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Chapter 8

Can democratic innovation work in an unfavourable political context? Assessing the effectiveness of the first Hungarian climate assembly

Abstract: In September 2020, the first Hungarian Citizens' Assembly on Climate Policy was organised by the new Mayor of Budapest. This chapter analyses how this local democratic innovation worked and what impact it had on the participants' attitudes to environmental issues and governance. The viability and success of the process was not evident at the outset, as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries and other participatory democratic mechanisms have not been used in Hungarian governance. The past decade of illiberal politics has led to reduced citizen activism and shrinking spaces for policy participation. However, the Citizens' Assembly was a success in terms of organisation, outputs and evaluation by participants. In terms of policymaking, the recommendations did not generate original ideas compared to the 'business as usual' of environmental protection; and they did not require sacrifices or radical behavioural changes from citizens or institutions. Regarding the impact of the assembly on the participants' attitudes concerning environmental issues, we found that participants felt more informed about those issues after the event. The chapter concludes with reflections on the prospects for democratic innovations such as climate assemblies in illiberal political contexts.

Keywords: climate assembly, Central Europe, deliberation, local governance, illiberal democracy

1 Introduction

Acknowledging the urgency of the climate crisis, climate assemblies as a specific form of mini-public are becoming popular in established democracies. Governments have used them at all levels of governance to involve citizens in generating recommendations to minimise the impacts of the crisis. There is empirical evidence that deliberation (Hara et al. 2019; MacKenzie and Caluwaerts 2021) in citizens' assemblies (Kulha et al. 2021) can promote concern for future generations and that, through the prioritisation of the commons over self-interest, the 'talk-centric' deliberative approach of climate assemblies can lead to support for ambitious climate policy solutions (Niemeyer 2013; Muradova et al. 2020; Torney and O'Gorman 2019). However, we know very little about how climate assemblies function in an illiberal context where elected govern-

ment officials not only focus on short-term goals and promote climate delay discourses but systematically weaken environmental politics.

To support systemic understanding and to establish under what conditions climate assemblies can meaningfully contribute to reflexive environmental governance, we address this gap through a case study analysis of the climate assembly convened by the Budapest City Council using an exploratory research design. Hungary is a typical case of an illiberal democracy (Bozóki 2015; Pap 2017) having had a right-wing populist government in power since 2010 that has weakened checks and balances, and reduced opportunities for direct participation in policymaking. While issues like immigration, gender politics, and family are intensively present on the agenda of the government, environmental policy has been systematically neglected and even partially dismantled (Hajnal and Boda 2021). However, at the 2019 regional elections, a coalition of opposition parties scored some local victories, including Budapest, where the new Mayor, Gergely Karácsony, was the candidate of the green-left party Dialogue for Hungary. This opened a window of political opportunity for local environmental initiatives.

Focusing on the climate assembly in Budapest (Hungary), earlier research has revealed why the event occurred. Even though it was initiated by civil society organisations, the prime mover of the deliberative process was political: local politicians pursued this objective to fulfil their election pledges, ensure ideological consistency, and promote sustainability (Oross et al. 2021). Focusing on the internal and external dimensions of climate assemblies and how the two are related, this paper investigates how this local democratic innovation worked and what impact it had on the assembly members' attitudes to environmental issues and governance. The main goal is to give a preliminary answer to the broad question of whether climate assemblies can be effective tools for revitalising democracy in an unfavourable, illiberal political context.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, based on the literature on climate and citizens' assemblies, we note some theoretical issues and expectations concerning the potential effect of the illiberal political context on public legitimacy, mediatisation, and the impact of such processes. Section 3 presents the case itself, the Budapest climate assembly. Section 4 deals with the research questions and the methodology used to answer them. Section 5 presents the main findings of the paper. Section 6 discusses our analysis of the climate assembly with respect to its effectiveness in revitalising democracy in an illiberal context.

