemblies represent one of the most prominent institutional manifestations of deliberative democracy, designed to integrate diverse public perspectives into policy-making processes (Curato, Farrell, 2021; Warren, Pearse, 2008). These instruments are composed of randomly selected, demographically representative participants who engage in sustained deliberation over a predetermined public issue (Elstub, Escobar, 2019, pp. 11–31; Smith, 2024). The assemblies’ primary objective is to generate informed, collectively endorsed recommendations for policymakers, thereby enhancing the legitimacy, inclusivity, and responsiveness of democratic decision-making (OECD, 2020; Reuchamps et al., 2023).

Structurally, citizens’ assemblies operate through a three-phase sequence encompassing learning, deliberation, and decision-making (Gerwin, 2018; Curato et al., 2022). In the learning phase, participants are exposed to objective expertise and

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evidence, alongside inputs from subjective stakeholders who have a vested interest in the issue, ensuring comprehensive understanding of both technical and normative dimensions (Smith, 2024; Elstub, Escobar, 2019). The deliberation phase is characterized by facilitated small-group discussions, during which participants critically reflect upon information, exchange perspectives, and collaboratively generate policy proposals, with independent moderators ensuring procedural fairness and inclusivity (Curato, Farrel, 2021). The decision-making phase concludes the process, whereby participants formalize their collective judgments through voting, producing recommendations that are subsequently transmitted to decision-makers (Gerwin, 2018; OECD, 2020).

Typically encompassing 60–100 participants, citizens' assemblies provide sufficient temporal and procedural space to support knowledge acquisition, deliberative engagement, and consensus formation. By operationalizing structured learning, iterative deliberation, and formalized decision-making, these assemblies exemplify how deliberative democratic principles can be instantiated in practice, offering policymakers evidence-based, citizen-informed guidance while simultaneously testing the boundaries of participatory governance (Warren, Pearse, 2008; Smith, 2024; Reuchamps et al., 2023).

While the institutional design of citizens' assemblies tend to exhibit cross-contextual similarities, their scope, purposes, and degree of influence differ markedly according to the governance level at which they are instituted. Authorities at various levels recognize that citizens' assemblies can offer numerous benefits: they promote inclusive dialogue, increase civic trust, enhance policy legitimacy, and help bridge the gap between citizens and institutions (Boswell et al., 2023, pp. 182–200; Boulianne, 2018, pp. 119–136; Elstub et al., 2021, p. 11272; Grönlund et al., 2010, pp. 95–117; Pospieszna et al., 2025, pp. 1–22; Podgórska-Rykała, 2025a). They also foster civic learning, empathy, and solidarity among participants, particularly when well-facilitated and embedded in responsive governance frameworks (Paulis, Pospieszna, 2024). However, research also points to the limitations and challenges of citizens' assemblies. Some warn against the risk of tokenism, when deliberative processes are used symbolically without meaningful influence on policy (Fung, 2015, pp. 513–522; Hendriks, 2006, pp. 571–602; Papadopoulos, Warin, 2007, pp. 445–472). The uneven political will, weak institutional integration, and lack of follow-up mechanisms often limit their transformative impact (Podgórska-Rykała, 2025a). Assemblies also risk exclusion if recruitment and communication strategies fail to ensure broad accessibility, especially for marginalized communities (Dryzek, Niemeyer, 2008, pp. 481–493). Deliberative experiments in deeply divided societies also face many challenges (Pow, 2023).

The rationale for organizing citizens' assemblies at different governance levels is shaped by distinct strategic, political, and institutional considerations. At the supranational level, for instance, citizens' assemblies have been promoted as tools for revitalizing EU democracy and embedding participatory practices in policy design. European leaders such as the EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Vice-President Dubravka Šuica have endorsed deliberative processes as essential to democratic renewal. Proposals have been made for EU institutions – including the

European Parliament and the Court of Justice – to convene assemblies on contentious topics such as migration, enlargement, or democratic backsliding.<sup>3</sup> A landmark initiative in this regard was the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), held from 2021 to 2022. It featured four transnational citizens' panels, each composed of 200 randomly selected individuals from across the EU, reflecting diversity in age, gender, geography, and socioeconomic background. Deliberating in multilingual sessions, participants tackled critical themes such as climate, digital transformation, democracy, and social justice. As Borońska-Hryniewiecka and Kinski (2024) observe, CoFoE represented a unique convergence of transnational citizen participation and multilevel parliamentary democracy. The process yielded 49 official proposals and hundreds of recommendations, some of which, such as the phasing out of non-sustainable packaging, have been adopted by the European Commission as part of broader initiatives like the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2022). However, this institutionalization of deliberative practices at the EU level has continued beyond CoFoE.<sup>4</sup> In this way, citizens' assemblies at EU-level are becoming both symbolic and procedural pillars of a participatory EU governance model.

