

# AN ATTEMPT TO ENCOURAGE AND INSTITUTIONALIZE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN MISKOLC BETWEEN 2019–2024\*

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## Introduction

In Miskolc, during the 2019–2024 municipal election term, the winning coalition sought to enhance public participation. To this end, an 'Office of Participation' (Részvételi iroda) was established, led by the officer of citizen participation (állampolgári részvételi referens) of the municipality, and the 'Citizen participation principles' (Állampolgári részvételi koncepció) of Miskolc was elaborated with the involvement of civil society organizations active in the city, which was unanimously adopted by the general assembly.

Over the past five years, various participatory and deliberative techniques have been tested, and specific departments and actors within the local government have begun to learn about citizen participation, its advantages, and challenges. The purpose of this study is to introduce and analyze this period, aiming to answer the question of how and with what results the participation directives of Miskolc were implemented.

The sources of this study include semi-structured interviews with the officer in charge of citizen participation, the chief architect, and the current and former presidents of the Dialog Association, as well as my own experience as a participant observer. I moderated discussions in the case of the 'Review of the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy,' the 'More Than Green Conference' and the series of 'Urban evenings'; I was a member of the jury at the first social hackathon and a member of one of the teams at the second; I participated in the planning and preparation of the 'Urban evenings,' I compiled and evaluated questionnaires



in consultation with the local government, and conducted interviews with experts on the topics related to the Urban evenings<sup>1</sup>.

In the introductory part of the study, I clarify the concepts of public participation, representative, participatory, and deliberative democracy, as well as their relationships to each other and the types of democratic innovations. After that, I will summarize the legislative background and domestic situation of citizen participation in Hungary; then, I will describe the structure for public participation in Miskolc, its Citizen participation principles, the applied methods of involvement, and the results of their application; as well as the first steps taken in order to incorporate principles of citizen participation into the operation of the municipality.

## Democratic innovations and public participation

Prosperity, educational revolution, and improved access to political information collectively contributed to increased political awareness among citizens, more vigorous mobilization, and a higher degree of public participation. Some citizens in Western societies have become increasingly skeptical of democracy, have distanced themselves from political parties, and have less trust in political leaders, the government, and parliament (Newton 2012). A significant problem is the phenomenon of the democratic deficit, characterized by a substantial proportion of passive citizens whose political activity is limited to casting their votes or not participating at all.

Dissatisfaction with the functioning of democratic systems led to the development of new solutions (Newton 2012). Since the 1960s, unconventional forms of protest have emerged, including the occupation of public spaces, performances, social forums, and flash mobs (Tarrow 2011), alongside the spread of democratic innovations. In the simplest terms, democratic innovation refers to the process of enhancing the quality of democratic governance. This is a simplification and a common element of the definitions created by Newton (2012) and Elstub–Escobar (2019), but it expresses the essence of the concept.

Depending on the source of the shortcomings in democratic systems, there may be different ways to remedy them. Some of the problems stem from the fact that citizens are often uninformed, apathetic, and susceptible to being misled. In these cases, educating, informing, and encouraging citizens to take a more active role is the solution with bottom-up innovations, which Newton (2012) classifies as follows:

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1 The interviews were: a local patriotic entrepreneur, a landscape architect, the head of the Miskolc baths, the chief engineer of Miskolc Tourism Ltd., an engineer dealing with bath development and bath investment, the manager of Miskolc Tourism Marketing Nonprofit Public Benefit Ltd., the director of the city transport company (MVK Zrt), the director of the city's museum, the president of the Association for Miskolc with Bicycle, the director of the Miskolc Cultural Center.