2 Theoretical considerations: Illiberal politics and climate assemblies

This section provides a review of theoretical expectations concerning how both the external and internal dimensions of climate assemblies are affected by illiberal politics. The literature on mini-publics in general (see Escobar and Elstub 2017) and climate assemblies in particular offers very sparse clues about what to expect in an illiberal po-

litical context since it focuses on the practice of deliberative politics, which typically happens in the context of liberal democracies (see Elstub et al. 2021; Torney 2021). Therefore, in the following section, we present some problems found in the literature that may be especially relevant to an illiberal context.

The success of climate assemblies obviously depends on the broader social context, which is influenced by politics (Thompson et al. 2021). The most important problem discussed by the literature in the context of established liberal democracies is how much decision-makers are committed to taking seriously what climate assemblies propose. It has been shown (in France, the UK, and Poland) that despite ex-ante commitments expressed by politicians, decision-makers have cherry-picked from assembly recommendations or been reluctant to implement them effectively (Torney 2021; Willis et al. 2022). This is hardly surprising, given that addressing climate change needs radical or even paradigmatic policy reforms – and a general observation is that such policy changes are difficult to enact (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Pre-existing contracts, ongoing programmes, dedicated resources, complex policy interests, a lack of knowledge and funds and a shortage of political attention may all contribute to the slowing of effective policy action. However, both the public in general and the participants of assemblies in particular may feel betrayed by perceived inaction, hindering willingness to participate in further such initiatives or even becoming a barrier to taking part ex-ante. We assume that this kind of perception and expectation may be even stronger in the illiberal context of Hungary for the following reasons.

First, in Hungary, there is no tradition of mini-publics. At the same time, the participatory opportunities associated with policymaking have radically shrunk since 2010 (Boda 2023). Quasi-participation has been offered through so-called ‘National Consultations’ organised by the government, through which citizens can fill out questionnaires with clearly tendentious questions and biased options for answers. These represent more an abuse of participatory governance than its effective use (Batory and Svensson 2019; Oross and Tap 2021). Although the climate assembly we studied was organised by the newly elected Budapest City Council, governed by a coalition of opposition parties (made up of six parties, not equally supportive of the green initiatives of the new Mayor), it is hard to imagine that the general political context had no adverse effect on expectations concerning this initiative. We assumed that the public would be suspicious concerning the political commitment behind the climate assembly proposal and that this would affect both its organisation and its outcomes.

Second, although the City of Budapest has some autonomy to make decisions about local matters, its political opportunities depend heavily on the right-wing Fidesz national government and the parliament where Fidesz has had –and still has– a constitutional two-thirds majority. The fact that the opposition took over Budapest from Fidesz in the 2019 local elections represented a major defeat to Fidesz (Kovarek and Littvay 2022). A rational expectation was that the government would do anything in its

power to block and undermine the initiatives of the city.¹ That is, even if citizens had put some trust in the commitment of the City Council to take the climate assembly seriously, they might still have shied away from participating in it, expecting the central government to oppose any politically meaningful local initiative. Even if they decided to participate, they may have been suspicious and reserved concerning the deliberative exercise, seriously affecting the quality of the process.

The attitudes of the public could have had a significant effect on the setting up and operation of the climate assembly. Climate assemblies are sometimes criticised for not being radical enough regarding policy recommendations (Willis et al. 2022). This may be an even more pronounced problem in the illiberal context of Hungary, in which politics has not thematised the danger and challenges of climate change, the whole environmental field has largely been neglected, and environmental issues are low on the political agenda (Pokornyi and Sággy 2021). In light of some theoretical considerations concerning the policy choices of illiberal regimes, this should not be seen as a random feature of the Orbán regime. The neglect of public goods and services which do not offer direct rewards in terms of power relations and/or fail to generate financing for the regime and its supporters is typical of illiberalism (Boda 2021). Evidence about the green attitudes of Hungarian people is mixed. At the general level, the majority acknowledges the severity of environmental problems, but only a tiny fraction of respondents take individual action to address them (de Moor *et al.* 2020, 139–149). Qualitative data on Hungarians' perceptions of green issues has provided evidence that people are interested in a safe and clean environment if it personally benefits them. However, they feel poorly informed and even misinformed about specific green policies and technologies (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023). According to public opinion research, people's policy attitudes are generally unstable, and the public agenda, with its priming effect, plays an important role in activating them (Zaller 1992). Therefore, while the hostile and negligent political environment in Hungary makes climate assemblies even more necessary than elsewhere, it is also reasonable to assume that the former did not contribute to the success, acceptance, and legitimacy of the climate assembly.