Most commonly, however, are assemblies that have been organized at the local level, addressing concrete policy problems such as climate change, urban planning, or transportation.<sup>5</sup> The majority of such processes are top-down, commissioned by public authorities, but there are also bottom-up assemblies initiated and funded by civil society actors or international projects (Bussu, Fleuß, 2023, pp. 141–160). Selection methods vary, with some challenges in achieving demographic and territorial diversity, although access to participants is generally easier at the local scale. Their topics are typically closely tied to municipal agendas, making them easier to define and often more actionable, with relatively high relevance and feasibility for implementation. Local political leaders tend to play a stronger role, which can increase the chances of implementation, but also raises risks of politicization (Hendriks, Lees-Marshment, 2019, pp. 597–617; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024).

At higher levels of governance, including regional and national levels, assemblies can be used to address complex cross-jurisdictional or strategic challenges. Implementing at the regional or supralocal level presents specific challenges. As Fung (2015, pp. 513–522) and Hendriks (2006, pp. 571–602) have noted, political will, administra-

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Follow-up of the Conference on the Future of Europe – one year on, 16.06.2023: [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/84e42a03-c71a-4dc6-a464-b4a5fcd5518f\\_en?filename=COFE\\_FS\\_2023\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/84e42a03-c71a-4dc6-a464-b4a5fcd5518f_en?filename=COFE_FS_2023_en_0.pdf), 14.11.2025.

<sup>4</sup> Shortly after the CoFoE the European Commission launched a new generation of thematic citizens' panels, directly linked to legislative processes. These include assemblies on food waste (2022–2023), virtual worlds (2023), and learning mobility (2023), each involving 140–150 randomly selected citizens from all Member States. These panels have generated actionable outputs – for instance, the Food Waste Panel issued 23 recommendations guiding the revision of the Waste Framework Directive, while the Learning Mobility Panel proposed measures to enhance access to study and training abroad. For more information see [https://citizens.cc.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://citizens.cc.europa.eu/index_en), 14.11.2025.

<sup>5</sup> This trend is well-documented through data collection efforts by the OECD, the EU-funded *Politicize* project, and global databases such as *Participedia* as well as the German *Bürgererrat* platform, which track deliberative processes worldwide.

tive capacity, and enabling legal frameworks are crucial to ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness. Without meaningful integration into policymaking structures, citizens' assemblies risk being perceived as symbolic. These supralocal assemblies are logistically and politically more demanding but offer greater potential to influence broader policy frameworks. Supralocal assemblies must reconcile local diversity with broader strategic agendas, negotiate shared ownership among multiple authorities, and ensure that recommendations remain both legitimate and implementable across jurisdictions.<sup>6</sup> These tensions raise a key research question guiding this study: *How does scaling deliberative practices from the local to the supralocal level affect inter-municipal coordination, participant representativeness, and the potential for implementing assembly recommendations?*

Poland provides a further compelling case: as a relatively new EU member state who began experimenting with deliberative instruments at the local and national levels (Paulis, Pospieszna, 2024; Pospieszna, 2025, pp. 69–90; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024).<sup>7</sup> However, they remain relatively new and are not yet formally regulated by law.<sup>8</sup> As such, they operate primarily as consultative bodies, without binding decision-making power. Nevertheless, citizens' assemblies are increasingly becoming institutionalized through municipal regulations and detailed procedural guidelines. While their overall structure tends to be consistent, the level of political support, public visibility, and policy impact differs significantly across cases. What is noteworthy is their ongoing evolution: assemblies are becoming more professionalized and more firmly embedded within broader participatory ecosystems. Despite the absence of formal legal status, they are exerting growing influence on public discourse and policymaking, particularly when supported by committed municipal leaders and effective media communication (Pospieszna, Hoffmann, 2025; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024). The emergence of the first supralocal citizens' assembly in the GZM Metropolis in 2024 opens a valuable opportunity to examine the strengths and weaknesses of deliberative innovations at the supralocal level. These findings are relevant for both scholars interested in deliberative democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, where empirical studies remain limited, and practitioners working to expand democratic innovation across levels of governance.

<sup>6</sup> Across the world, there are numerous examples of citizens' assemblies at the regional level, illustrating efforts to embed deliberation in mid-tier governance. Canada pioneered one of the most well-known regional experiments with the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia in 2004, where 160 randomly selected citizens deliberated over months and proposed changes submitted to a province-wide referendum (Warren, Pearce, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Poland is a unitary state, but it does not imply that all political and administrative power is centralized in the national government. The country has a very strong local government system based on the principles of broad decentralisation and subsidiarity. Its local government structure, comprising 16 regions (voivodeships), over 300 counties, and almost 2,500 municipalities, creates opportunities for deliberative engagement at multiple levels of governance, enabling both top-down and bottom-up initiatives within a uniform legal and institutional framework.

<sup>8</sup> Neither national nor local legislation clearly defines the structure, functions, or legal role of citizens' assemblies. At the municipal level, the *Act of 8 March 1990 on Municipal Self-Government* (consolidated text: Journal of Laws 2025, item 1153) grants municipalities autonomous legislative and executive powers in local matters not reserved for central authorities. This local act enables cooperation between authorities and residents through participatory mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies, which are typically treated as a form of public consultation.



