

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

EASTERN EUROPE

SOUTHEAST ASIA

LATIN AMERICA

INDIA

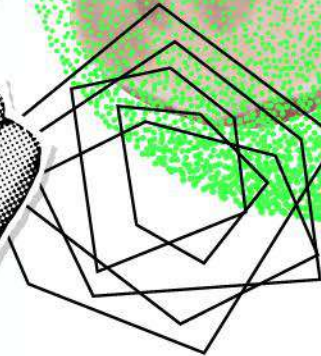
* GLOBAL SOUTH

Eastern Europe: Tangled Between SOUTH and North



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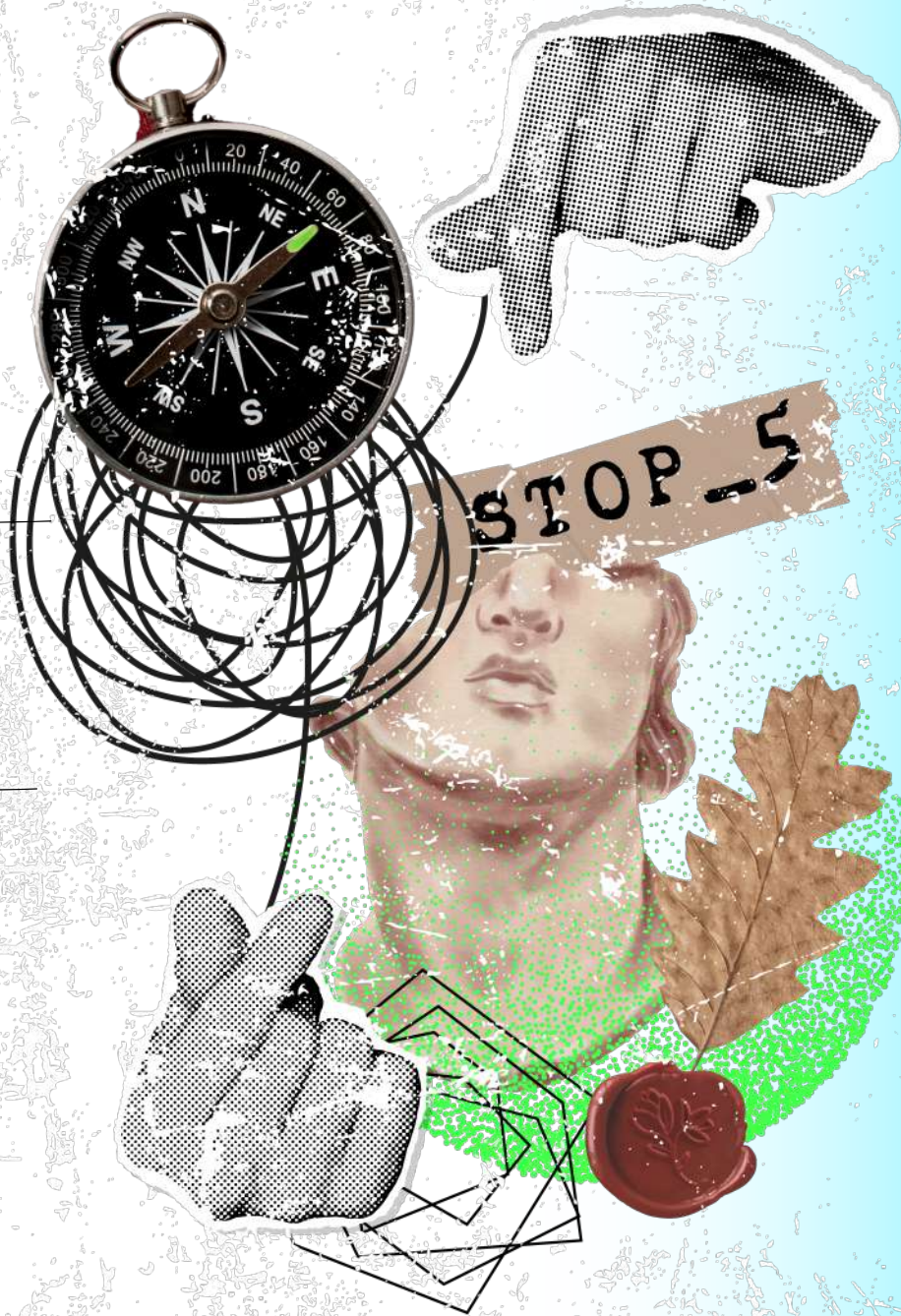
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Eastern Europe:
..... *Tangled* Between **SOUTH**
and North