Another issue concerns how climate assemblies are mediatised, as this greatly impacts the relationship of such processes to other parts of the political system. Well-publicised citizens' assemblies may increase trust in government, a lack of which is a key issue in tackling climate change (Howarth et al. 2020; Willis 2020). Public engagement beyond the formal process associated with the event (e.g., media coverage of the latter, and follow-up events) can contribute to engaging and communicating with the public more deeply about the outcomes of the process (Devaney et al. 2020). Proper media coverage may also increase the public's trust in the event and help recruit participants.

Citizens' assemblies struggle to get much media coverage anywhere. However, the situation is especially problematic in Hungary, where a large part of the media is con-

¹ In fact, in 2021–2022, the government significantly curtailed the financial autonomy of local governments, including that of Budapest.

trolled by the government or its cronies (Polyák et al. 2020). Public broadcasting is under direct political control and opposition politicians are practically never given the floor, while most commercial television broadcasters, radio stations, and printed newspapers (including all the regional dailies) are owned either by Lőrinc Mészáros, a crony of the government who has become Hungary's wealthiest businessman over the past decade, or the media foundation set up by Fidesz. The City of Budapest has very limited means of communicating with the public, and we expected that the media coverage of the climate assembly would remain very limited. A further development of the past decade is that policy debates have faded away: members of the government very rarely appear in the media, and when they do so it is usually in pro-governmental media where they do not have to face critical questions or in-depth inquiries about policies. The policy process has sped up considerably, and its transparency has declined substantially (on these aspects of the policy process, see Boda 2023). Accordingly, we expected very poor media coverage of the climate assembly before, during, and after the event.

Based on these considerations, the general research question that guides our chapter concerns the effect of the illiberal political context on the climate assembly organised by the city. Namely, *How did the illiberal political context influence the organisation and the success of the climate assembly?*

Further specific research questions aimed at operationalising the general inquiry:

- *What was the impact of the assembly in terms of policymaking?*
- *What was the impact of the assembly in terms of media coverage?*
- *What was the assembly's impact on participants' attitudes concerning environmental issues? How did participants perceive the quality and success of the process?*

3 Introducing the case

The citizens' assembly on climate policy was run as part of the revision of the city's climate strategy. In November 2019, the declaration of a climate emergency resulted in the creation of a climate assembly in collaboration with the NGO DemNet. The aim was to identify what Budapest inhabitants should do to address the climate emergency.

Although it was commissioned by City Hall, the assembly was not designed around the latter's political needs or expectations; it was developed by civil society members. DemNet coordinated meetings with the participation of several civil society experts and the support of the Sortition Foundation (UK), the European Climate Fund, and the Municipality of Budapest.

The random selection of assembly members followed international good practice, using a two-step random selection method. The first step was encouraging the online application of participants: 10,000 invitation letters were sent, and 333 invitations were registered in Budapest during the two-week registration period, meaning a registration rate of 3.3%. This was followed by the stratified, random selection of participants: a list

of fifty assembly members was compiled who represented the population of Budapest over 18 years of age according to gender, age, education, and place of residence. This selection process was carried out using an open-source algorithm that has been used to select participants for more than 40 citizens' assemblies around the world (Flanigan et al. 2021).

