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Municipal Participatory Budgeting Designs in the V4 Countries

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Abstract

Research on PB in CEE has been rather fragmented and has focused on the diffusion of PB, and sometimes on determinative factors inside the countries. Some comparative studies exist but address primarily initial steps of PB. This paper presents the outcomes of a research that focused on the design of participatory budgeting in the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). The main method is a secondary comparative analysis of existing literature and information on the subject. The findings are based on recently published country studies and other available information related to the national context in the countries. We use the country studies as input for a multi-case study analysis (Zongozzi & Wessels, 2016) to make comparisons and, if possible, generalize some of the findings, but also to point out specifics determined by the context in which PB is being implemented and practiced. As the subsidiary method we used expert evaluation. To obtain extra information we consulted experts in all selected countries during July and August 2022. Analyzing PB processes in these countries showed similar features and that, on the whole, PB processes still belong to the group of “the Porto Alegre model adapted for Europe”, as concluded in the literature published almost a decade ago. But this is only valid at a more abstract level of PB designs. Looking at PB processes in practice, it is seen in the V4 region that the actual practices vary over municipalities, even within one and the same country.

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1. Introduction

Participatory budgeting (PB) is defined as a decision-making process through which citizens deliberate and negotiate over the distribution of public resources (Shah, 2007). It is viewed as a direct-democracy approach to budgeting that offers citizens an opportunity to learn about government operations and to deliberate, debate, and influence the allocation of public resources (Shah, 2007). It is considered to be a slight add-on to the existing democratic process, e.g. compared to the quantum budget and ideas of liquid democratic decision-making that are currently being discussed and experimented with as another, but more radical, innovation of participatory democracy (Paulin, 2019).

PB is on the rise (Miller et al., 2019). It is perhaps the most widespread and popular form of democratic innovation (Soukop et al., 2021). It started in Porto Alegre in 1989 and has travelled all over the world (de Vries et al., 2021a). Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries started implementing PB later, but soon after they were fast in joining the community of practitioners, and today they represent almost 50% of the entire cases of European PB (Mączka et al., 2021). The transfer of PB from Brazil to Europe has been a highly differentiated process (Sintomer et al., 2008), and PB has been implemented in various ways, largely as a result of legal, social, political, and historical traditions that exist in different countries (Harkins & Escobar, 2015; Brun-Martos & Lapsley, 2017). As time has passed, the substance of PB, i.e. the redistribution of a significant part of the municipal funds through actual deliberation with previously marginalized groups, has lost importance compared to achieving effects that were originally seen as side-effects (de Vries et al., 2021a), and still there is broad variation in how PB programmes function. This means that the effects of PB on accountability, the decentralization of decision-making authority, and empowerment are conditioned by the local, social, political, and economic environment (Wampler, 2007a). That is why it has been stressed that there is a need to examine PB's functioning in different contexts (Kurdyś-Kujawska et al., 2019).

This might be especially an issue in the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia: "V4") central in this paper. These countries are in the middle between Western European countries and Eastern European countries such as Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. This is not just a matter of geography, but also in terms of politics, economics, socio-cultural features and administrative arrangements. Politically, although these countries do belong to the EU, at the national level a tendency toward less democratic leadership is seen (cf. Freedom House, 2022). Economically, their ranking among 48 European countries regarding GDP per capita

is in the middle – between position 12 and 18 in 2019 (IMF, 2022). Socio-culturally, these four countries score relatively high on power distance, i.e. the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally; masculinity, i.e. a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success, and high on restraint instead of indulgence, i.e. suppressing gratification of needs and regulating it by means of strict social norms (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004). Also special are the opinions of local policymakers (politicians and administrators) of which many more in the V4 than in Western European countries are of the opinion that decisions should be made by experts, that one should rely on leaders in decision-making, and that only the fully informed should have a say in politics (de Vries, 2004, p.59). In terms of administrative arrangements, the four countries are special, given the huge number of municipalities. In Poland there are almost 2500, in the Czech Republic over 6000, in Slovakia somewhat less than 3000 and in Hungary over 3000. Hence, the size of local government in these countries is mostly very limited. Such contextual features might be crucial in the design of PB.