BY:
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Resetting democracy:
the south side of global deliberation



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During her work, she supported the domestic and international offices of a civic tech company and provided expertise for the development of new methodologies. She conducted research on current trends in tech and innovation for the EU Commission, trained young Western African leaders, and activists in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, and served as a jury member of the Prague Civil Society competition SWITCH.

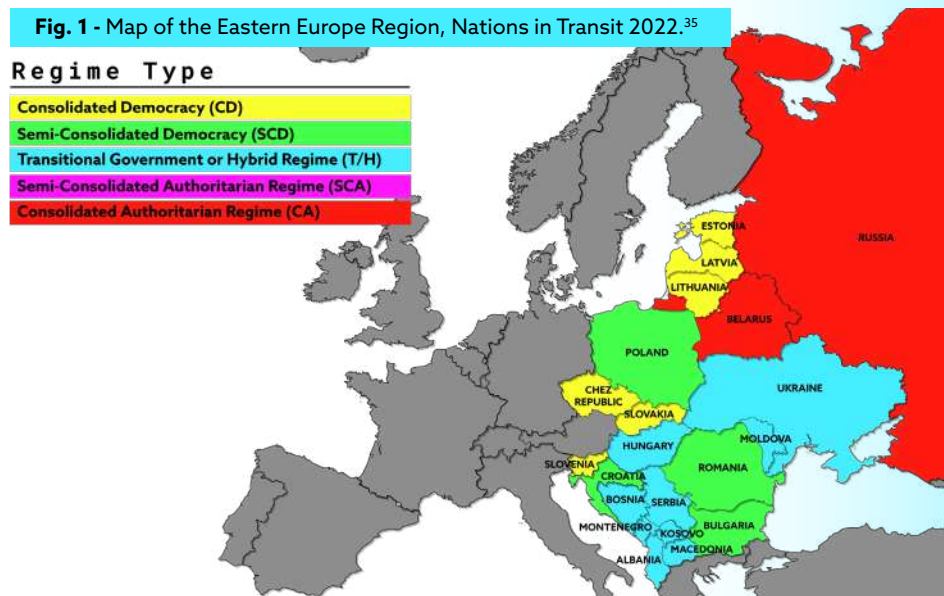
An alumna of Columbia University and Sciences Po Paris, she tried to bring her extensive knowledge of political science and human rights into the field of participation and civic engagement, with special attention paid to the issues of gender parity and inclusion of marginalized groups.

_Introduction

Democracy in the world is facing continuous challenges, with more and more people talking about a crisis of representative democracies and a need to reinvent the existing democratic order and explore new models of social and political engagement through participatory and deliberative practices. At the same time, the conversation about democratic innovation continues to be dominated by representatives of the Global North. This approach shows significant shortcomings due to the exclusion and underrepresentation of the Global South's needs, specific characteristics, approaches, and experiences.

This chapter looks at the Central European region that stands at the crossroads of the two worlds, providing a space for experimentation on how to combine them best to promote and foster democratic innovation. According to *Nations in Transit*,³⁴ Central Europe currently consists of countries that represent a wide range of levels of democracy, ranging from consolidated authoritarian regimes to consolidated democracies

34. Smeltzer, Mike & Buyon, Noah. (2022). *Nations in Transit Report: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).



The Rise and Decline of Democracy and Peace in Central and Eastern Europe

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a region that faced an opportunity for democratization in the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain that ushered in the wave of regime change.