The citizens' assembly was organised over two weekends. During the first weekend (16–17 September), experts on different areas of climate change gave factual presentations to the assembly members about climate change and its effects. The presentation topics covered the meaning of climate change, opportunities to reduce household emissions, transport and climate, and social adaptation (see Table 8.1). Assembly members also had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with more radical perspectives as stakeholders (e.g. activists from *Fridays for Future*) participated in a roundtable discussion. During the first weekend, the assembly members worked in small groups, assisted by trained facilitators, in continuous collaboration.

Table 8.1: Budapest Citizens' Assembly on Climate Policy: Topics, meetings and outputs

Topic	Meeting and Discussion	Output (and % of support by assembly members)
Climate change Energy use of households	1.5 h	Recommendation: Media campaign on climate change (90%)
	1.5 h	Recommendation: Development of energy conservation programs for buildings (94%)
Transport and climate change Health and climate change	1.5 h	Recommendations: Development of public transport (91%) Restriction of downtown car traffic (88%)
	1.5 h	–
	1.5 h	Recommendation: Projects for better use of rainwater (85%)
Sustainable rainwater management Green surfaces Social adaptation	1.5 h	Recommendation: Increase in green surfaces (94%)
	1.5 h	Recommendation: Construction of climate-friendly experimental streets (90%) Measures to stop climate-damaging projects (75%)
Visions about the future of Budapest	2 h	–

Notes: The report was sent to the City Council on 11 November 2020. The draft strategy on Climate Change of the City Council (published in January 2021) accepted all proposals and included them in the text. The final document was accepted in March 2021.

During the second weekend (September 26–27), assembly members developed 21 proposals for how the Municipality of Budapest should respond to the climate emergency. The proposals considered the best were discussed in detail on the fourth day. Finally, members of the assembly weighed the pros and cons associated with eight proposals, identified other considerations, and voted on the extent to which they supported the recommendations. The assembly did not have a social media account to enable media coverage. Reports about the assembly were posted on the municipality's and the Mayor of Budapest's accounts, and press releases were also sent out by these two entities.

4 Data and methods

Our research is exploratory: the goal is to describe phenomena and unveil relations between them (Stebbins 2001). In order to answer the research questions, we used several datasets comprising quantitative and qualitative data as part of a mixed methods research design (see Escobar and Thompson 2019). First, the political attitudes of the assembly members before and after the event were surveyed. The survey questionnaire included items concerning political interest, trust in political actors, political participation, opinions about climate change and environmental policy, measures of political efficacy, and populist attitudes. The response rate was 39%. The basic goal of the survey conducted by DemNet, the coordinating NGO of the assembly and two academic partners (the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences and Corvinus University of Budapest) was to understand how the experiences of the climate assembly affected the way of thinking of the participants.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with politicians and experts involved in the process: the Mayor of Budapest, the Deputy Mayor, an advisor to the Mayor, one city councillor in charge of the process, the main organiser from the NGO in charge, and one facilitator. These individuals represented information-rich sources in relation to the research aims (Braun and Clarke 2018, 85). The face-to-face interviews were conducted from June to October 2020. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using NVivo software. We employed data-driven thematic analysis, a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, because of its flexibility and advantages in highlighting similarities and differences across the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006, 97).

Data on media coverage was also collected. Media monitoring was commissioned by the assembly's organisers between August and October 2020. The content analysis focused on narratives about the event. We analysed how public service news programmes captured the complexity of the event and presented different interpretations. During the analysis, key messages were identified, with a particular focus on regularly repeated messages.

To understand how the illiberal political context influenced the organisation of the citizens' assembly, we undertook document analysis focusing on election manifestos

used in the 2019 municipal elections, climate-related policy documents (e.g. the draft of the climate strategies of Budapest), and documents that were circulated to invite citizens to take part in the process. We then added a comparative component to the analysis (Boswell et al. 2021) by using the reports on Climate Assembly UK (2020) and the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland (Elstub et al. 2022). Finally, one of the authors (Oross) was present at the assembly and gathered fieldnotes and personal impressions about it.

5 Findings

This section provides empirical analysis of the climate assembly with regard to policy impact, media coverage, and impact on assembly members.