The academic literature (and, also, practice) describes many benefits from PB. It is said to be able to create a stronger civil society (among other things through enhanced learning of citizens), improve transparency, lead to greater public accountability, and allocate resources more effectively (Jaramillo & Alcázar, 2017; Montambeault, 2016; Sæbø et al., 2008; Touchton et al., 2019; Wampler, 2007b). It is also argued that compared to other participatory initiatives like (e-)consultations, PB may be more attractive to citizens as it is less abstract, i.e. a more pragmatic activity, and, therefore, motivates citizens to be engaged at the local level (Royo et al., 2020; Špaček, 2022). On the other hand, several critical points have been raised in the literature regarding PB, for instance, concerning the low actual participation of participants, the marginalization of parts thereof, the procedural power of administrators monitoring and controlling the process, and the low quality or even absence of deliberation (Röcke, 2014; Fung, 2006; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Kuruppu et al., 2016; Lowndes & Wilson, 2001; Musso et al., 2011; Nyamori et al., 2012).

PB practices have been researched in developed countries as well as in developing and transition economies, including countries from Central and Eastern Europe. It is striking that analyses of what is going on in processes of PB, what it is about, and how citizens benefit from such processes are limited to a few critical case studies (Goldfrank, 2007; High, 2009; Kuruppu et al., 2016; Röcke, 2014; Boc, 2019; Svaljek et al., 2019; Klimovský & Nemec, 2021). Also, regarding its practices in CEE countries, despite the widespread attention for PB, research has been rather fragmented (Klimovský et al., 2021) and has just focused on the diffusion of PB as a democratic innovation. Determinative factors inside the countries are only sometimes considered (Klun & Benčina, 2021). A few comparative studies exist but primarily address the initial steps of PB (e.g., Mikuš et al., 2021) or are not up to date or propose only partial information on some countries, (e.g., data in Dias et al., 2019, have not been updated;

regarding the Czech Republic, they offer only partial information). Nonetheless, researching PB in the CEE region is important because, on the one hand, PB in Eastern Europe represents about 46% of PB in Europe (Dias et al., 2019). However, the levels of political participation in this region are generally lower, civil society is typically weaker than in Western Europe and Scandinavia (Gherghina et al., 2019), and citizens are much less organized than in Western countries (de Vries & Sobis, 2022).

All this could have its impact on the way PB processes are designed in the V4 region. This article presents the outcomes of a research pointing out whether that is indeed the case. The research questions this article plans to answer therefore reads “What is the dominant design in PB in the V4?”

The structure of this paper is as follows. After briefly introducing PB processes in the V4 we focus on the design of PB processes because it is determinative for the practices. Previous research points out that although the PB implementation has the character of a cyclical process that includes certain common stages (diagnosis, deliberation, collective decision-making, execution, and monitoring), it varies in the level of process democratization (Kozłowski & Bernaciak, 2021).

2. Participatory budgeting and its designs – points from literature

Research into PB forms part of a larger field of interest in democratic innovations, both theoretical and practical (Sintomer et al., 2008 or Dias et al., 2019). According to many authors (like Krenjova & Raudla, 2013 or Mikuš et al., 2021), there is no universal definition of PB, and the topic of PB interweaves with discourses on participatory democracy/governance, deliberative democracy, public-sector modernization, and public-management reform.

Sintomer et al. (2008, p. 168) see PB as a process that allows for the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances. They add five criteria: (1) the financial and/or budgetary dimension must be discussed; participatory budgeting involves dealing with the problem of limited resources; (2) the city level has to be involved, or a (decentralized) district with an elected body and some power over administration (the neighbourhood level is not enough); (3) it has to be a repeated process (one meeting or one referendum on financial issues is insufficient to constitute an example of participatory budgeting); (4) the process must include some form of public deliberation within the framework of specific meetings/forums (the opening of administrative meetings or classical representative instances to “normal” citizens is not participatory budgeting); (5) some accountability for the output is required.

Mikuš et al. (2021, p. 166) propose a slightly different set of criteria: According to them, (1) the subject of PB is a defined part of the public budget; (2) civic participation has a direct impact on budget creation; (3) protecting the interests of the community by applying a deliberative element is essential; (4) long-term repetition of the process is required; (5) an institutional framework is established to ensure the control function of the management of public finances; (6) process settings with redistribution elements are present; (7) citizens do co-decide on the rules of the process.