1. Reforms of elections and voting procedures: reducing the voting age, universal citizenship, race-conscious re-districting, making voting registration easier, early, electronic and postal voting, compulsory voting, etc. (Newton 2012).
2. Informing citizens, consultation, deliberation: deliberative forums, consensus conferences, planning cells, scenario workshops, study circles, electronic notice boards, democratic kiosks, civics, and citizenship courses, citizenship mentors, citizens panels, juries, panel and focus groups, deliberative polling, etc. (Newton 2012) In Miskolc, the series of „Urban evenings“ and the related preparatory work can be put into this type.
3. Co-governance, i.e., the involvement of citizens in decision-making and implementation: participatory budgeting, citizen assemblies, neighborhood development, village and community councils, community policing experiments, health, education, and planning boards (Newton 2012). Among the tools applied in Miskolc, community planning was a method of co-governance.
4. Utilizing the tools of direct democracy, including referendums, initiatives, recalls, town meetings, and forms of co-governance that grant citizens real decision-making powers (Newton 2012). In Miskolc, the participatory budget and citizens' assembly were implemented for this form.
5. E-democracy: online versions of traditional forms, including e-elections, e-petitions, online polls, and electronic means of finding others with similar political agendas, contacting others, and promoting everyday actions (Newton 2012). In Miskolc, online public opinion polls were used as part of each process, and an interactive website supported the participation program. In this latter, there was a possibility for comments, submitting ideas for the participatory budget, and voting online.

When problems arise with politicians, political procedures, and institutions, increasing transparency and accountability can lead to more effective outcomes. These goals are served by top-down, constitutional, governmental innovations, which either refine the operations of classical institutions with increasing vertical accountability or increase horizontal accountability by strengthening the operation of checks and balances (Newton 2012).

Some refer to participatory democracy as a deliberative, direct, or strong democracy (e.g., Pataki 2007), suggesting that there is some confusion in the use of these terms. Regarding the types of democracy and their relationship to each other, I consider the grouping and definitions of Oross (2020) to be suitable, according to which indirect/representative democracy means that public policy decisions are made by representatives elected by citizens and the institutions of direct/participatory and deliberative democracy aim to remedy the weaknesses of representative democracy. Direct/participatory democracy means the direct participation of citizens in the operation of social institutions, including workplaces, media, and public administration. In deliberative democracy, public discussions play a crucial role in the decision-making process, as they are connected to those who are directly affected by the decisions.



The actual decision-making power of citizens does not necessarily characterize deliberative methods, and discussions do not always accompany the institutions of direct democracy (Oross 2020).

Public participation, in its narrower sense, refers to the involvement of individuals in the institutions that operate democracies, including voting, contacting a political representative, participating in protest campaigns, lobbying, and attending consultations<sup>2</sup>. In a broader sense, public participation involves citizens and their communities assuming responsibility for the processes that occur in their immediate and broader environment and being involved in shaping various social and economic matters (a slight modification of Nárái–Reisinger's 2016 definition). The adjective 'citizen' was chosen instead of 'public' as the name of the participation program in Miskolc, as it adopted a broader sense of 'public' in terms of content and approach, aiming to encourage and support it.

## Democracy, democratic innovations, and social participation in Hungary

A low level of political interest characterizes Hungarian society as a whole, with fluctuating political participation and low trust in political institutions. All of these (and not independently of them) are accompanied by a highly materialistic value system, low levels of general trust, solidarity, and tolerance, as well as a low tendency to take risks. (Havasi 2022a) Csizmadia (2014) refers to the Hungarian society as one that lacks foundation, as a result of which democracy grinds to a halt, stiffens, and loses its ability to renew itself. The cohesion of citizens and a well-functioning system of citizenship education should serve as a foundation.

Hungary's political system is based on the primacy of representative democracy; the role of direct and participatory democratic institutions is supplementary to this. Legislation enacted since the change of regime has created the basic legal framework for public participation (Jávor–Beke 2012). The Hungarian constitution (later the Basic Law) contains several human rights that are necessary for the foundation of public participation (freedom of information, the right to access data of public interest, the right to advocacy, the freedom of expression and thought, freedom of assembly and association), and also contains institutions of direct democracy: the local and national referendum, the detailed rules of which are laid out in pivotal laws. In our legal system, social consultation is a requirement during legislative processes for laws, government decrees, and ministerial decrees, as well as in regional and settlement development<sup>3</sup>, and it is also an element of numerous tender invitations. In the case of local governments, the relevant law<sup>4</sup>.

2 <https://countytoolkit.devolution.go.ke/public-participation>

3 Government Decree 314/2021(XI.8.) on Urban Development Concept, Integrated Urban Development Strategy and Urban Planning Tools, as well as Certain Legal Institutions for Urban Planning

4 Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on Local Governments of Hungary



Their task is to support self-organizing communities, cooperate with these communities, and ensure broad citizen participation in local public affairs.

