

# National citizens' dialogue

Citizens want to be heard



So much divides us in Poland every day. Different political or world views are currently an obstacle to discussion, dialogue and consensus. They are also a barrier to gaining broad social acceptance of political decisions.



But do Poles even expect to be involved in making important decisions?

YES!

**83%**

of those asked believe that politicians should seek the opinions of ordinary people more often when important decisions are being made \*



Do ordinary people believe that despite differences, conversation is possible?

**75%**

of those asked believe that ordinary people are able to come to agreement despite having different views \*



This makes sense!

**78%**

of Poles believe that certain processes [such as citizens' assembly], could contribute to reducing social tensions in Poland \*

**88%**

of people think that the results of such assemblies should be taken into account by politicians when decisions are being made \*

**79%**

of those asked would be willing to participate [in citizens' assembly] if selected \*



\* The study was conducted in March 2023 by Ipsos, commissioned by More in Common Polska and the Shipyard Foundation, N=1000

This booklet will tell you what the National citizens' dialogue is all about. You will find out about its main principles and see that a different way of making decisions is possible.



## A few words of introduction...

*Increasingly, what unites different groups of Poles is not what they want, but rather whom they jointly dislike or even hate. It is impossible to build anything on this. No hope can be derived from this other than the hope of retribution, or perhaps even revenge. This is not the kind of hope that is needed in Poland today. (...) Based on the experience of my own (and not only my own) successes and failures, I have come to the decision that a new, different idea of democracy is needed – that a systematic, long-term, productive, as participatory process as possible is needed to get us out of this trap.*

**"A different idea for democracy" >** (WIEŻ Laboratory, KIG Social Dialogue Committee, Shipyard Foundation, Warsaw 2021)

This booklet presents this different idea of democracy: one that includes citizens and gives them agency in decision-making, which is sensitive to diverse needs and focuses on education, dialogue and quality decisions on socially important issues.

The idea is mainly based on a grassroots, innovative project conducted by the Shipyard Foundation in 2022 called the "National citizens' council on energy costs". Its aim was to reflect on solutions to the problem of energy poverty affecting one in ten Polish families and, more broadly, on issues of soaring energy prices. This national process combined two successive elements – local councils and a national citizens' assembly. Never before in Poland has there been such an extensive, sequential participatory process or a citizens' assembly conducted on a national scale.

We believe in looking for other ways to have good dialogue between citizens and authorities – especially now, when there are so many issues requiring discussion and so little common space where everyone feels comfortable. Poland, like many other places, has become tribal – we have lost the ability to listen to each other and respect each other. The model of National citizens' dialogue described in this brochure has enormous depolarising potential, because it establishes the conditions for good discussions across divides, something that is sorely lacking now.

We are experimenting and looking at what is happening in the world. Citizens' assemblies are one of the more pronounced trends. At their core is the inclusion of all citizens (including those who do not usually vote) in formulating opinions and verdicts on important public issues. Perhaps the authorities now constituting themselves in our country will follow this worthwhile trend. This is what I wish for myself, but especially for all citizens and Poland.

Kuba Wygnański  
Shipyard Foundation




**See what steps are needed to implement such a process in Poland. Read on to find out more!** 

## Where do we start?


A National citizens' dialogue model involves a wide variety of stakeholders, including hundreds of citizens, dozens of experts, people from local government and activist groups, as well as the media. Such a process requires solid preparation. **See, what do we need to pay attention to at the beginning of the process?**





 **A good and important topic:** looking for an issue that is complicated and at the same time important for a significant part of society, for which socially acceptable solutions will be sought, worked out jointly by citizens and government representatives. It's important to determine the extent to which the issue is recognised and what its main narrative is in order to make sure that it really resonates in society.

There are multiple issues of great importance in Poland arousing high emotions and divisions, requiring time for reflection and expert knowledge, such as the retirement age, abortion, education or health system reforms, support for children and youth in mental health crisis.