The definitions might formally differ, but the essence of PB becomes clear in both. Due to the absence of a universal definition of PB, the shortcomings of a nominalist definition (as it cannot fully encompass the diversity of existing practices), and an ontological definition aimed at defining what PB should be, other authors have used a methodological definition with minimal requisites in order to distinguish PB from related practices while providing sufficient leeway for the different specificities of procedures. In the following text, we mainly use the representative approaches of Sintomer et al. (2008, 2010 and 2013), combined with a few additional illustrative inputs.

The original typology suggested by Sintomer et al. (2008) suggested that six models of PB can be distinguished. These six are strongly influenced by path-dependency: the Porto Alegre model adapted for Europe, the participation of organized interests, community funds at the local level, the existence of a public/private negotiating table, proximity participation, and consultation on public finances. The six models of PB as distinguished by Sintomer et al. (2012, 2013) are labelled democratic participation, democratic proximity, participative modernization, multi-stakeholder participation, neo-corporatism, and community development. These models vary in intensity, scale, normative devices, technique, technology, and ideas (de Oliveira, 2017, p. 40) and can be summarized as follows:

- a) In the first distinguished form, non-elected inhabitants (and possibly their delegates invested with a “semi-imperative mandate”) have de-facto decision-making powers, although de jure the final political decision remains in the hands of elected representatives (p. 14).
- b) In the proximity democracy form, only those citizens or organizations are involved that are trusted and have been “cherry-picked” by the administration. It “is grounded in informal rules and leaves civil society with only marginal autonomy” (p. 17).
- c) The third model, “participative modernization”, consists only of consultation and addresses mainly managerial issues and the modernization of service delivery. It is not about neighbourhood issues, social policies or marginalized groups (p. 17).

- d) In the fourth model, multi-stakeholder participation dominates. Non-organized citizens are excluded and replaced by private enterprises, NGOs, and local government itself.
- e) In the neo-corporatism model, the citizens have completely disappeared and are replaced by “those who matter”, i.e. organized groups like NGOs, trade unions and professional associations, social groups (the elderly, immigrant groups, and so on), and various local institutions/agencies.
- f) Only in the last model, called “community development”, do the origins as developed in Brazil re-appear. It includes procedural rules and requires a relatively high quality of deliberation. The most active participants tend to be the upper segment of the working class, involved in running the community associations. In this model, the role of NGOs is often decisive, especially when they advocate for the rights of disadvantaged or marginalized groups (Sintomer et al., 2013, p. 20).

The typology suggested by Sintomer et al. has been revised several times. Krenjova & Raudla (2013), for instance, attempted to outline existing PB models and discuss them with respect to the environmental variables influencing PB in CEE countries. They modified the Sintomer typology and suggested five European models, namely Porto Alegre adopted for Europe, proximity participation, consultation on public finance, community participatory budgeting, and multi-stakeholder participation. According to them (p. 24), the model of Porto Alegre adapted for Europe can be seen as the “genuine” type of PB, as it has preserved the basic features of the Brazilian case, where this participatory process has its roots. The other models have made “concessions” that diverge from the original model on two fronts: proximity participation, as well as consultation on public finance, are of a consultative nature (rather than implying binding constraints on the elected representatives), while multi-stakeholder and community participatory budgeting are oriented towards organizations only (rather than all individual citizens).

Although such typologies exist and are available, they have not been sufficiently linked with existing PB cases. The available literature on PB in CEE countries is usually oriented toward adoption as such (this can also be seen in the most recent conclusions by the editors of special issues dedicated to PB in the CEE countries – e.g., in Klimovský et al., 2021).

It might be obvious that if the dominant type of design of PB as chosen in the V4 is partly determined by the contextual features, one would not expect the most encompassing model to be dominant, i.e. the model including deliberation and decision-making by the non-elected participants on a substantial part of the municipal budget. Rather one would expect many concessions in the design. If, however, PB in the V4 is substantial in all elements, this implies that we should reflect on the relation between contextual features and the design of PB. We will return to this point in the conclusions. First, this article continues with a brief presentation on the methodology

and the outcomes of our research.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the main RQ outlined in the introduction of this paper, we focused our comparison on the following:

1. How long has PB been experienced in the countries?
2. How is PB regulated in national legislation?
3. How is PB being carried out in practice?
4. What main features of PB can be identified in individual countries?
5. Do PB practices inside the countries mostly follow a similar model or are they relatively heterogeneous?