### **Promise and Caution in Scaling Deliberative Practices**

To address the research question of how scaling deliberative practices from the local to the supralocal level affects inter-municipal coordination, participant representativeness, and the potential for implementing assembly recommendations, we employ a qualitative design that combines an in-depth case study with participant observation, as well as analysis of official documents, public communications, and final recommendations. In addition, we draw on insights from the expert workshop “Deliberative Innovations: A Step Further. Experiences from Poland’s First Regional Mini-Public and Future Challenges” (11 April 2025, Kraków), organized by the authors and attended by nearly forty scholars, practitioners, and civil society actors involved in citizens’ assemblies in Poland. Using the World Café method, participants rotated across four thematic tables focused on (1) inter-municipal coordination and responsibility-sharing, (2) embedding regional assemblies within multi-level participatory ecosystems, (3) inclusive and context-sensitive design, and (4) the roles and boundaries of civil society and experts. Discussions were documented through flipcharts and post-it notes, enabling cumulative reflection and collective knowledge-building that informed our analytical framework.

These materials informed the structure of our empirical analysis, organized around six key dimensions that emerged from both the workshop and the case study. Together, these dimensions offer a coherent analytical lens for assessing the GZM assembly in relation to European deliberative standards and the broader context of democratic innovation in Poland. They include: (1) Institutional Design and Legitimacy, concerning the formal embedding of assemblies in governance structures and their perceived credibility; (2) Representation and Participant Selection, addressing recruitment procedures, diversity, and the balance between inclusiveness and representativeness; (3) Policy Relevance and Topic Selection, examining how agenda-setting aligns with public priorities and administrative feasibility; (4) Role of Political Actors and Implementation Prospects, focusing on institutional commitment and the translation of recommendations into policy; (5) Communication and Media Strategy, capturing how assemblies are framed and communicated to the public, shaping their visibility and legitimacy; and (6) External Influences and Local Adaptations, examining how regional assemblies draw on international models while adjusting to domestic political, administrative, and cultural contexts. Collectively, these dimensions offer a structured framework for analysing the evolving practice of citizens’ assemblies in Poland, both at the local and supralocal levels, and for identifying the institutional conditions that enable or constrain their democratic potential.

Before examining the dynamics of scaling, we first provide a closer look at the level of governance and the deliberative process. Upper Silesia-Zagłębie Metropolis (GZM) is a union of 41<sup>9</sup> municipalities located in southern Poland, covering an area of

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<sup>9</sup> Bytom, Chorzów, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Gliwice, Katowice, Mysłowice, Piekary Śląskie, Ruda Śląska, Siemianowice Śląskie, Sosnowiec, Świętochłowice, Tychy, Zabrze, Będzin, Bieruń, Czeladź, Imielin, Knurów, Łędziny, Łaziska Górne, Mikołów, Pyskowice, Radzionków, Sławków, Tarnowskie Góry, Wojkowice, Bobrowniki, Bojszowy, Chełm Śląski, Gierałtowice, Kobiór, Mie-

approximately 2,500 square kilometers and home to over 2 million residents (Podgórska-Rykała, 2018, pp. 19–29). Established to strengthen coordination across a densely populated and structurally diverse post-industrial region, GZM encompasses both large urban centers and smaller towns and rural communities. The area is characterized by high population density, significant daily commuting flows, and complex mobility patterns, alongside persistent challenges related to carbon-intensive infrastructure and environmental degradation. The Metropolis operates as a supralocal governance body with competences in spatial planning, promotion, transport, and sustainable development, seeking to address cross-cutting challenges that exceed the capacity of individual municipalities. Given the fragmented nature of the territory and the diversity of local needs, effective coordination, particularly in the domain of public transport, remains one of the core priorities of the GZM's strategic agenda (Podgórska-Rykała, 2025b, pp. 24–26; Mielczarek-Mikołajów, 2021, p. 369).

In 2024, GZM launched Poland's first supralocal citizens' assembly, a groundbreaking deliberative process designed to engage residents from across a metropolitan region in shaping public transport policy.<sup>10</sup> Titled *Time for Better Transfers (Kolej na dobre przesiadki)*, the assembly was conceived as part of a broader strategy to modernize and integrate the region's public transportation system, particularly in the context of EU-funded railway investments under the Metropolitan Railway project. The initiative was both ambitious and context-sensitive, responding to GZM's specific territorial challenges: high population density, a fragmented urban structure, intense inter-municipal commuting, and the absence of a fast and efficient public transport system. Given GZM's unique spatial configuration, spanning 41 municipalities with over 2 million inhabitants, coordination of transport services has long been a complex undertaking. The citizens' assembly was designed to address this complexity by focusing on a specific transport corridor in the north-western part of the Metropolis. The goal was to co-create citizen-driven recommendations on how best to integrate new and existing public transport options, particularly rail, into the broader network of buses, trams, and other local connections.