In a short period, popular movements flushed away pro-Soviet regimes that have consistently been rated as “Not Free” by

35. “The map reflects the findings of Freedom House’s Nations in Transit 2022 survey, which assessed the status of democratic development in 29 countries from Central Europe to Central Asia during 2021”. Smeltzer, Mike (2022). *Civil Society’s Many Faces on Nations in Transit Report: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*. p. 4, Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

Freedom House.³⁶ Following the changes in Bulgaria, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania, other former Soviet bloc countries turned towards democratic systems with competitive elections and increased freedom of speech and other civil liberties.³⁷ Yet, the whole region has not followed the path of peaceful transition as a series of ethnic conflicts, independence wars, and insurgencies took place in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001, leading up to and resulting in the separation of Yugoslavia.

Unfortunately, democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Balkan region is currently at a crossroads. It faces internal threats from populist and autocratic regimes, external aggression, and other security threats such as cybercrime and disinformation. The victories of the first years of democratization and expansion of social and political freedoms in other parts of CEE were not long-lasting either. Reorganizing the existing order also created a power vacuum and power struggles that resulted in the slide of fragile democracies into hybrid or autocratic regimes. The Freedom House report from 2020³⁸ noted that there were fewer democracies in the region at that time than at any point since the report was first published in 1995. The decline left society even more vulnerable to further

36. Freedom House is a non-profit organization group best known for its political advocacy on democracy, political freedom, and human rights.

37. Kakissis, Joanna. (May 7, 2022). *Democracy At Risk In Central And Eastern Europe, Report Finds*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/07/851774707/democracy-at-risk-in-central-and-eastern-europe-report-finds>. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

38. Smeltzer, Mike & Buyon, Noah. (2022). *Nations in Transit Report: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

power grabs during the COVID-19 pandemic when governments and their leaders got a chance to tighten control and continue the centralization of power. At the same time, the general information landscape got increasingly flooded with Russian and Chinese misinformation and propaganda.

The situation further deteriorated when on February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, shifting the autocratic attack on democratic order towards violence. The war has already displaced millions of people and potentially accelerated a continuous anti-democratic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe. The stakes of the conflict are especially high since the Kremlin aims to subjugate a freely elected sovereign government and continue to utilize its militarist, expansionist, and imperialist instruments and rhetoric. Thus, the ongoing war in Ukraine created an urgent need for cooperation and coordination across the region to protect democracy and support Ukraine and over 4 million Ukrainian refugees.

Even though the current trend of democratization in the region points downwards, the political climate is far from homogeneous but rather a tapestry of different spaces and levels of experimentation with deliberative and participatory democracies on governmental and non-governmental levels. The cases documented for the Demo.Reset deliberative journal series presented below showcase two opposing sides of the spectrum: creating the space for political innovation and education in Hungary and institutionalizing a participation agenda in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

_Creating Space for Deliberative Democracy in Hungary

Hungary is one of the focal points of our overview. This landlocked country in Central Europe has borders with seven nations and a population of almost 10 million. The population is mainly comprised of Hungarians, with a significant Romani minority. The history of Hungary follows the trajectory described above: Post-WWII, Hungary became a satellite state of the Soviet Union. After the failed revolution in 1956, Hungary became a comparatively freer yet still repressed member of the Eastern Bloc. In October 1989, Hungary turned into a parliamentary democratic republic and joined the European Union in 2004, and became a part of the Schengen Area in 2007.

However, since then, Hungary's form of governance became a hybrid regime. This regime combines elements of democratic and authoritarian rule yet is distinct from both.

“They may be democratic in the minimal sense that they feature regular, competitive elections, but their dysfunctional institutions are unable to deliver the definitive components of a liberal democracy: checks and balances, the rule of law, and robust protections for the rights and liberties of all.”³⁹

39. Smeltzer, Mike & Buyon, Noah. (2022). *Nations in Transit Report: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*. Freedom House. p. 4. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

As noted by Nations in Transit,

“Hungary's decline has been the most precipitous [...] It was one of the three democratic frontrunners as of 2005, but in 2020 it became the first country to descend by two regime categories and leave the group of democracies entirely.”⁴⁰

Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010, Viktor Orbán, illustrates this trend and is slowly dropping the pretense of respecting democracy. He has centralized power, took over much of the media, created a hostile climate, and harassed civil society organizations as well as continuously supported like-minded regimes in the region, including Russia. Adopting the emergency law in 2020 allowed the government to rule by decree and exposed the undemocratic nature of the regime. In addition, conservative Christian policies and rhetoric propagated by Orbán exude xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, and various forms of queerphobia, making already marginalized communities' life all the more difficult and outright dangerous.