As for the amount of money involved, we opted to take the percentage of the total municipal budget. This was done to make results comparable. If we took absolute amounts of money involved in PB processes, the outcomes would show a variation which is due to the size of municipalities instead of the relevance of PB processes.

The PB design was determined by investigating what the procedure entailed in terms of proposal, projects, who is eligible to deliberate and to vote, and whether the local council had to accept the outcomes or could still reject outcomes of the PB process.

The main method is a secondary comparative analysis of existing literature and information on the subject. The findings are based on the most recently published country studies we collected during January 2022 using Google Scholar. We used the country studies as input for a multi-case study analysis (Zongozzi & Wessels, 2016) to make comparisons and, if possible, generalize some of the findings, but also to point out specifics determined by the context in which PB is being implemented and practiced.

To obtain extra information we consulted experts in all selected countries during July and August 2022. In each country, two experts were contacted for direct interviews (face-to-face or online). The selection of the experts was based on the requirement that they belonged to top-level national academicians, being the authors of articles/book chapters related to PB. The experts provided their opinion about the main features of PB in their country based on the questions sent to them before the interview. The questions asked were: What is the approximate percentage of municipalities currently working with PB processes? Do the municipalities mostly follow a similar model, or are their approaches relatively heterogeneous?

If a similar model is applied and where variations can be seen, the experts were

offered a table containing the following: the size of the PB budget, the requirements on eligibility to participate, the applied procedure of proposal submission, the ways proposals are deliberated, the voting system applied, the final decision-making procedure and the implementation of the project. If the experts perceived any significant variations, they were asked to provide examples and explanations.

The selection of the V4 countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) is based on historical and geographical grounds. The selected countries share a common communist history, and all of them joined the European Union in 2004. From a geographical point of view, they represent a homogeneous block in Central Europe. The V4 countries belong to the Central and Eastern European region (CEE countries). In that regard, PB initiatives in this wider region face constraints from historical legacies: (1) citizens have been detached from decision-making for a long time as they were previously receivers of public services rather than active co-creators; (2) autonomous self-government at the sub-national levels and various collective forms of political and social organization are a relatively new concept in this region; (3) despite waves of decentralization, responsibilities and powers remain ambiguously assigned to sub-national governments without them enjoying fiscal autonomy; (4) revenues and expenditures of sub-national governments are often imbalanced, and subsidies or transfers from the central level are usually unreliable; (5) the autonomy of sub-national governments in decision-making is limited; and (6) there is general dissatisfaction concerning the quality of local services – citizens do not trust the government. Krenjova & Raudla (2013) confirm these legacies, pointing out that the limited financial autonomy of local governments in these countries, combined with the prevailing political culture, and rather weak civil societies, are determinative for the main challenges to the successful adoption and use of this democratic budgetary innovation among CEE countries. The importance of these legacies is widely acknowledged (e.g. in Klimovský et al., 2021).

The main limitation of this article is that it is not based on our own empirical data. Our aim was to summarize what is available on PB designs in the V4 countries and put forward some explanations as well as research gaps and an agenda for future research.

4. Actual practices in Participatory Budgeting in the V4

This section focuses on the evolution of PB in the four selected countries, taking into account that there are already several comprehensive sources describing the situations in detail (such as Mikuš et al., 2021; Bardovič & Gašparík, 2021; Klotz, 2021; Kozłowski & Bernaciak, 2021; Sedmíhradská et al., 2021). This section should therefore be seen as a brief description of the practices in the V4 which integrates existing knowledge (because the countries are approached in the literature separately by the authors).