5.1 Impact on policy

We evaluate the impact of the climate assembly on policy from two different angles. First, we look at the content of the specific policy recommendations that the assembly produced and assess the originality and radicality of the proposals in relation to addressing climate change. Our expectation was that, in an illiberal context where environmental issues have been systematically neglected, the recommendations would not reflect very radical viewpoints and would be coherent with mainstream green policies. Second, we look at the direct impact of the recommendations and how they have been integrated into the city's policies.

Table 8.1 lists the recommendations adopted by the assembly and the share of support for them. One of the most popular policy recommendations among assembly members was improving the energy efficiency of buildings by providing grants, loans, and support for project development. With this policy option, citizens aimed to improve air quality, make homes more comfortable and valuable, and reduce their overheads. According to citizens, the renovated houses could be recognised with a diploma or plaque. Another favoured policy recommendation was to increase green surfaces to protect against urban overheating and increase rainwater drainage and greenhouse gas sequestration, thereby also creating a better living environment (e.g. through noise protection and dust binding). To achieve these goals, assembly members mentioned solutions such as transforming parking spaces into green spaces, planting trees, creating green walls and green roofs, greening inner courtyards, greening tram rails, running plants on house walls and putting pots and flower boxes on walls, and greening unused parts of roads and bus stops.

Our assessment was that these recommendations did not represent very radical or original ideas compared to the 'business as usual' of environmental protection, nor required sacrifices or radical behavioural changes from citizens. The recommendations instead propose projects that would create direct and short-term benefits to people.

While there is nothing wrong with adopting ‘win-win’ solutions in environmental policy, one may wonder whether proposals of this kind really address the challenge of climate change and whether it was worth convening a climate assembly to reach those conclusions.

Apart from the content of the recommendations, the direct policy impact is crucial: how effectively have the recommendations been integrated into the City’s policy plans and implemented in the two years following the assembly? When talking about the impact of the process, a representative of the City’s Department of Climate and Environment explained that it confirmed her conviction that it is worth talking about climate change as people come to understand the challenges, and that the climate assembly had been effective in translating the messages of “engineers” and experts into everyday language. Regarding the impacts, she emphasised that “I was primarily interested in the output of the event ... in fact, I was there as a user who wants to use the results from this and incorporate them into decision-making”. It was underlined that the recommendations have helped policy advisors convince politicians about the most important measures that need to be taken. This should be seen as a direct political accomplishment of the assembly. While it may not have reached and influenced the wider public (due to the poor media coverage of the event), it helped in policy formulation and in the work of experts from the City Council.

The City Council took into account the recommendations of the climate assembly: the Climate Strategy mentions the recommendations, referring to how parts of the Strategy are linked to assembly proposals. A chapter deals with attitude formation and the population’s involvement in decision-making, and contains several sub-goals related to these aims. Again, this was probably the effect of the climate assembly: participatory governance is now taken for granted. This was also stressed by the Mayor:

The logic of participation is that it is insatiable. When you open a door, people come in through it, and then they don’t want to go out anymore. This is why participation should only be expanded continually, which is why I think we need to proceed using careful steps.

The Strategy describes the recommendations and the order of the goals is almost the same, although it does not describe the recommendations according to support by assembly members and puts the objective of reducing downtown traffic before increasing green spaces. However, several objectives in the Strategy are not associated with concrete measures for implementation (for example, specifying the amount of resources intended for development) but merely repeat what was described in the previous Strategy for the city and list the scope of action and opportunities of the capital. Our overall assessment is that the recommendations were integrated into the City Council’s Climate Strategy, but instead of revolutionising it, they led to only piecemeal improvements. A major problem with the Strategy is that its implementation has not been prepared and planned. This lack of attention to implementation is a general feature of policymaking in Hungary.