This socio-political climate generates an imminent need for creating new democratic and communal spaces where various actors can safely cooperate and work on educating and supporting their communities, empowering each other to create change and fight for democracy, and experiment with new forms of democracy-building. Association of Alternative

40. Csaky, Zselyke. (2020). *Nations in Transit Report: Dropping the Democracies Facade*. Freedom House, p. 2. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

Communities (Alternatív Községek Egyesülete),⁴¹ based in the second largest city of Hungary, Debrecen, is one of these organizations.

Alternative Communities is a 25-year-old organization that focuses on community building and engagement. During an interview conducted on April, 2023, President of the Association Richárd Damu, Community Organizer Ági Tóth, and Program and event organizer Zsuzsa Béres-Áfra talked about the joy of working with and for their community, learning from its members and supporting them in their search for acceptance and inclusion. For example, the Association members habitually take part in the LGBTQIA+ Pride parades to support members of the queer community in times of increasing state-sponsored homophobia. As Richárd Damu noted, one of the most memorable experiences of their community work was helping a lesbian woman who had been depressed and attempted suicide due to her struggles with homophobia. They directed her towards a queer community group that helped her to accept herself and work on restoring her self-esteem and mental health.

Fig. 2 - Photo of the Association team members, by Eleonóra Tisza, 2023⁴².



41. To learn more about the Association of Alternative Communities (Alternatív Községek Egyesülete), please visit: <https://altkozegy.hu/about/>.

42. Tisza, Eleonóra, 2023. The girl gang has come together to help raise funds for the community space. Taken from Alternative Communities Facebook Page. in <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=6210438142328677&set=a.250491874990030> (Accessed May 5, 2023).

The organization's core focus is community building since they believe that one of the basic conditions of democracy is to give space to civil organizations. Creating such space should help activate the local community, provide it with new democratic tools and knowledge, and engage them in resolving social problems. Working with the community should serve as a way to nourish cooperation among different actors and help marginalized parts of the community and grassroots organizations.

One of the key demographics is the youth because this group is consistently disengaged from political life or even excluded from it. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) research, there's a lack of political engagement among the youth in CEE. The results show that young people

“neither believe that political institutions adequately represent their priorities nor that these institutions effectively include their voices.”⁴³

The Association of Alternative Communities piloted the first-ever school Participatory Budgeting (PB) in Debrecen to engage the youth. Usually applied at the city level, this methodology started in Latin America in the 1980s but did not reach Hungarian schools yet. At the same time, city-level PBs in Hungary usually set an age limit of 16, thus excluding young people from the process.

Between 2021 and 2022, students from the Medgyessy Ferenc High School, Art High School, and Technical School in Debrecen were

43. National Democratic Institute. (n.d.). *Youth Attitudes of Politics and Democracy: Czech Republic*. NDI. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/youth-attitudes-politics-and-democracy-czech-republic>.

invited to participate in a school-level decision-making process. The students were able to choose how to spend 350,000 HUF (1,030 USD) by proposing their ideas and voting for their favorite ones. The project was implemented with the support of Miklós Merényi (K-Monitor, Hungary), who works on disseminating the participatory budgeting methodology, and an American mentor, the Center for the Future of Arizona (US) coordinator. Since these democratic exercises and youth engagement are not governmental and educational system priorities, the funding had to be acquired externally from the United States Embassy in Budapest. The funding acquisition in this political climate is especially challenging for organizations like the Associations. Ági Tóth, Richárd Damu, and Zsuzsa Béres-Áfra noted that the Association is ostracized and is de facto seen as “an enemy of the government.”⁴⁴