The process was preceded by intensive preparatory work, including stakeholder consultations, field research, and input from urban mobility experts. Over the course of five weekends between October and December 2024, participants engaged in a structured deliberation process. This included expert presentations, facilitated small-group discussions, stakeholder sessions, and co-creation workshops. The design combined deliberative democracy methodology with technical analysis and spatial planning tools, offering participants both accessible knowledge and a sense of agency. The outcome of the assembly was a set of prioritized recommendations focusing on improving transfer points, accessibility, service coordination, and infrastructure quality, and are intended to inform future GZM transport policies and investment strategies. For more information about the assembly look at Table 1 below.

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rzęćice, Ożarówice, Pilchowice, Psary, Rudziniec, Siewierz, Sośnicowice, Świerklaniec, Wryy, Zbrosławice.

<sup>10</sup> For more information about this assembly see: <https://forumobywatelskie.transportgzm.pl>, 14.11.2025.



Table 1

**Overview of the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis (GZM)  
Citizens' Assembly**

<b>Name of the Assembly</b>	On track for Better Transfers – how to achieve them? (Kolej na dobre przesiadki – jak to osiągnąć)
<b>Organizer</b>	Upper Silesia-Zagłębie Metropolis (GZM), Center for UE Transport Projects (Centrum Unijnych Projektów Transportowych), Fado Social Cooperative (Spółdzielnia Socjalna Fado)
<b>Year and Duration</b>	October 2024, 3 full days
<b>Geographic Scope</b>	Supralocal (7 municipalities within GZM)
<b>Participating Municipalities</b>	Bytom, Chorzów, Piekary Śląskie, Radzionków, Świerklaniec, Tarnowskie Góry, Zabrze (2 districts)
<b>Territorial Context</b>	Union of 41 municipalities, 2.5k km <sup>2</sup> , >2 million residents, high urban density, commuting challenges
<b>Topic</b>	Integration and modernization of the regional public transport network
<b>Policy Context</b>	Linked to EU-funded Metropolitan Railway project
<b>Participant Selection</b>	4,000 invitations; voluntary registration; 42 participants selected via stratified lottery
<b>Stratification Criteria</b>	place of residence, gender, most common mode of transportation, age, education, number of dependent children
<b>Process Design</b>	5 meetings held on 3 consecutive weekends: expert inputs; small-group discussions; voting
<b>Outputs</b>	102 citizens' recommendations (from 117 proposals)
<b>Institutional Collaboration</b>	OECD
<b>Innovative Features</b>	First supralocal-scale mini-public in Poland; combines deliberation with spatial planning

**Source:** Own compilation based on the material collected.

### ***Institutional Design and Legitimacy***

The GZM Citizens' Assembly was designed in collaboration with the OECD ensuring alignment with international standards for deliberative democracy. Its institutional legitimacy was grounded in both methodological rigor and a multilayered planning process. The assembly was not treated as a one-off consultation but as an integral part of the metropolitan governance ecosystem, connected to a broader strategic framework that included the Metropolitan Railway investment project and EU funding mechanisms. While many local citizens' assemblies in Poland seem more ad hoc and isolated from strategic planning, the regional format required more formal anchoring within multi-level governance structures.

The design process involved extensive preparatory work, including stakeholder mapping, exploratory fieldwork (e.g., participatory walks), and structured consultations within GZM's formal participatory architecture, notably the Sectoral Dialogue Team for Transport. This step-by-step planning process made the assembly part of existing institutions, helping to align it with broader planning goals and giving it a more formal role. The legitimacy of the assembly was further reinforced through its operational design in close cooperation with GZM's internal teams and external stakehold-

ers. The partnership involved experienced facilitators, methodologists, and transport experts, ensuring a transparent and inclusive process.

Stratified random selection was used to form a demographically representative group of participants from seven municipalities located along a selected transport corridor. This approach addressed the challenges posed by GZM's highly fragmented territorial structure and ensured the inclusion of diverse resident perspectives. In contrast to local assemblies, where demographic diversity can be easier to achieve due to smaller catchment areas, regional processes face greater complexity in ensuring territorial and infrastructural balance.

Moreover, the assembly gained symbolic and normative legitimacy through its visibility at international events and its connection to European deliberative initiatives. While the outcomes of the process were not legally binding, GZM publicly committed to reviewing and incorporating the assembly's recommendations into regional transport planning. This willingness to translate deliberation into actionable policy, coupled with internal advocacy from GZM's Communications and Dialogue Team and the Department of Sustainable Mobility, demonstrated a robust institutional commitment.

### *Representation and Participant Selection*

Ensuring representative participation was central to the legitimacy and credibility of the GZM Citizens' Assembly. The organizers aimed to reflect both the demographic and territorial diversity of the metropolitan region by implementing a two-stage random selection process. Initially, 4,000 invitations were sent to randomly selected addresses across seven municipalities forming the north-west transport corridor of GZM: Bytom, Chorzów, Piekary Śląskie, Radzionków, Świerklaniec, Tarnowskie Góry, and parts of Zabrze (only two districts: Rokitnica and Helenka). These areas encompassed a range of urban, suburban, and rural contexts, reflecting the spatial heterogeneity that characterizes the GZM territory.