5.2 Media coverage

One important topic when analysing the external dimensions of a climate assembly is the mediatisation of the event. There are several ways organisers can give insights into the process to the public: for example, the Citizens’ Assembly of Scotland had a ‘convener’, a person whom the media could identify as a public figure for the assembly, while organisers also shared stories about members’ experiences that were covered by local media (Elstubb et al. 2022, 63–68). The organisers of the Budapest assembly were aware of the results of the British cases. In an interview we conducted, the Advisor on Citizen Participation was rather satisfied concerning the impact of the City’s communication:

I think the bigger impact of the event is actually the way it appears in the news. We published news statements right after the event, and I saw it today in one of the papers, and I was really impressed, because those were exactly the messages I wanted to see about climate change.

In order to see how effective organisers were in this regard, we collected details about media appearances that reported on the assembly (see Table 8.2).

Table 8.2: Media coverage of the Budapest climate assembly

Type of media	Items of news/articles (n)	Positive/neutral/negative tone
National newspaper	1	neutral
Commercial television	2	neutral
Radio channel	3	neutral
Blogpost	2	neutral, negative
Online portal	7	neutral

Due to the state-controlled nature of public media in Hungary, organisers could not reach out to the national public television or radio; therefore, these channels did not broadcast any news about the event. One national newspaper published an article interviewing politicians, organisers, and participants. There were reports on national commercial television broadcasts: one report was in the daily news, and one morning talk show involved a discussion with the organisers. Based on this evidence, the organisers were not particularly successful in spreading their message in traditional media. The picture is a little bit brighter when we consider online media outlets. One voluminous analysis appeared on a thematic blog, and one right-wing pro-government blog criticised the process. Seven online portals reported about the event, covering right-wing, liberal, green, and left-wing ideological approaches and the economic perspective.

We conclude that the media coverage was relatively meagre, especially if we consider that this was the first climate assembly in Hungary. Previously, deliberative proc-

esses have been used only on a few occasions in Hungary and exclusively with local development projects or plans of a much smaller scope. Here, the goal was to propose policy recommendations for the capital city of Hungary, with some 1.7 million inhabitants. Given the project's ambition and nature, we can safely state that more media interest could have been expected. First, no national broadcasting channel, television or radio, provided substantial coverage of the event. This is hardly surprising, given the tight political control of public broadcasting in illiberal Hungary and the fact that the climate assembly was organised by the City of Budapest and its Mayor, Gergely Karácsony –the most significant political adversary of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party. Second, only two television broadcasters reported on the event – although one of them (RTL Klub) broadcasts nationwide. At the time of this report, it was the most-watched TV channel in Hungary. Finally, only one newspaper and only one local radio station reported about the event, which should be seen as truly disappointing by the organisers.

It is striking that only independent media or media related to the opposition covered the assembly. On the 'right', we could identify only one blog post, which was overtly critical of the initiative. The whole media universe close to the government was silent about the process. This is due to the effect of illiberal politics, where the majority of the media strictly follows the government's agenda and does not allow dissident voices to be heard. This behaviour can be partly explained by voluntary compliance, but many sources of evidence point to the fact that the government and the Fidesz party, in fact, directly steer the media close to them (Polyák et al. 2020).

5.3 Impact on assembly members

We expected that the illiberal political context would undermine the event's legitimacy, which would be reflected in increased difficulty recruiting participants. We also speculated that citizens' weak trust in political institutions and participatory governance would undermine their willingness to participate enthusiastically and seriously, which could have affected the overall quality of the assembly.

Regarding recruitment, the proportion of those registering for the climate assembly (3.3%) is in line with international experience, which reports figures of between 3% and 5% (Flanigan et al. 2021). Organisers put much effort into helping the 10,000 citizens who were invited to apply: during the registration process, permanent in-person, online, and telephone assistance was provided. Further, assembly members were offered 50 euros as an incentive to participate. Even so, the dropout rate (22%) may be considered relatively large as only 39 citizens showed up from the selected 50; this can be considered a sign that they shied away from participating.