In Hungary, the introduction of top-down democratic innovations at the governmental and constitutional levels is not typical; in fact, we have observed the emergence of anti-democratic innovations in recent years, which has increased the rule of law deficit.

The existing tools of direct democracy in the country are primarily used by the elite, who often exploit them (Herman 2015). An increasing number of bottom-up democratic innovation experiments are taking place at the local level, and parties and social movements are also attempting to introduce innovations. Case studies can be found in Oross (2020), Gosztonyi (2022), Kuna-Simon (2012), and Szántó (2012), which discuss participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, and traditional involvement tools, respectively. Füzér (2017) analyzes the process that took place in Pécs after the turn of the century, during which a transition occurred from a community initiative model to a beneficiary model. In the meantime, the interpersonal social capital of active citizens and their trust in the participation process eroded. Kocsis and his colleagues examined the practice of population involvement in Hungarian municipalities as part of the large-scale ÖFFK II research project (see: Kocsis–Csanádi 2018; Kocsis 2019; Illésy et al. 2019). They found that the majority of local government leaders were reluctant to involve the public to a greater extent, primarily due to their perception of local governments as their right to control. (Kocsis 2019). The results of their large-scale local government questionnaire indicate that in Hungarian local governments, public opinion is primarily channeled through public hearings and forums. Besides these, other relatively frequently used means are tours of the municipality and mayoral visits to homes; these are followed in frequency by informal customer service hours, public meetings attended by specialists, street forums, idea boxes, the inclusion of selected public stakeholders, even less often local referendums, hours of the municipality, online customer service points, regular visits to local businesses, neighborhood trust system, specialized advisory panel, focus groups, participatory budgeting. The size of the settlement is a significant factor in determining which devices can work effectively.

The citizens themselves prefer different tools depending on the size of their settlement; according to the findings of Jávör–Beke's (2012) survey targeting the population, "in smaller settlements people tend to use more direct, personal relationship-based, and constructive solutions (such as public forums, public hearings, participation in community work), while in larger settlements, especially in big cities, they prefer more institutionalized, impersonal forms that focus on disputes and protests (such as civil protests, local referendums, etc.) (Jávör–Beke 2012: 81).

Boda–Jávör (2012) employed an interview-based methodology to investigate the attitudes of institutional actors and civil organizations toward social participation. They found that "employees of state institutions generally consider participation to be important and potentially useful in normative terms, but in their work, they tend to perceive it more as an additional task." (Boda–Jávör 2012: 62).



The underdeveloped democratic culture, characterized by a low level of awareness and intention, as well as incomplete knowledge among citizens, was considered a factor hindering social participation. The actors of civil society did not dispute that “greater awareness and activity from society would be necessary.” However, they pointed out that “existing intentions often fail due to the resistance of public administration and local government actors. This, in turn, dampens even the remaining enthusiasm and further undermines the already low level of community activity” (Boda–Jávor 2012: 62). Overall, it can be said that the Hungarian situation is characterized by a desire for cooperation with society, which drives neither national nor local governance. However, local communities also have limited demands in terms of involvement in decision-making.

### The participation programme in Miskolc between 2019–2024

Hungary has been governed by Fidesz with a two-thirds majority since 2010. During the same period, most local governments have also come under Fidesz's control, including large cities such as the traditionally socialist Miskolc. Under Fidesz's leadership, the country has become an illiberal democracy, characterized by a rule-of-law deficit and weakening of civil society, as well as a decline in civic activism (see in more detail: Havasi 2023), which is reflected in the European rule of law enforcement process against the country. In this political environment was the winner of the 2019 local government elections in Miskolc, the coalition of opposition parties and civil society organizations (Függetlenek A Szinva Városáért Egyesület–MSZP–Momentum–Párbeszéd–Jobbik–LMP–DK–MMM–Velünk a Város Lokálpatrióta Egyesület), whose intention -among other things- was to strengthen citizen participation. To this end, the position of *Citizen Participation Officer* was created, which was filled by an experienced sociologist and civil activist. The Office of Participation, situated in the city center, served as an open space accessible to both citizens and informal and formal communities. The office staff, which would eventually consist of three people by the end of the term, visited public events in the city to make contact with the population and promote the participation program. In the first year, the principles of citizen participation were developed through the participation of politicians, local government officials, including lawyers, representatives of professional civil society organizations, and active community members.