Residents who received invitations could voluntarily register their interest in participating. From this pool of applicants, 42 participants were selected through a stratified lottery based on place of residence, gender, most common mode of transportation, age, education, number of dependent children. This approach aligned with international standards for deliberative processes, such as those endorsed by the OECD and the European Commission. Importantly, GZM emphasized a deliberative ideal of representativeness not only in demographic terms but also in geographic and infrastructural diversity, recognizing the disparities in mobility, connectivity, and civic engagement across its municipalities. In comparison, local assemblies usually rely on simpler recruitment and often draw participants from a single administrative unit, making territorial representativeness easier but less inclusive of diverse infrastructural perspectives.

Despite the rigorous design, the organizers encountered structural barriers that affected representativeness. In some municipalities, response rates to the invitations were lower, which influenced the final territorial distribution of participants. These

disparities highlighted ongoing civic inequalities shaped by variations in socio-economic status, digital access, and levels of institutional trust. The low level of interest among residents in participating in this process was also a result of their weak sense of belonging to the metropolitan area. Nonetheless, organizers actively addressed inclusion barriers by offering financial support, such as reimbursement of transportation costs. The deliberative sessions were also designed to accommodate individuals with caring responsibilities and disabilities, ensuring physical and procedural accessibility.

The transparent and inclusive selection process substantially contributed to the democratic legitimacy of the GZM Citizens' Assembly. It showcased a practical application of deliberative democratic ideals at the supralocal level while also exposing the persistent challenges of achieving truly equitable participation. These lessons are vital for future regional assemblies, pointing to the need for deeper outreach strategies and infrastructural support mechanisms that foster the participation of historically marginalized and hard-to-reach communities.

### ***Policy Relevance and Topic Selection***

The topic of the GZM Citizens' Assembly, regional public transport integration, was selected for its high policy salience, practical feasibility, and cross-municipal relevance. Anchored in the broader "On track for better transfers" initiative, the deliberation focused on improving the accessibility and efficiency of public transport within the Upper Silesia-Zagłębie Metropolis, particularly the coordination between bus and train services. This choice not only addressed the daily challenges of residents' mobility, but also responded to broader strategic goals related to sustainable environmental development, social integration and the functional integration of the metropolitan area. In this case, similar to local assemblies, where topics often reflect long-term municipal issues (climate issues), the regional scale further accentuated the need to focus on longer-term structural issues requiring inter-municipal coordination.

Crucially, the issue was not only contextually urgent but also policy-aligned and actionable. The assembly's deliberations were embedded within a concrete policy planning process, namely, the GZM's work on the "Metropolitan Railway" and its strategic commitment to creating a more coherent regional transport network. The involvement of multiple municipalities and stakeholders underlined the supralocal nature of the problem, allowing participants to engage with the real complexities of cross-jurisdictional governance and transport planning. This direct connection between deliberation and existing policy frameworks enhanced participants' motivation and underscored the seriousness of the process.

Moreover, the topic facilitated a shift in perspective from local or municipal concerns to a metropolitan outlook. Participants discussed the needs of smaller towns, rural areas, and large cities together, promoting a more integrated understanding of regional mobility. Issues such as transfer hubs, timetable coordination, and accessibility for marginalized groups revealed not only the fragmentation of existing infrastructure

but also the potential for cooperative solutions. In this way, the assembly served both as a platform for civic learning and as a space to develop a shared civic identity across the structurally diverse GZM territory.

Finally, the topic's dual character, technical yet socially impactful, proved particularly well-suited for a deliberative mini-public. While the subject required input from transport experts and planners, it was also sufficiently rooted in everyday experience to allow non-experts to engage meaningfully. The combination of expert presentations, stakeholder input, and structured deliberation enabled participants to produce informed and context-sensitive recommendations. The clarity and relevance of the topic, grounded in both local needs and European strategic priorities, were essential in legitimizing the process and creating real potential for implementation.

### *Role of Political Actors and Implementation Prospects*

The GZM Citizens' Assembly was launched at the initiative of the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis authorities and fully funded from the metropolitan budget, marking a strong institutional commitment to democratic innovation. The process was spearheaded by the Dialogue and Communication Team and strategically anchored in the broader agenda of the GZM Board, with consistent support from key political figures throughout the preparatory and deliberative phases. These actors perceived the assembly not merely as an experiment in participatory governance but as a tool to shape concrete regional policy, especially in the field of public transport. In contrast to local assemblies, where implementation prospects often depend on a single mayor or (though very rarely) city council, supralocal assemblies require multi-level coordination and stronger inter-institutional alignment.