As noted by Richárd Damu, working with younger generations in Hungary is a great way to spread democracy because they are “sensitive to new ideas. They can change, while the older generation cannot accept those new ideas.”⁴⁵ This methodology was, in essence, used as a way to show young people democracy in action and start preparing them for the life of an active citizen who understands how to take part in politics through broader community-focused social and political activities, and not only in elections. Thanks to such a process, students can realize that their voice matters, and they can create change. Therefore, an exercise in which young people are invited and empowered to deliberate, cooperate, and make decisions

44. *Personal communication, April, 2023.*

45. *Ibid.*

for the whole community, can help break down cultural and knowledge barriers that block the development of deliberative democracy, as identified by Demo.Reset.⁴⁶

Practically speaking, the process took three weeks, during which members of the Association, with the support of the local Student Parliament, worked in the school. Any student could participate by submitting a proposal, deliberating, and voting. Out of 900 students, 400 (44.4%) participated in the process showing a high interest in participating in the initiative. The project generated 30 proposals, some of which were developed and submitted by individuals, while others were put together by groups of students. Seven of them were practically the same and required the replacement of uncomfortable classroom chairs.

Ten concrete and feasible ideas were confirmed and put on the ballot. However, before the voting, participants were invited to run a campaign in school or on social media. For the campaign, students could "make a poster that [would be] displayed in the hall... [...] [Students] could also plan a video [to show] on the school's Facebook page, and write an official one or two sentence summary [to] be included on the ballot. It was not mandatory, but the Association managed to mobilize the majority of participants."⁴⁷

46. Demo.Reset. (2022). *Phase 1. Be Part of this Global Network: Demo.Reset.* www.demoreset.org/en/global-network/. (Accessed May 5, 2023).
Miklós, K-Monitor, 2022. Page 20.

47. *Report on the Debrecen School PB (A diákok költségvetése), Merényi*

Fig. 3 - Proposal posters, by Eleonóra Tisza, 2023⁴⁸



During the three voting days, 385 votes were received, most of which were cast on the first day. After the voting was closed, the Headmaster announced the results on the radio. The results were also communicated online. The winning ideas were "Restroom renovation" (156 votes) and "Sanitary box [with free pads and tampons in the bathrooms]" (148 votes).

According to the members of the Association, since this was a pilot project that aimed to test whether this methodology would work in the Hungarian context and generate any interest from the young people, it was exciting to see that the methodology worked well and that the level of engagement from young people surpassed the 40% mark. In addition, the President of the Association, Richárd Damu, noted that this case sparked the interest of other actors, and now more schools are interested in running their own PBs.

48. It is a library room. On the forefront are shelves with books and a table with chairs and a computer in the background. The shelves with books are partially covered with hand-made posters describing school PB projects. The texts are in Hungarian. Tisza, Eleonóra, 2023. Taken from Alternative Communities Facebook Page. in <https://www.facebook.com/altkozeg/photos/pb.100076469551265.-2207520000./1025083021484589/?type=3> (Accessed May 5, 2023).

Despite their frustration with the current government, the organization's members are optimistic that legislative change can end the existing regime. However, they recognize that there is still much work to be done to achieve such change, as organizations like the Association for Alternative Communities need to foster cooperation between themselves and communities, as well as support decision-makers in moving towards more open governance driven by participation and deliberation, and community-centered policies. To achieve this, they need to continue to build and expand the social and political space in which everyone, including young people, is adequately equipped and empowered to work for change.

_Participation Institutionalization in Slovakia

A contrasting example of participatory and deliberative democracy can be found in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where participatory democracy is increasingly more and more institutionalized and mainstreamed in the daily operations of the governing institutions. In this case study, we will focus on the Slovak Republic. This landlocked country with around 5.4 million inhabitants borders five countries, including the Czech Republic and Hungary.