4.1 Poland

The first PB-like initiative in Poland is linked to the city of Płock. Between 2003 and 2005 – within the framework of the United Nations Development Programme – a public-private partnership was constituted between the municipality, local NGOs, PKN Orlen (a petrochemicals and gasoline company), and the Levi Strauss company. Projects that were explicitly titled participatory budgeting were introduced in 2011 and 2012. Sopot city is another example. PB processes emerged out of political rivalry between the mayor and the majority of the City Council, and both sides were looking for new ideas to win support (Prykowski, 2011; Kęblowski & Van Criekingenb, 2014; Kozłowski & Bernaciak, 2021; Džinić et al., 2016). Until now, PB initiatives have been implemented by more than 300 local governments (out of a total of 2478). Most cities practicing PB are large and medium-sized cities, but PB processes are also found in rural areas (Leśniewska-Napierała, 2019).

Until 2019, a heterogeneous array of practices was in place, resulting in the need to adopt a legal framework. It stipulated that as of 1 January 2019, participatory budgeting would be a statutory obligation for municipalities with county (powiat) status (Madej, 2019). There are 66 such cities in Poland.

To make the picture even more complex, we need to mention that Poland also has an alternative participatory mechanism called the “Solecki Fund”. This is a central-level fund managed by the Ministry of the Interior, earmarked for the implementation of projects aimed at improving citizens’ quality of life at the village level (this was already legislated in 2009, and that is why it is presented as the “village fund” – Prykowski, 2011; Sześciło & Wilk, 2018). Compared to PB, this instrument is underresearched in Poland (cf. Mączka et al., 2021).

According to Kozłowski & Bernaciak (2021), the implementation of PB in Poland has two aims: 1) involving local communities in the co-management of the city and 2) removing decision-making authority from existing political rivalries. Regarding the first aim, the voter turnout varied (the highest recorded number was 73%, the lowest 3%). The participation was sometimes significantly lower than voter turnout in the national elections (Madej, 2019), although the minimum age for voting on PB proposals is usually set to 16, in some cases even to 13, or it is not regulated at all (Kurdyś-Kujawska et al., 2019). According to existing analyses, this might be also determined by the size of the funds that municipalities allocate on behalf of participatory budgets (from 0.2% to 1.5% of expenditures was allocated to PB, as indicated by Kozłowski & Bernaciak, 2021; in some regions PB did not reach 1% of municipal expenditures - Madej, 2019; in rural areas the percentage is usually even lower – Leśniewska-Napierała & Napierała, 2020).

4.2 Czech Republic

The history of PB in the Czech Republic (Czechia) is relatively short – the literature usually considers the 2014 PB project of the Prague 7 municipal district to be the first real PB project in Czechia. Nevertheless, as Brabec points out, procedures close to the key ideas were already introduced between 2012 and 2014 in four small municipalities where inhabitants could decide on proposals pre-selected by municipal bodies (not by inhabitants/citizens) (Brabec, 2019). PB has been diffused thanks to initiatives of non-governmental organizations, networks (especially the National Network of Healthy Cities, which has been promoting the Local Agenda 21), and the Czech Pirate Party (Kukučková & Bakoš, 2019; Sedmíhradská et al., 2021).

PB has not been regulated by national legislation. Also, no soft law has been passed by responsible central bodies that would guide PB practices. Nor is there any national database of organizations that have implemented PB. Nonetheless, practices are monitored to some extent by the non-governmental organization Agora Central Europe. This organization also provides data on 2019 and 2020 practices on its web pages.³

According to Sedmíhradská et al. (2021), in the Czech Republic, the so-called “project-oriented participatory budgeting” (see next chapter) prevails. Especially the larger municipalities have implemented PB, i.e. municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants. They represented about 60% of PB in 2019 (Minárik, 2020). The percentage of the total municipal budget allocated through PB is very low, ranging from 0.02 to 1.94%, with a median of 0.38%. Brabec (2019) summarized data on voter turnout in PB voting in municipalities in Czechia, clearly suggesting heterogeneity (from less than 1% to 38% of inhabitants voting on PB proposals).

Almost always, municipal bodies or officials are involved as technical evaluators in a pre-selection process prior to voting. In the case of larger cities or city districts, there is usually a PB coordinator who helps the proposers to adapt their projects to comply with the rules. On average, 71% of the project proposals were approved for (final) voting during the pre-selection process (Sedmíhradská et al., 2021). According to Sedmíhradská et al. (2021) most PB voting has been conducted online (57%) or in combination with physical voting (30%). ICT support of PB can be contracted out in larger cities.