*The Municipal Citizen Participation Principles of Miskolc MÁRK*) names four participation levels and various participation methods within them. During the process, several methods are combined at different levels of participation. The initiator of the given process must define the methods and framework and inform the invited actors about these factors in order to prevent unrealistic expectations, dissatisfaction, and disappointment.



At the level of *information*, the goal is to provide information about the participation processes, which are facilitated through the city's website, Facebook page, the 'Minap' newspaper, its online version, and the [tervezzukmiskolcot.hu](http://tervezzukmiskolcot.hu) website. The Department of Communication and Media of the mayor's office performed information-related tasks in connection with the participation processes. Given that everything had to go through the responsible persons in the office, publishing information and news was a slow and complicated process. This particularly disturbed the activists of the CSOs, as it was very different from their flexible, quick-reaction approach to working. Although communication was recognized as important, it was the most criticized element in the participation processes according to all actors. *It would have been nice if there had been someone in the office who had focused solely on this task... The communication interfaces must be constantly provided with content. The employee responsible for communication should be able to devise and execute campaigns, working closely with us, of course. (excerpt from interview - participation officer)*

According to the MÁRK, the *consultation* is a two-way, asymmetrical process during which the municipality provides information and asks for opinions. Its tools include an online participation website, an online questionnaire, field trips (*kitelepül-és*), a community survey, and an idea box. The MÁRK did not name it, but the "Urban Evenings" series also served this purpose, about which I will talk in more detail later.

The *dialogue* is a regular, public communication about a specific issue, utilizing various means, including community planning, community assemblies, public forums, community discussions, customer service hours, public hearings, and sectoral civic workshops (MÁRK).

In the case of a *partnership*, the municipality undertakes to make the decision that developed in the dialogue. In addition to the municipality, the actors and tools of the partnership mentioned in the MÁRK are the Civil Partnership Council, civil workshops and councils, participatory budgeting, local referendums, community assemblies, and community initiatives (MÁRK).

The creation of a *civil partnership system* was one of the objectives of the MÁRK. In Miskolc, the cooperation between the municipality and civil society organizations has a long history which has had its ups and downs. The MÁRK targeted the establishment and operation of civil workshops, as well as the creation of a Civil Partnership Council. The *professional workshops* should be organized among CSOs active in the city and interested in participating in the process, tailored to their respective scopes of activity. These workshops can delegate representatives who may participate in professionally relevant meetings of the local government committees with the right to consult. The members of the Civil Partnership Council would be invited by the current vice-mayor responsible for civil partnerships, who would be selected from among organizations that contribute to the performance of local government tasks or participate in the reconciliation of interests at the sectoral or local level. (An alternative to this solution could be for the civic workshops to delegate members to the partnership council.)



The Civil Partnership Council has the right to comment on the budget chapters that affect CSOs and the principles of municipal subsidies for CSOs. The professional workshops were not established, partly because the potential key actors of the workshops—the most significant green organization and the most innovative organization operating in the social sphere—became disappointed with the participation process.

In the field of social services in Miskolc, the role of civil organizations is significant. The city has signed service agreements with 15 organizations, and the Miskolc Disability Professional Workshop (Miskolci Fogymotóközpont) has been operating for two decades, bringing together around thirty professional interdisciplinary partners. (Havasi 2022b) All of this could have provided a solid foundation for the outlined structure to function effectively. However, one of the most substantial and innovative organizations in the social sector became disillusioned with the participatory process, as its proposal was eliminated during the pre-screening phase of the participatory budget due to its cost implications. The submitting organization disputed the necessity of the amount estimated by the municipality for implementation, as their calculations included the involvement of volunteer work. The municipality, on the other hand, was obliged to proceed through public procurement processes.

At the beginning of the term, representatives of the green movement reached out to the citizen participation officer, proposing the development of a civic strategy for the city, the establishment of a civic roundtable, and the inclusion of civic representatives in municipal committees. The initiators were involved in the civil partnership task force, but they felt that the emerging MÁRK lacked guarantees. Consequently, they withdrew from the process. They also expressed dissatisfaction that a separate civil strategy was not developed, but the participation officer insisted that the participation of citizens and civil society organizations could not be separated. Consistently adhering to this position, the officer invited CSOs from Miskolc to all events and gatherings throughout the term. While some organizations ensured their representation on every occasion, others protested by refusing to participate.