 **Determine the political will to change and implement solutions:** a good, important issue should be followed by the certainty of political support and the identification of key decision-makers who can implement the solutions developed by citizens. The closer they are to the process and the more open they are to it, the better.

 **Resources:** in order to implement the process, you need financial resources, staff, capacity, a good team at your side and the aforementioned interest of decision-makers, as well as, where possible, their organisational support (they are very often the main organiser of the undertaking). Remember, such a process is a long and intensive endeavour – you need to take this into account when planning resources.

 **A good team of experts and allies:** the process must include a group of experts (by definition, the undertaking should be based on facts, knowledge), representatives of public institutions and ministries responsible for the issue being consulted, community organisations, people observing the methodology of the process, activists, local government representatives, as well as recognizable partners who give the process credibility.

 **A solid information campaign:** communication and promotion are integral elements of the process. It is necessary to ensure a communication strategy that includes from the beginning a clearly communicated purpose of the process and reliable and transparent information about both the process and its subject, to develop a website and guarantee visibility on social media, to prepare clear information materials about the issue and the process and maintain ongoing contact with journalists. An official kick-off is also important, which, if properly prepared, will build interest and set the tone for the entire process.

**The National citizens' dialogue, which we tested and want to promote, involves two stages:**

**1. Numerous, decentralised but coordinated local councils,** engaging a wide and diverse group of residents and other stakeholders in the conversation.

**2. A national citizens' assembly,** involving a representative group of citizens in providing their opinions and developing a set of recommendations.





## Local councils

... that is, dialogues available to everyone across the country



### What do they consist of?

The premise of this stage of the process is to implement dialogue-oriented meetings with the support of grassroots organisers that are:

-  a few hours long,
-  local,
-  conducted in as many locations as possible throughout the country,
-  based on a scenario that is simple to replicate.

**The National citizens' dialogue** organiser has to prepare all the materials needed to promote, conduct and summarise the councils, and to encourage local organisers to conduct such meetings themselves.

### Who can organise a local council?

Local governments, non-governmental organisations, experts, social organisations, community organisations, parishes, libraries, volunteer fire brigades, schools, senior citizen councils, rural women's associations, local leaders, activists, and even individuals ready to invite participants to their homes. So potentially – every one of us! The councils should be as accessible as possible – both in terms of their organisation as well as participation.

### What do the local councils provide?

#### Reaching a broad range of citizens

By relying on local partners to conduct the meetings, the issue raised has a chance to become widely known in the consciousness of a large number of citizens in every corner of the country, and thus become an important topic in the national debate. The conclusions of the local councils are collected and summarised at the national level.

#### A diagnosis of local problems and needs

The consultations can help diagnose, in all their diversity, the problems and needs of local municipalities, or even smaller communities. They can indicate basic and simple directions for solutions, visible on a local scale.

45

local councils held  
in all of Poland



The "Civic council on energy costs" organized by the Shipyard Foundation, brought together more than **700 people** at **45 local councils**. [Learn more >](#) on how these meetings looked like and read about their organization [here >](#).

**See >** also the "Civic council on education" that we organised in 2019, which included over **4000 participants in 150 meetings!**

## Between local councils and the citizens' assembly.

The next step after the local councils is the national citizens' assembly. The sequential occurrence of these two elements provides an opportunity for the assembly to address the problems and challenges identified by residents in the first stage of the process. Therefore, a good summary of the councils is important – it helps refine the scenario of the citizens' assembly. **The local and national processes can, and should, complement each other!**

## The national citizens' assembly




### ... a several-day long, in-depth co-decision process for a representative group of citizens

#### What does it consist of?

At this stage, roughly 100 male and female citizens, selected from a draw, are brought into the process. They devote their time to **learning about the issue in depth, dialoguing and forming an opinion**, meaning a social “verdict”.