Crucially, the assembly was linked to a larger, ongoing infrastructural and policy initiative, the EU-funded "Metropolitan Railway" project, focused on integrating rail and bus services across the region. This alignment ensured the policy relevance of the deliberation and gave the recommendations a clear channel for potential implementation. The GZM Board formally committed to reviewing and responding to all 102 final recommendations adopted by the assembly, and internal structures such as the Directorate for Strategic Transport Projects and the Transport Division were involved in the post-deliberative phase, analyzing and filtering proposals for policy integration.

At the same time, the implementation of the assembly's outcomes faced structural constraints. Many of the proposed changes, such as ticket integration, infrastructure improvements, and schedule coordination, require collaboration across administrative levels and institutional actors, including local municipalities and national rail operators. GZM, while functioning as a supralocal authority, does not hold full operational competences in all areas related to public transport, particularly rail services governed by state-owned companies. This reflects a broader pattern in post-socialist governance systems, where decentralization has created complex layers of authority without always resolving inter-institutional fragmentation.

Despite these institutional limitations, the assembly generated substantial political and administrative learning. Its successful implementation and perceived value have prompted GZM decision-makers to consider establishing a permanent mechanism for participatory processes, including the potential for future assemblies on other strategic issues. Moreover, the process catalyzed intra-metropolitan dialogue and fostered a new collaborative dynamic between various departments within the GZM. It demonstrated that, under the right conditions, political will, institutional openness, and strategic alignment, deliberative processes can become not only legitimate but impactful instruments of regional governance. The key challenge moving forward lies in ensuring the continuity of such practices beyond electoral cycles and anchoring deliberative mechanisms within the policy implementation machinery of the Metropolis.

### *Communication and Media Strategy*

The GZM Citizens' Assembly was accompanied by a multi-level communication strategy aimed at informing, engaging, and legitimizing the process in the eyes of the public. The Communications and Dialogue Team of the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis coordinated outreach activities before, during, and after the deliberations, using both online and offline tools. These included a dedicated website (which was only established after the process had been completed), newsletters, press releases, local radio and television coverage, and social media campaigns. However, the overall resonance of the process remained modest, and its visibility varied significantly across the region. Compared to local assemblies, which benefit from stronger local media ties and shared civic identity, regional processes must overcome a weaker collective identity and more fragmented media landscape.

One of the major challenges identified by both organizers and workshop participants was the limited public recognition of the GZM as a unified political actor. Despite being a formal metropolitan union, GZM lacked a strong symbolic presence in the media landscape. This made it difficult to establish a clear narrative around the assembly and to convey its regional importance to a broader audience. Moreover, the polycentric structure of the metropolis, with residents often identifying more strongly with their local municipality than with the region, further complicated unified communication efforts.

Participants in the April 2025 World Café workshop stressed the difficulty of crafting media messages that could both explain the complexity of a deliberative process and resonate with diverse local communities. The tension between the slow, structured rhythm of a mini-public and the immediacy required by media formats was a recurring theme. Additionally, communication efforts were hindered by limited access to regional media platforms and the lack of sustained partnerships with key broadcasters or journalists.

Nevertheless, the experience yielded actionable insights for future regional deliberative initiatives. Participants in the workshop emphasized the importance of early-stage communication planning, co-creating messaging with community actors,

and leveraging human-centered storytelling to make the process relatable. They also recommended developing consistent visual branding for assemblies, fostering long-term cooperation with regional media outlets, and adapting communication formats to different segments of the population. As deliberative processes move to the regional level, tailored and inclusive communication strategies will be critical not only for increasing visibility but also for strengthening public trust and fostering a shared sense of ownership.

### *External Influences and Local Adaptations*

The GZM Citizens' Assembly was deeply influenced by European deliberative standards and institutional frameworks, particularly those promoted by the OECD. As one of the first supralocal deliberative processes in Poland, it emerged from a broader European wave of experimentation with citizens' assemblies and was designed in close consultation with international experts. The process was presented at OECD events, positioning it within a transnational ecosystem of democratic innovation and lending it additional legitimacy.

By contrast, although most local citizens' assemblies in Poland were indirectly inspired by international guidelines such as those of the OECD, their final design and implementation were shaped primarily by domestic contextual factors. These included accumulated experience and learning from good and bad practices of organizing earlier assemblies, political dynamics within municipal authorities, the influence of other actors such as climate activists connected to transnational climate movements, and various locally specific interests. In the case of GZM, however, these domestically developed templates and dynamics played a less significant role, allowing international standards and good practices to take clearer precedence in guiding the process.

Importantly, the GZM assembly did not simply import foreign models but strategically localized them. While the OECD's Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes served as a key point of reference, the organizers adapted these standards to Poland's unique metropolitan governance context. Rather than relying solely on an external blueprint, the GZM team co-developed a model that combined structured citizen deliberation with technical planning and stakeholder input. This hybrid design allowed for flexibility and responsiveness to the functional realities and administrative competences of a Polish metropolitan union.