The Civil Partnership Council was not established either, despite its significant potential contribution to the city. The current support and grant system of the civil sphere is fragmented. Establishing a comprehensive and transparent civil support system in collaboration with stakeholders would be highly beneficial.

After the adoption of MÁRK, the primary goal of the civil participation officer was to incorporate participatory principles *into the operational framework of the municipal office and local government*. She aimed to develop procedures and ensure that the involvement of citizens and civil organizations became an integral part of everyday administrative processes. A significant achievement was made during the review of the Sustainable Urban Development Strategy. An event was organized, during which a large number of the city's civil organizations were represented. Various topics were discussed at the roundtable sessions, and one key proposal that emerged was to ensure that future municipal grant applications are



developed in collaboration with representatives from civil organizations relevant to the topic and location. The resigning mayor approved of the idea, and in consultation with the grant department, plans were made to establish five task forces for the TOP+ projects. They also approved the list of 30–40 organizations to be invited to participate in these groups. The question remains whether the new city leadership will uphold this decision.

Another goal would be to ensure that the organizations involved in the planning process can join as a consortium partner role in the city's grant applications. This would override the recent practice where MESZEGYI (Miskolc Unified Social, Health, and Child Welfare Institution) and the Maltese Charity Service have been the city's constant partners in tenders. The question once again arises: if the organizations do not receive guarantees for consortium partnership, will they be willing to contribute their ideas and energy to the applications?

According to the MÁRK, participatory points (részvételi pont) are multifunctional, integrated civil community spaces where involved organizations carry out voluntary participatory tasks in addition to their core activities. These tasks help facilitate multidirectional communication between the city district and the municipality while also supporting local community initiatives and empowering citizens. The cooperation agreements with the civil organizations selected in each city district were not established, as the municipality was unable to provide compensation. Despite this, the involved organizations still joined for individual actions in connection with the city's participation processes. The civil participation officer considers it essential that the participatory points will continue to function in the future. However, for the process to be controllable and for the operating organizations to dedicate sufficient time and energy to this activity, compensation is necessary.

### Participatory Techniques Used in Miskolc

From among the *traditional participatory tools*, Miskolc has held *public hearings* and *community forums*. The latter were most often initiated by community groups who opposed a planned investment. The forums typically saw a large turnout, with the Citizenship Participation Officer moderating the discussions. A negative aspect of the events was that the municipality was reluctant to openly communicate or admit that the controversial investment would proceed, with only the specifics of how it would be carried out in question. As a result, the residents' disappointment was almost predictable. A positive aspect of the process was that taking into account the doubts raised during the forums, changes were made to the plans. For example, by rotating the new building, fewer trees need to be cut down. The construction of the new road will also include traffic-easing solutions.

Among the democratic innovations, a community assembly was held, participatory budgeting was introduced, and a series of city evenings were organized.



The citizens' assembly (közösségi gyűlés) and citizens' jury (állampolgári tanács) are deliberative methods in which participants make proposals to decision-makers on a predefined issue. These processes facilitate in-depth discussions, allowing citizens to reflect on and deliberate specific topics before offering their recommendations. The assembly or council is composed of a representative group of members from the given community, who are randomly selected through a lottery method by the organizers. During the 2–7-day event, participants listen to experts, and then, in a debate led by an independent moderator, they develop a consensus-based opinion on the issue at hand. The two formats differ in the number of participants: the assembly typically includes a larger group, ranging from 50 to 150 people, while the jury consists of 12 to 24 participants<sup>5</sup>. The municipality of Miskolc chose climate protection and the related issue of air quality as the topic of the community assembly. The 46 participants elaborated on seven proposals in detail (Bördös 2021), which the municipality began implementing, at least by looking for funds.

*Participatory budgeting* (részvételi költségvetés) is a democratic innovation in which citizens directly participate in the decision-making process regarding the allocation of a portion of the state or municipal budget. Many versions of participatory budgeting have developed, differing in terms of the powers granted to citizens (such as choosing between specific investments, determining development priorities, or submitting their ideas), the methods used to involve them (directly and/or indirectly, through elected representatives or civil organizations), and the activities in which citizens participate (forums, discussions, casting votes). For more details, see Syntomer et al. (2008). Merényi identifies the common characteristics of participatory budgeting as follows: “The process should be tied to specific budgetary and financial decisions, involving either the affected groups or the entire local population; the process should be repeated over several years; active citizen participation should be a part of the involvement; and the results should be transparent and accountable” (Merényi 2020: 11).