4.3 Hungary

Similar to Czechia, there are no legal requirements on PB in Hungary. Local governments did start to experiment with PB only a few years ago. This was partly due to legislation that reduced the powers of local governments and increased state control

3 The data are available here: <https://www.participativni-rozpocet.cz/participativni-rozpocet/> (accessed 01.02.2022).

over them. Increased use of PB was caused by the emphasis on citizen participation during the municipal election campaigns in 2019 (Klotz, 2021).

Up to now, only a few of the 3155 Hungarian municipalities have any experience with PB (less than one per cent). Three local governments in particular have been acknowledged as the most experienced – two districts of Budapest (Kispest, where PB was announced in the programme “Community Budget 2017”, Budafok-Tétény, where PB started right after the elections in October 2019), and the Municipality of Budapest (where PB started in October 2020; Klotz, 2021). Following the 2019 municipal elections, in addition to the Municipality of Budapest (as many capital cities, Budapest has its own self-government as the city/at the city level, and all city districts also have their self-government), several local governments of Budapest (the 1st, 3rd, 8th, and 9th districts) earmarked a small sum (about 1% of their budgets) for local PB as part of their 2020 annual budget.

A very specific feature of PB in Hungary is the visible political motivation behind it – local politicians from opposition parties specifically started to implement PB to increase their parties’ local embeddedness by creating new contact opportunities (Oross & Kiss, 2021). Local politicians loyal to the government do not usually see any need for this kind of public participation (as an element of the strong re-centralization process, which is ongoing now in Hungary). However, NGOs have also initiated some PB practices, e.g. Transparency International Hungary recently cooperated with three municipalities, Szentendre, Óbuda-Békásmegyer and Terézváros, to introduce PB and provide them with professional support. The US Embassy funded the project (Transparency International Hungary, 2022).

4.4 Slovakia

Slovakia has a high fragmentation of municipalities, similar to Czechia and partly to Hungary and Poland. In Slovakia, there are 2927. The capital of Bratislava became the first municipality to use PB in 2011. During this first round of PB, money was not allocated from the city budget but rather was obtained from sponsors thanks to the initiative of the NGO Utopia. The total budget was rather modest (15,000 EUR). For the next rounds, it was promised that 1% of total expenditures would be allocated to PB by the city (i.e., around EUR 2 million). However, in 2012 the City Council allocated only EUR 29,975 and in 2013 EUR 46,000. This was perceived to be demotivating for volunteers involved in PB but did result in PB being implemented in some Bratislava city districts (Murray Svidroňová and Klimovský, 2021).

On-going PB processes have been identified in 59 municipalities (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2022). Municipalities and city districts in Slovakia have implemented various specific PB models. For instance, one of the Bratislava districts – Petržalka – used a model in which projects were presented by its bodies, and citizens were only allowed to vote. In Ružomberok, PB was implemented with the NGO Utopia in 2013 and 2014. Only citizens who were actively participating during thematic assemblies

could submit projects.

Available information indicates that from 0.05 to 0.39% of the total municipal budget has been allocated to PB in Slovakia (de Vries et al., 2021b).

Slovakia is the only V4 country where PB has also been identified at the regional level – the region Trenčín started to implement PB in 2017, the Bratislava region started in 2018, and the Trnava region in 2019. In the case of Trenčín, a project initiated with the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society was implemented in the school year 2018/2019, allocating one thousand Euro to all secondary and grammar schools in the region and allowing pupils to decide how to spend the money.

5. Comparison and discussion

The information provided in the previous section is indicative for the fact that the extent to which the actual practice of PB in the V4 region conforms to one of the designs distinguished by Sintomer depends on the level of abstraction. A summary thereof is provided in Table 1.

On a more abstract level, the Porto Alegre model adapted for Europe (as also suggested by Krenjova & Raudla, 2013) prevails in the V4 countries. The minor exception is Slovakia, where both the secondary literature review and experts involved show that the right of citizens to propose projects for voting can be restricted in some cases.