The citizens' assembly meetings consist of three components:

-  in the educational part of the assembly, **citizens learn and are given the facts**. They listen to people who specialize in the assembly's topic, whose role is to introduce them to the challenges discussed and present possible solutions;
-  in the deliberative part of the assembly, they **discuss and exchange arguments** concerning the solutions they have learned about under the guidance of professional moderators;
-  at the end, they **make a decision**, that is a verdict on directional or specific solutions to the process topic.

#### What does a citizens' assembly provide?

The strength of the assembly is the presence of a group of “ordinary” yet diverse citizens, as in ancient Greece or on an American jury. In the assembly **the group is randomly drawn and representative** – so that it matches the socio-demographic characteristics of the population such as age, sex and place of residence. What matters at this stage is a qualitative discussion in a diverse group.

*We come from different areas of Poland; we are of different ages; we are involved in different issues in our day-to-day lives and have different views and experiences. Had it not been for the National citizens' assembly on energy costs, our paths would probably never have crossed. And yet, as a group of randomly selected Poles, as diverse as our society is, we have come together to look for ways to counter energy poverty in Poland.*

Excerpt from the preamble “Voice of the assembly's participants”  
from the **Summary** > of the Civic council on energy costs

**The citizens' assembly provides time for in-depth reflection.** Meetings last from several to up to a dozen days, spread over as many as several months.

Thanks to the participation of the politicians, **who set the framework for implementing the solutions that have been worked out (e.g., legislative, legal or financial)**, there is a chance to develop tailor-made decisions. Importantly, **the verdict of the participants developed in the form of an assembly can gain more public support** than the same decision made by politicians alone.

**See >** how the first national citizens' assembly looked and how diverse was the participating group.





## Summary of the process and next steps

### Summary

The conclusion of such a project needs to be celebrated. There can be many ways of doing this, but the key ones are:

- 📁 preparing a report containing an accessible description of the conclusions of the process,
- 👏 organising a wrap-up event, as widely publicised as possible and accessible to the media. It is essential that decision-makers are present to comment on the verdict or even to present a preliminary plan for its implementation. In order to build consensus for the verdict's implementation, it is worth ensuring that the entire political spectrum is invited. The presence of the citizens who participated in the process is also valuable.

### What can be done after the involvement of citizens is completed?

- 🗺️ **Prepare a roadmap to implement the verdict**, with a timetable and division of tasks
- 🔄 **Establish the cross-sectoral cooperation** necessary to effectively implement the verdict
- 🔍 **Monitor implementation of the verdict in an ongoing manner**
- 📖 **Disseminate information about the verdict, advocate on its behalf**, including from the bottom up, which can involve organisers, partners, stakeholders, participants and experts.
- 🗳️ **Referendum?** People are still talking about the sense of this mechanism. We see the potential use of the referendum as a next step after consideration by citizens, for example, when certain legislative changes are needed. However, we maintain that future referendums should be organized as part of a broader process of dialogue between citizens and the authorities, which will include elements of deliberative democracy.



You can see how the results of the Civic council on energy costs were summarised by [experts](#) and [politicians](#) participating in wrap-up event.

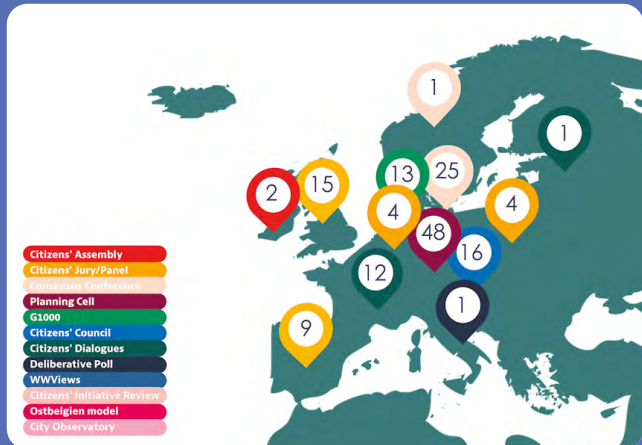


## Why is it worth it?

### It's a new trend in Europe

Increasingly more countries and institutions are following this path! According to OECD 2021 data, over 500 instances of government use of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative methods (i.e., emphasizing education and in-depth conversation among a randomly drawn group of people) have been identified over the past 20 years in member countries.