After WWI's end and the Austro-Hungarian Empire's dissolution, it became a part of Czechoslovakia, one of a few CEE countries that remained democratic during the interwar period. However, local fascist parties came to power, and the first Slovak Republic existed during WWII as a satellite state of Nazi Germany. Czechoslovakia was reestablished at the end of WWII and became a part of the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc. There were attempts to liberalize the country,

yet it culminated with the crushing of the Prague Spring by an invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1948. The regime ended after a peaceful Velvet Revolution in 1989, and Slovakia became an independent state in January 1993 after a peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia. In 2004, Slovakia joined the European Union and NATO and became a part of the Eurozone in 2009.

Since then, Slovakia has become one of a few consolidated democracies in the Central and Eastern European region alongside Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia. However, the corrosive effect of the democratic decline in the region, conservatism, foreign disinformation and propaganda, and local corruption brought down the democracy score for all of those countries in 2022.⁴⁹

Even though Slovakia follows the trend of democratic decline, it is still a consolidated democracy, which creates a favorable environment for democratic innovation and the implementation of participatory and deliberative practices. One of the central national agencies working with this agenda is the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, specifically the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society. Borrowing Prague's good practice of creating local participation coordinators, the Slovak Ministry of Interior cooperated with Participation Factory, a Czech social enterprise, to create teams of participation coordinators at the regional level in five of the eight Slovak regions.

49. Smeltzer, Mike & Buyon, Noah. (2022). *Nations in Transit Report: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*. Freedom House. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf. (Accessed May 13, 2023).

Participation Factory⁵⁰ is a four-year-old Prague-based social enterprise that focuses on designing and delivering participation processes. Participation Factory is a member of People Powered and coordinates its activities in Central Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The context of their work differs significantly from the Hungarian case presented above.

Local political institutions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia seek innovation and are increasingly interested in deliberation and participation-based methodologies. Thus, Participation Factory (PF) identified a strong need to create an environment for the sustainable implementation of such processes and, as noted by Anna Tehlova, Managing Director of PF, "a huge knowledge and experience gap in this field."⁵¹ The latter represented one of the challenges in engaging stakeholders and citizens in key decision-making processes to ensure that the policies and solutions proposed by the government reflected the real needs of the people.⁵²

Fig. 4 - First planning workshop in Bratislava for regional participation coordinators, by Karel Kolar & Renata Balogh, 2022⁵³



50. To learn more about Participation Factory, please visit: <https://www.participationfactory.com/>.

51. Personal communication, April, 2023.

52. Ibid.

53. Koral, Karel & Balogh, Renata, 2022. The first planning workshop in Bratislava for regional participation coordinators. taken from Participation Factory in

To solve this problem, the Ministry of Interior engaged PF for 18 months so that their experts would train regional coordinators "from zero to actual experts who can handle any process by themselves."⁵⁴ The challenge of the work is not only to pass the know-how, guide the coordinators, and be the guarantors who ensure the high quality of projects but also to raise awareness among other government agencies. Even though Participation Factory previously implemented a similar project in 11 city districts of Prague, the project in Slovakia is qualitatively different as it focuses on regional governments. It includes, for example, the development of different strategies and policies in contrast with the urban-planning-oriented projects of the Prague municipal districts. Due to the nature of the projects, coordinators and Participation Factory experts work primarily with the stakeholders rather than the general public, who is mostly unaware of the ongoing program.

An example of such projects is setting up a platform for cooperation among the CSOs, NGOs, and associations that work on the issues faced by a Roma community in the Prešov region. This project gathered over a dozen organizations and kick-started the first-ever conversation among them, which laid the path for their cooperation among themselves and the Prešov regional government. As noted by the PF experts, working on projects like this, which help support already marginalized communities, has a high social impact and value and brings a special sense of fulfillment.