The topic of transport, chosen for the assembly, illustrated this interplay between EU influence and local adaptation. It was not only aligned with EU priorities such as the European Green Deal and the green transition but was also embedded in a concrete investment agenda co-financed by European funds, including the Metropolitan Railway project. This dual anchoring of the process, in both EU policy frameworks and regional strategic planning, created fertile ground for democratic experimentation that was both rooted in the context of Metropolis and internationally informed.

Table 2 below summarizes the main differences identified through our analysis, highlighting how supralocal and local assemblies in Poland diverge in terms of institutional embedding, coordination, and sources of legitimacy.



Table 2

Comparison of Supralocal vs. Local Citizens’ Assemblies in Poland: Opportunities and Challenges Across 6 Key Dimensions

Dimension	Local Citizens’ Assemblies	Supralocal Citizens’ Assemblies
Institutional Design and Legitimacy	Often initiated by municipalities; typically ad hoc; limited formal integration into broader governance structures.	Require multi-level coordination; linked to strategic frameworks and long-term policy agendas; more complex design.
Representation and Participant Selection	Selection methods may vary; challenges with demographic and territorial diversity; easier access to local participants.	Emphasis on cross-municipal representation; challenges in ensuring territorial equity.
Policy Relevance and Topic Selection	Topics usually closely tied to municipal priorities; easier to define and implement; higher immediate relevance.	Topics chosen for cross-jurisdictional relevance; aligned with regional development plans; may require co-financing.
Role of Political Actors and Implementation Prospects	Stronger role and influence of local political leaders; higher chance of implementation but also greater risk of politicization.	Dependent on cooperation across institutional actors; implementation requires coordination beyond one administrative level.
Communication and Media Strategy	Communication more direct; better local media access; stronger local identity helps visibility and public resonance.	Greater complexity in outreach; weaker regional identity; need for tailored, multi-channel strategies.
External Influences and Local Adaptations	Adaptation of deliberative formats tends to be informal or ad hoc.	Lack of domestic models leads to seek inspiration from international examples to ensure legitimacy and quality; more experimental, with less established institutional frameworks than at the local level; complex, cross-municipal governance structures.

Source: Own compilation based on findings from the study.

The comparison presented above illustrates that scaling deliberative practices from the local to the supralocal level entails not only institutional innovation but also new coordination challenges. While local assemblies benefit from proximity, stronger community identity, and more direct implementation pathways, supralocal initiatives such as the GZM Citizens’ Assembly demand formalized structures, multi-level governance arrangements, and cooperation across municipalities. At the same time, they open space for deeper democratic learning, the diffusion of international standards, and the emergence of new forms of metropolitan civic identity. These insights suggest that regional deliberation is not simply an expanded version of local participation but rather a qualitatively distinct mode of democratic experimentation that redefines the relationship between citizens, institutions, and territorial governance.

Conclusion

This article examined the first supralocal citizens’ assembly organized in Poland by the Upper Silesian-Zagłębie Metropolis (GZM), addressing the question of how de-

liberative processes can be effectively implemented at the supralocal level in Poland. Our inquiry was driven by growing scholarly and policy interest in scaling up deliberative democracy beyond the local level. Despite the increasing popularity of citizens' assemblies across Europe, limited research has focused on those organized at a higher administrative level within unitary systems. We addressed this gap by analyzing the design, implementation, and political significance of the GZM Citizens' Assembly.

Our research shows that supralocal assemblies introduce a distinct set of challenges and opportunities compared to their local counterparts. Regarding the first research question, what institutional, organizational, and deliberative differences exist between local and supralocal assemblies, the GZM case highlights that supralocal assemblies require formal anchoring in multi-level governance structures, strategic alignment with broader supralocal agendas, and cooperation across multiple municipalities. They face more complex recruitment challenges to achieve both demographic and territorial representativeness, and they demand structured communication strategies to reach a dispersed and heterogeneous population. Policy relevance at the supralocal level is inherently cross-jurisdictional, tied to long-term and infrastructural projects, whereas local assemblies tend to focus on municipal-level, more immediately actionable issues. Supralocal processes also draw more heavily on international frameworks and best practices, while local assemblies often rely on domestic templates or ad hoc experimentation. In sum, supralocal assemblies are not simply scaled-up versions of local assemblies; they constitute a qualitatively distinct form of deliberative practice that combines institutional innovation with civic learning across multiple municipalities.

Regarding the research question, how scaling deliberative practices affects inter-municipal coordination, participant representativeness, and implementation prospects, the GZM assembly demonstrates several key effects. First, supralocal scaling necessitates explicit mechanisms for coordination among municipalities and administrative units, which enhances institutional collaboration but also introduces complexity and dependency on political will. Second, achieving equitable and representative participation requires targeted outreach, logistical support, and sensitivity to differences in civic engagement, mobility, and access across the supralocal territory. Third, linking deliberative outputs to concrete policy initiatives, such as the EU-funded Metropolitan Railway project, strengthens the potential for implementation but is constrained by fragmented competences and multi-level institutional dependencies. Despite these challenges, the assembly facilitated inter-municipal dialogue, fostered a shared metropolitan civic identity, and contributed to administrative learning within GZM, illustrating that supralocal deliberation can be both legitimate and impactful.