In the version applied in Miskolc, citizens can formulate proposals on three topics: making the city more nature-friendly, reducing social inequalities, and creating missing services, public spaces, and facilities. During the pre-screening of proposals, the municipality's experts examine their feasibility and cost requirements. From the proposals that pass this filter, a citizens' council selects 15 proposals to be put to a vote. Volunteers are invited to join this council, and their selection is based on ensuring that the council represents the city's population as well as possible. After registration, citizens can vote on the proposals through the participatory website. In the first year, 170 ideas were submitted; in 2023, 150; and in 2024, 91. Meanwhile, the total amount increased threefold, rising from 15 million forints to 40 million forints. The situation worsens when considering the number of voters: in 2022,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/citizens-assemblies>, <https://involve.org.uk/resource/citizens-jury>



134 people voted, while in 2023, only 100 people participated in the election. The implementation of the ideas has started, but it is happening very slowly. Many of the ideas from 2022 were still in the procurement or detailed planning stages in 2024. The decrease in the number of submitted ideas may be attributed to the fact that those whose ideas were rejected in the first round did not become active later on, as well as the slow pace of implementing the ideas.

The series of "*Urban Evenings*" (városi esték) aimed to facilitate discussions among Miskolc citizens, municipal representatives, and experts on three specific topics in a café-style setting to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Before each event, the goal was to gather and share information related to the evening's topics, as well as to gauge public sentiment through an online questionnaire. The reopening of the former Diósgyőr swimming pool and the issue of urban transportation sparked great interest, as evidenced by the number of completed questionnaires (1,400 and 714 respondents, respectively) and the attendance at the events. The situation of the city's largest park, Népkert, attracted less interest, with only 294 people completing the questionnaire and 25 attending the event. The attendees were mainly relevant professionals, residents of Népkert, and leaders of local businesses and institutions.

At the "Urban Evening on Transportation," pro-car residents were underrepresented, resulting in their perspectives being somewhat overlooked, and communication with this group was lacking. Although expert interviews were prepared before the events, almost none of them were published. The primary reason for this was the absence of a person responsible for coordinating communication who could also manage matters within the municipality. At the events, discussions were held in roundtables, divided by subtopics. At the first event, people did not move from their initially chosen tables. However, at the following two events, the organizers switched to the "World Café" method, meaning they rotated the participants among tables. All three events were exciting, held in a good atmosphere, and the questions were explored from many different angles. A key aspect of the method is that it prioritizes enhancing citizens' access to information over community organizations. Nevertheless, in the case of Népkert, the relevant local government professionals received inspiration, and further discussions took place between the so-called "Népkert round table" and the chief architect's cabinet regarding the direction of future planning. The unanimous conclusion from the event evaluation surveys was that participants were satisfied with the organization and execution, and they would be happy to attend similar events in the future. A critical comment addressed the "insularity" of the Népkert event and the absence of local MPs. The explanation for this absence was that party representatives were intentionally kept away to prevent the events from being hijacked for political purposes. Unfortunately, the political climate is such that civil initiatives must distance themselves from political parties, even though they should be seen as potential resources and allies.



The citizen participatory principles of Miskolc embraced a broad approach to participation, incorporating the use of tools focused on *community development*.

During the examined period, the Participation Office supported *grassroots initiatives*. The most successful of these was the "Adopt a Public Space!" program, in which a local community takes responsibility for the care and maintenance of plants and public objects in a specific public area. By 2024, 36 active communities were operating. In addition, two community gardens were established, and a community in a segregated area was strengthened, taking on the responsibility of managing their community center during the examined period.