Regarding the assembly members' behaviour during the event, our expectation concerning their reserved and distrustful attitude was not supported by the unfolding of the climate assembly. Our observation was that during the event participants were

active, enthusiastic, and constructive. This is supported by the opinion of the Advisor to the Mayor of Budapest on Citizen Participation:

People left the room saying, “I actually did not know about this, you should do much more communication and education about climate change”, and it is not like no one is doing anything right. It is just the way the world works, and you never really stop thinking about these issues, and you [citizens] never really have the chance to talk to experts, and ask questions, above all.

Our survey data indicates that participants perceived the event as successful in terms of the provision of evidence and learning. The surveys shed light on the positive effect of deliberation on participants’ knowledge about climate change, the reasons why Budapest had declared a climate emergency, and the City’s Climate Strategy, as participants felt more informed about these issues after the assembly (see Figure 8.1).

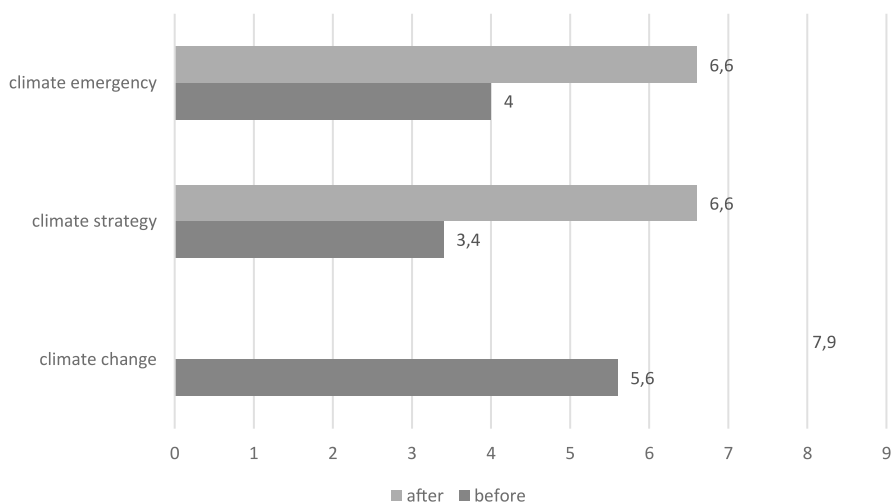


Figure 8.1. Self-reported knowledge in the Budapest climate assembly.

Question: How informed do you feel about ... (n=19, 1–10 scale, mean values, $p \leq 0.05$)

Assembly members expressed outstanding satisfaction with the deliberative quality of the process, awarding scores of around 9 out of 10 in all of the relevant dimensions. Participants felt that they had an equal opportunity to speak and participate in the discussion and that the participants had listened to each other. In these two dimensions, the average opinion was remarkably positive (in both cases, 9.8 out of a maximum of 10 points), and the participants’ opinions did not vary much. The openness and compassion of the participants was also highly valued and agreed upon. In contrast, access to information about ideas showed greater variance, with some dissatisfaction, but overall, the average response rate was also positive (8 out of 10). A simple explanation might be that the event was well-organised and achieved its objective of creating a de-

liberative space. However, these outstanding satisfaction levels may also be linked to a kind of ‘aha!’ moment that participants experienced. Our assumption is that the illiberal political context made the deliberative exercise especially memorable to participants. If this is so, it suggests that the culture of illiberal and populist politics is not endemic in Hungary and that further deliberative and participative opportunities may play a role in changing it.

Participants’ satisfaction with the event is also reflected in their high level of agreement with the proposed recommendations. According to our data, participants supported the proposals to a very strong extent.

6 Discussion and conclusions

We assumed that the unfavourable conditions engendered by the illiberal political context would affect the organisation, development, and social and political impact of the Budapest climate assembly. We studied these effects according to three external and one internal dimensions: broader social impact measured through the media coverage of the event; the policy impact measured through the quality of policy recommendations, as well as the openness of the City Council to integrate and implement them; and the attitudes of the assembly members measured through a before-and-after survey. All in all, we conclude that climate assemblies may be effective tools for revitalising democracy in an unfavourable, illiberal political context to only a limited extent.