54. *Ibid.*

Fig. 5 - Quo Vadis, Romale? Workshop members in Prešov Region by Mikulas Bodor, 2022.⁵⁵



Since the project focuses on internal capacity-building, it definitely responds to the knowledge barrier to deliberative democracy as identified by Demo.Reset. Additionally, this program aims to change a governance culture and to make it more citizen-focused, open, transparent, efficient, and data-driven. However, Anna Tehlova, who also coordinates the Slovak project, notes that the program's main purpose is to tear down the organizational barriers and support institutions in creating infrastructure that would make deliberative and participatory practices a part of their DNA. In order to do that, the PF team is in continuous contact with the coordinators and their direct bosses and heads of other relevant departments who are engaged in the projects supported by coordinators, for example, the Department of Health or Social Affairs. There is also an ongoing commitment with the Ministry,

55. Bodor, Mikulas, 2022. Quo Vadis, Romale? Workshop members in Prešov Region. taken from Quo Vadis, Romale? in Participation Factory <https://www.participationfactory.com/quo-vadis-romale-how-the-presov-region-is-moving-towards-better-integration-of-roma-communities/> (Accessed May 5, 2023).

which is trying to ensure that everything being built will be used in the future beyond those 18 months.

According to Anna, one of the effective tools used in the process is a "Community of Practice" or weekly meetings among coordinators to discuss their challenges, ask each other for advice, and support each other's work. It is easy to deal with challenges when you are not the only one facing them, says Anna. Additionally, it creates opportunities for cooperation and a habit of keeping in touch, which can continue even after PF experts step aside.

This program constitutes a great example of systematic participation that helps consolidate and make sustainable infrastructure for continuous democratic innovation and deliberative democracy. Compared with Hungary, where the main actors are non-governmental, Slovakia's main actors are governmental institutions supported by a team of experts. This program shows how setting up the participation as a system is a long-term process contrary to ad hoc short-term deliberative methods like school Participatory Budgeting.

Yet, similarly to any other context, the Slovak case showed that continuous advocacy and awareness-raising among other governmental actors is necessary to decrease risks of new internal institutional blocks and challenges. However, this issue is much easier resolved by a team of coordinators in the case of Slovakia than by individual coordinators, as in the Prague case, since a team of coordinators has more resources to advocate, promote, and negotiate with other actors.⁵⁶

56. *Ibid.*

Participation Factory and its experts hope to continue working on creating long-lasting participation systems and practices that support local governments in creating and sustaining political and social spaces that continue to welcome democratic engagement, inclusion, and support.

The reviewed cases demonstrate how different the contexts are within the CEE region, and how much these differences affect the scope of potential projects, the needs of local organizations, and their ability to cooperate with the government and each other.

_Eastern Europe: Neither Global North, Nor Global South

Despite the differences in the contexts, the scope, and the nature of the projects presented, both members of the Association for Alternative Communities and Participation Factory shared a positive view of the future and a belief in the continuous growth of deliberative and participatory methodologies in all levels of governance. However, experts from both organizations also highlighted that the Eastern European region is unique in that it significantly differs from Western Europe and the Global North since it still struggles with corruption and sustaining stable democracies.

At the same time, neither of the experts who took part in the interviews for this chapter said that they identify their region with the Global South. The main reason is that the Global South is associated with more barriers to democracy, higher rates of

corruption, and the lack of various essential services. As noted by Anna Tehlova, who also co-founded and coordinated the Public Space Network (PSN) in Nairobi, Kenya, certain marginalized communities in Eastern Europe have similar problems accessing essential services faced by many Sub-Saharan African communities. However, the average level of access and quality of life in Eastern Europe is, on average, higher.

This issue of Eastern European self-identification is even more complicated because the countries in this region vary significantly in their levels of democracy and economic status. This ambiguity undoubtedly contributes to Eastern Europe's low levels of cooperation with other regions, either from the Global South or the Global North. The differences among the countries in the region also make it difficult for the local corporations to communicate, find common points, and cooperate with each other.

Regardless, it is evident that solutions that work for the Global North cannot be fully or at all applicable in Eastern Europe. At the same time, it is necessary to eliminate the desire to "catch up" with the North, as it is necessary to recognize the differences between all the regions and acknowledge that, in some cases, countries of the Global South have more innovative solutions. The relationship between "the North" and "the South" should be based on mutual respect, recognition of differences, acknowledgment of the existing discrepancies and imbalances, achievement of equity, and exchange of best practices from democratic innovation and deliberative democracy.