The inspiration for *social hackathons* (szociális ötletmaraton) comes from hackathons—typically prize-based competitions where diverse teams work intensively over two to three days to solve a challenge, usually involving the development of software. Social hackathons differ primarily in the challenges they present. However, their execution is similar: idea pitching, team-building to match ideas with participants, idea development, presentation of project plans, and final decision-making. The first social hackathon in Miskolc, held in spring 2022, had a broadly defined challenge: to improve the quality of life for the city's residents. A total of 37 ideas were submitted, and with the help of mentors, 50 participants developed six project plans. Out of the developed ideas, two were implemented, even though all the ideas received either cash prizes awarded by the jury or special prizes based on contributions from attendees aimed at supporting their realization. The second social hackathon, which focused on climate neutrality, presented a challenge in terms of attracting fewer ideas and participants. Ultimately, 25 people developed four projects. While implementation has started, progress has been slow and more challenging than anticipated. According to participants' feedback, the social hackathons were considered highly successful, with most highlighting the value of the human connections formed and the joy of experiencing creativity and enthusiasm sparked. However, the organizers were dissatisfied with the number of participants, the quality of ideas, and the composition of the participants. This latter group proved to be relatively homogeneous, consisting mainly of professionals in humanities. Organizers believe this is due to these initiatives being newly launched in a society that has become passive, and they will need time to gain momentum. The idea of shortening the event was considered. However, it was concluded that if someone is unwilling to dedicate one or two days to developing an idea, they are unlikely to invest more energy in its implementation. This is evidenced by the fact that only a tiny portion of the winning ideas were eventually realized despite the available resources.

Among other postmodern tools of participation, community planning stands out in Miskolc, emerging as the most prominent element of the participatory program. During these events, local stakeholders and communities collaborate to create a shared vision, community plan, and/or strategy. Typically, few participants attended the community planning events, but those who did came up with great, inspiring ideas. However, the results should be approached with caution precisely



due to the low participation numbers and the lack of representativeness of the method. Community planning took place about the "Szinva Green Corridor" (Szinva Zöld Folyosó) plan, which aims to bring the stream that runs through Miskolc closer to the people and foster a more vibrant relationship between humans and their environment. As part of this process, community planning sessions were held at six locations that are suitable for community gatherings and meetings. Additionally, there was a "Szinva tour" by bike, featuring the city's chief architect and interested citizens. A total of fifty people engaged in these activities, and a few comments and suggestions were also made on the website. Additionally, community planning was conducted regarding the future of the Görömböly wine cellar row, as well as several surrounding squares.

### **The principles of participation, their place within the organizational structure of the municipality, the Chief Architect's Cabinet, and the Climate Protection Group**

According to the MÁRK, the goals of the participatory process in Miskolc are to establish an organized form of cooperation with civil organizations and active communities, to develop a systematic practice of involving stakeholders, and to ensure that investments align more precisely with actual needs. Additionally, the goals are to strengthen Miskolc's identity and establish social responsibility. (MÁRK) The very phrasing ("establish," "develop") indicates that everything that has happened in Miskolc over the past five years is merely the beginning of a journey. The Miskolc program will demonstrate long-term results through continuous learning of consultative methods (MÁRK).

The personal goal of the participation officer and the vice-mayor responsible for civil participation was to integrate the concept and practice of participation into the office's daily operations, making it a part of the office's functioning. A related result is that a local government decree was passed on the socialization (társadalmazás) procedure, according to which, if any office unit wants to socialize an issue, the civil participation officer prepares a plan with its financial implications and submits it to the mayor. If the mayor approves, the process will start.

In the examined period, the chief architect's cabinet was the most active, either as an initiator or as an invited actor in the participation processes in Miskolc. This is partly natural because *"they are the investors; everything comes from there."* On the other hand, the principles of local governance and participation espoused by the chief architect and their team also steered the processes in this direction: *"The municipality is the government of the city's residents; it is even in the name." It is one thing for people to hold positions there, but positions are based on the mandate of the city's residents. Therefore, decision-makers should not make decisions solely at the municipal level while city residents suffer the consequences; instead, decisions should be made through collaboration. ...It is clear that every municipality represents the community's interests, which may sometimes clash with individual*



interests, but not because the official prefers it; rather, it represents the community's interests. (Interview excerpt – Chief Architect)

The Urban Maintenance Group (városüzemeltetési csoport) primarily sought the Participation Office's assistance for public forums. Cooperation with the Miskolc Cultural Centre has also begun, but it can still be considered to be in its infancy. The collaboration mainly involves providing space for civil groups at city events, such as a street section, square, or terrace. This offers a good opportunity for them to introduce themselves and also gather some resources. Therefore, there is much-untapped potential in the cultural field.