Regarding external dimensions, we found evidence that the illiberal political context influenced the organisation and success of the assembly. In the case of the recruitment process, the 3.3% proportion of those registering for the process did not support our initial expectation that participants might shy away due to the central government’s opposition to politically meaningful local initiatives. However, the last-minute dropout rate (22%) can be considered a sign of reluctance to participate. Civil society organisations had effective avenues for promoting citizens’ engagement in decision-making, as the Municipality of Budapest was responsive to civil society initiatives. This is particularly relevant regarding a salient topic like climate change that affects future generations. Concerning how the climate assembly would be mediated (media coverage), we expected this to be very poor both before and after the event. In line with our expectations, only independent media or media related to the opposition covered the process, while the whole media universe close to the government was silent (no public broadcasting television or radio channels covered it). The lack of interest from this part of the Hungarian media was unlikely to be accidental. It may be explained by the fact that the climate assembly was organised by the municipality of Budapest and led by opposition parties. It is an open question how much the very topic of climate change added to this silence. Since the Hungarian government is somewhat reserved about environmental issues, to say the least, we may speculate that the green focus of the mini-public further motivated pro-governmental media to neglect it. In any case, the fact that only two television stations, one newspaper, and one local radio sta-

tion covered the event was disappointing for the organisers. These problems of media coverage clearly hinder the efficiency of climate assemblies at revitalising democracy and addressing climate change in an illiberal political context.

As for the impact of the event in terms of climate governance, our expectation that the policy recommendations would not be too radical was fulfilled. The recommendations of the event do not represent original ideas compared to the ‘business as usual’ of environmental protection, and they do not require sacrifices or radical behavioural changes from citizens. This might be partly explained by the unfavourable illiberal political context of Hungary, in which policy debates in general, and environmental and climate policy debates in particular, have faded away over the past decade. However, the event had direct political benefit as it helped with policy formulation and the work of the experts inside the City Council. Contrary to our expectations, those citizens who decided to participate did not express suspicion or reservations regarding the internal dimensions of the process. Instead, both the organisers’ experiences and the survey results about the event’s quality and success indicate the positive effect of deliberation on assembly members’ climate change attitudes, suggesting that the culture of illiberal and populist politics is not endemic regarding climate governance.

Our findings are based on one case study, and due to the absence of research in this area, the study is exploratory. Therefore, further mixed methods research (Escobar and Thompson 2019) should bring more empirical evidence on this vital topic and is clearly required. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to determine whether the above-described impacts of the Hungarian illiberal political context are general characteristics of climate assemblies convened in unfavourable political contexts. Future research could critically assess climate assemblies in such contexts – for example, in Poland, where the first nationwide citizens’ assembly on energy costs was convened by an NGO without government participation (Brzozowska et al. 2022) – and create typologies to distinguish them better.

The somewhat disappointing findings about the overall effects of the climate assembly should not imply that organising such processes in illiberal contexts is futile. In such an environment, some factors should probably be paid even more attention by organisers than in liberal democratic contexts. For instance, the supporting institutional and political coalition behind such assemblies is of greater importance because state institutions and governmental actors tend to be hostile to these types of initiative. Also, more emphasis should be paid to communicating about the event before and after, relying on social media, the internet, and other communication channels independent of the government. Our analysis revealed some promising phenomena even under the constraints of an unfavourable political macro-context, such as citizens’ satisfaction with the event. We speculate² that illiberal politics makes people hungry for

² Unfortunately, for data protection reasons, we are not allowed to recontact the assembly members to survey the possibly long-lasting positive effects of participating in the first Hungarian climate assembly. However, we would like very much to believe that such a survey would indeed provide further support for our speculation on the democratic potential of such mini-publics under illiberal circumstances.

true democratic experiences. In this sense, it may be that the effects of the climate assembly were more favourable than they appear at first sight, but these effects are more indirect. They are linked to the positive lived experience of being part of a democratic initiative of this kind.

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