The findings carry broader implications for democratic practice. The GZM Citizens' Assembly exemplifies how supralocal deliberative formats can be embedded within existing planning frameworks and used to inform strategic policy development. Institutional ownership, inclusive communication strategies, and transparent selection procedures enhance trust, policy legitimacy, and civic learning. The study also underscores the need for permanent deliberative infrastructure at the supralocal level, such as standing assemblies or recurring participatory formats, to support continuity and long-term democratic innovation. Finally, the GZM case offers a valuable reference

point for other supralocal contexts in unitary states, demonstrating both the promise and the complexity of scaling deliberative democracy beyond the local level.

Importantly, although the GZM assembly brought together citizens from only seven municipalities, which is why we refer to it as supralocal rather than regional, it provides an important foundation and learning opportunity for future initiatives at the broader regional level. By systematically testing deliberative mechanisms at the supralocal level, Polish metropolitan authorities can gradually build the experience and institutional infrastructure necessary to create assemblies covering entire regions.

Looking ahead, our study suggests the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to ensure the continuity and impact of citizens' assemblies beyond one-off events. Building permanent deliberative infrastructure at the supralocal and, potentially, regional level, such as standing assemblies or recurring participatory formats, could support long-term democratic innovation. Further investment in inclusive recruitment strategies, communication capacity, and inter-institutional cooperation is also necessary to ensure that such processes are both equitable and effective. The Polish experience shows that even in a unitary system, supralocal, and in the future, regional, deliberative assemblies can contribute meaningfully to democratic resilience.

Future research should expand on our findings by conducting comparative studies of supralocal and regional assemblies across different governance systems, including both federal and decentralized states. More attention should also be given to the long-term effects of such assemblies on civic engagement, institutional trust, and policymaking cultures. As deliberative practices continue to spread across Europe, especially in response to transnational challenges like climate change or digital transformation, understanding their operation at intermediate governance levels will be crucial. The GZM case offers a valuable reference point for scholars and practitioners alike, demonstrating both the promise and the complexity of scaling deliberative democracy beyond the municipal level.

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## Summary

This article addresses this gap by analyzing the first supralocal citizens' assembly in Poland, organized by the Upper Silesia-Zagłębie Metropolis (Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia, GZM). Drawing on deliberative democracy theory, policy documents, and empirical material, including data from a World Café workshop with practitioners and scholars, the study examines the institutional design, implementation dynamics, and policy relevance of this pioneering initiative. We argue that the GZM Citizens' Assembly represents a conceptual and institutional shift from local to supralocal deliberative governance, involving specific administrative, political,

and territorial challenges. These challenges include ensuring inclusive representation across municipalities, embedding the process within strategic policymaking structures, and fostering inter-municipal collaboration. The case illustrates both the potential and the complexity of scaling deliberative practices. Overall, the study contributes to debates on democratic innovation and resilience by demonstrating how supralocal citizens' assemblies can serve as laboratories for participatory governance in unitary states as Poland.

**Key words:** deliberative democracy, citizens' assemblies, supralocal governance, democratic innovations

### **Rozszerzanie demokracji deliberatywnej na wszystkich szczeblach zarządzania: przykład ponadlokalny z Polski**

#### **Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje próbę wypełnienia luki badawczej, analizując pierwszy ponadlokalny panel obywatelski w Polsce, zorganizowany przez Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowską Metropolię (GZM). Opierając się na teorii demokracji deliberatywnej, dokumentach programowych i materiałach empirycznych, w tym danych z warsztatów World Café z udziałem praktyków i naukowców, badanie analizuje strukturę instytucjonalną, dynamikę wdrażania i znaczenie polityczne tej pionierskiej inicjatywy. Autorzy twierdzą, że Panel Obywatelski GZM stanowi koncepcyjną i instytucjonalną zmianę z lokalnego na ponadlokalny model zarządzania deliberatywnego, wiążącą się ze specyficznymi wyzwaniami administracyjnymi, politycznymi i terytorialnymi. Wyzwania te obejmują zapewnienie inkluzywnej reprezentacji we wszystkich gminach, osadzenie procesu w strategicznych strukturach decyzyjnych oraz wspieranie współpracy międzygminnej. Przypadek ten ilustruje zarówno potencjał, jak i złożoność skalowania praktyk deliberatywnych. Podsumowując, badanie wnosi wkład w debatę na temat innowacji demokratycznych i odporności, pokazując, jak ponadlokalne zgromadzenia obywatelskie mogą służyć jako laboratoria dla partycypacyjnego zarządzania w państwach unitarnych, takich jak Polska.

**Słowa kluczowe:** demokracja deliberatywna, zgromadzenia obywatelskie, ponadlokalne zarządzanie, innowacje demokratyczne

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