[Source >](#)



The formula of the citizens' assembly has been successfully used for many years (in countries including the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, France and Ireland). In Poland, citizens' assemblies have so far been used twelve times in cities (including Gdansk, Krakow, Lublin, Lodz, Poznan, Rzeszow, Warsaw and Wroclaw) and once at the national level. The Shipyard Foundation was involved in five of these processes.



### It's part of the way laws are made in the European Union

*[Citizens' assemblies]... should become part of the way we make policy. This is why I will propose that, in the future, we give citizens' panels the time and resources to make recommendations before we present key legislative proposals. Because I am convinced that democracy does not end with elections, conferences or conventions. It needs to be worked on, nurtured and improved every day – Ursula von der Leyen at the closing of the Conference on the Future of Europe, Strasbourg 2022 (see the source >).*

### See how many assemblies have been conducted in Europe only on climate issues:



[Source >](#)

### This can be a tool to strengthen democracy!

This trend is followed by the belief that an effective, better way of discussion is possible. That citizens, under the right conditions, can cross the lines that divide their views. That a longer process of learning, reflection and dialogue makes it possible to support the authorities in making difficult yet important decisions.

Methods such as the one described in this booklet allow those in power to hear the public's opinion on a given issue. And – equally important – they can change attitudes, restore faith in democracy and trust in public institutions.

## Make discussion possible in a world where this seems to be increasingly difficult

If you have made the decision to organise the next National citizens' dialogue, congratulations! You will certainly appreciate its outcome, as well as the meeting and conversation of citizens you will witness. More importantly, they will appreciate it too!

*The Polish Citizens' Assembly on Energy Costs was innovative in the way that it integrated broader public dialogue on the topic [through the organisation of the local councils] before the Assembly took place. This enabled the voices from various communities across Poland to feed into the Assembly process, in particular helping to set the agenda for the deliberations that followed. We have much to learn from our Polish colleagues.*

**Graham Smith, University of Westminster, Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies** > (international network for sharing knowledge on citizens' assemblies).



*The increasing divisiveness, growing inequalities, and the deepening gap between citizens and politicians continually weaken social cohesion. It has never been more crucial to engage in collective action and redefine what citizen participation means to us.*

*The Nationwide Citizens' Assembly on Energy Costs in Poland and other citizens' assemblies in the CEE region have proven that when the right forum is provided, citizens are not afraid to cooperate in solving some of our greatest challenges and approach resolving significant dilemmas wisely. Not building on this is a luxury we cannot afford.*



**Éva Bördős, DemNet** > (Hungarian organisation involved in citizen participation)



At the Shipyard Foundation, we have been creating and supporting effective solutions to social challenges, involving citizens in deciding on public matters and helping organizations and local governments to plan and implement social activities for over 14 years. We develop and disseminate good practices, create tools to simplify facilitation of social activities, conduct social research, train and develop educational materials.

The effects of our activities are used by e.g. senior citizens, students and teachers, local communities, activists and local government officials from all over Poland. We believe that the best decisions result from open dialogue. That is why we strive to create opportunities for everyone to participate in discussions on issues that are important to them and to influence decisions. The activities we have carried out include public hearings on the National Recovery Plan, civic councils on education and citizens' assemblies in Warsaw, Lublin and Rzeszów, as well as the first national citizens' assembly in the country.



This is not a publication that will answer all the questions about organising the **National citizens' dialogue**, but it will present a way of thinking, actions and its most important elements. A detailed step-by-step guide is available at [www.stocznia.org.pl](http://www.stocznia.org.pl).

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