A challenge for the city's Climate Protection Group was to finalize a climate agreement, as Miskolc, along with two other Hungarian cities, was included in the European Union's 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission. This commitment involves developing comprehensive plans for a climate-neutral city and establishing the necessary partnerships to implement them. The task force, in collaboration with the Participation Office, organized a series of workshops in different city districts on related topics. Except for the water protection workshop, the participation willingness was very low. The question remains whether the topic did not interest people enough or if there were issues with communication, the invited group, and the method of reaching them. I assume that the water protection workshop was more successful because an active community from North Kilián hosted the event. A more successful socialization attempt was the "More Than Green" conference, which featured roundtable discussions. During these discussions, the attending CSO representatives and citizens not only discussed the given topic but also made commitments on how they could contribute to the goal of a climate-neutral city. They were also able to present their suggestions, not only then but later online. In preparation for the climate agreement, the organizing partners decided that the theme of the second social hackathon in Miskolc would be climate neutrality. Even before the 100 Climate-Neutral Cities project, the topic had appeared in participatory processes, as the community assembly focused on air quality, and the "Szinva Green Corridor" also touches on the stream's ecosystem. The process was successful in the sense that a climate contract was established; however, upon examining the number of signatories, it becomes clear that widespread involvement was not achieved.

Unlike the participatory office in Józsefváros, where it was part of the mayor's internal cabinet during the previous term, in Miskolc, it was under the responsibility of the vice-mayor and the head of the office made efforts to keep the processes distanced from party politics. *"Of course, everything is politics, but I said (...), I am not willing to select initiatives or civil organizations based on politics (...)."* (Interview excerpt – Participation Officer) Over five years, dilemmas arose in this regard, such as whether the participation office should assume the role of moderator in a public forum initiated by a local Member of Parliament.

In general, the organizers of the participatory programs attempted to keep local MPs at a distance so that party politicians could not utilize them for political



marketing. This is a contradictory situation, as it would be a healthier solution if the MPs were present at consultations affecting their areas, engaging in dialogues and initiatives. The situation, however, is that there is indeed a risk that political parties might attempt to appropriate the results. A regrettable consequence of this phenomenon is that, in the current political climate, a movement can be harmed if it aligns with any party, as opponents can immediately raise concerns about political agendas.

The MÁRK's principles of participation include that participation must be accurate and meaningful and cannot be used to pretend to support a predetermined political or professional position. Proposals and opinions received through the participatory system must be taken seriously, and stakeholders must be informed of the outcomes. In this regard, the Miskolc processes can be considered particularly successful, even when considering the aforementioned challenges.

## Summary

The methods that enable and encourage public participation (in Miskolc, referred to as citizenship) incorporate elements from both the direct/participatory and deliberative democracy toolkits. Among democratic innovations, bottom-up type innovations serve to achieve these goals. Several democratic innovations were tested in Miskolc, which, based on Newton's typology, were the following: „Urban evenings“ and interactive website (which served to inform, consult, and deliberate citizens), community planning (as a means of co-governance), participatory budget and citizens' assembly (tools of direct democracy), online public opinion polls, interactive website (e-democracy). The study aimed to investigate how and with what results the citizen participation program in Miskolc developed, as well as how citizens' activity and capabilities were enhanced. Several notable achievements were made, including the implementation of various methods, the establishment of infrastructure for citizen participation, and its integration into the municipality's daily operations. However, the weaker aspect of performance is the number of citizens reached and activated. One possible reason for this is that more time is needed to scale up participatory processes and for citizens to learn democratic modes of operation.

Another weak point of the processes and a partial cause of the low participation rate was communication, which will need to be improved in the future if the ongoing work is to continue.

An innovative procedure, institution, or tool does not necessarily lead to the expected results, and even if it does, it may come with high costs, requiring significant time and energy investment. In this regard, good decisions were made in Miskolc, as the chosen methods effectively served the actual purposes at a cost-effective rate.

It is impossible to avoid conflicts altogether; democracy involves debates, which in turn leads to conflicts. Certain critics of the participatory process in Miskolc, especially those from the civil sphere, would expect more and more substantial decision-making rights. However, it is also true that our legal system is fundamentally based on representative democracy. Thus, participatory democracy and its institutions can help us operate this democracy in a more meaningful and high-quality manner.

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