Usually, PB is designed as a project-oriented approach in which the process is characterized by the following phases:

1. a call for projects (in most cases the total predetermined amount already approved in the budget is also announced);
2. collection of project proposals;
3. pre-selection of projects (dominantly by municipal bodies based on project feasibility or technical analysis);
4. public deliberation on the proposals/projects;
5. voting on pre-selected projects; and
6. financial approval and implementation of successful projects.

Table 1:

PB in the V4 countries – summary of findings

Country and starting year	PB based in law?	Diffusion in municipalities	Main source of funding	Proposals subjected to deliberation with residents?	Who finally decides on proposals? (citizens / council)
Czechia: 2014	No	App. 2,5% of municipalities	Municipal (0.02–1.94% of the total budget)	Yes, usually	Co-decision (local council decides the total budget, citizens vote)
Hungary: 2017	No	Less than 0.5% of municipalities	Municipal (from 0.25 to 1.5% of the total budget)	Yes, usually	Co-decision
Poland: 2011	Yes, partly, for cities with county status.	About 30% of municipalities	Municipal funds (from 0.2 to 1.5% of the total budget)	Yes, usually	Co-decision
Slovakia: 2011	No	App. 2% of municipalities	Municipal (from 0.05 to 0.39% of the total budget)	Yes, usually	Co-decision

Source: authors, adopted from de Vries et al., 2021b, expert inputs

Table 1 shows that PB arrived in the V4 relatively late, i.e. less than 15 years ago. It also shows that the amount of money involved as a percentage of the total municipal budget is rather low. In terms of the “scale” of PB, the data indicate that from 0.02 to 1.94% of the municipal expenditures have been allocated to PB in the V4 countries. The amounts allocated to PB are especially low in Slovakia (from 0.05 to 0.39% of the total budget) and do not exceed the legally required minimum in Poland. In the rest of the V4 countries, PB reached 1.5% of the total budget. This result confirms our expectations presented in previous sections, where the contextual features of the V4 result in low expectations concerning the occurrence of substantial PB processes in the region. Nonetheless, the PB processes have become widespread, at least compared to Western European countries (cf. de Vries et al., 2021b) and Slovenia, where a clear decline in PB processes is witnessed (Klun & Benčina, 2021). PB processes in the V4 are often repeated over multiple years, there is public deliberation about proposals/projects, and there is co-decision involving the municipal council and the participants in the PB about the implementation of proposals with decisive voting by the participants on the preference of different projects.

At a more concrete level, a huge variance is seen in the design of PB. It would be more accurate to state that within the countries involved a huge variation is visible between municipalities in the design of PB. There is clearly no “one size fits all” model implemented by all municipalities. Although commonalities exist, the practice is at the

same time full of variations. This has two implications. First, available typologies of PB designs may not be sufficient for categorizing existing practices. This was confirmed in Poland. Mączka et al. (2021) recently published their findings on PB procedures in Western Poland. They concluded that none of the municipalities implementing PB used one of the “pure” PB models as suggested by Sintomer. Their research also revealed a large variety of configurations of PB used by municipalities. This variation is seen in the amount of money available for PB, the voting method on the projects proposed, the extent of participation, and the inclusion of different (also marginalized) societal groups. The great variation of practice was recently confirmed with regards to Czechia and the use of ICT in PB by municipalities – not only in the ways they inform about PB, but also in the way they use ICT to engage with citizens (Špaček & Navrátil, forthcoming).

The fact that there are differences in implementation of the Porto Alegre model adapted for Europe in selected countries was also confirmed by experts: Table 2 presents the opinion of experts about differences in PB design in all four countries. The table indicates that, according to the experts, local approaches differ, but not too much, except for the Slovak case, where in some municipalities municipal staff are the ones to propose projects instead of the citizens.

Table 2
The differences in implementation of PB by municipalities in selected countries

	Equal approach				Minor variation				Significant variations			
	CZE	HU	POL	SK	CZE	HU	POL	SK	CZE	HU	POL	SK
The % of the municipal budget involved					x	x	x	x				
The eligibility to participate		x	x		x			x				
The way proposals are made			x		x	x						x
The deliberation about proposals					x	x	x	x				
The voting system					x	x	x	x				
The decision-making process					x	x	x	x				
The implementation of the decision					x		x	x		x		
The perceived (by experts) quality of the process as a whole							x	x	x	x		

Source: authors’ own, 2023

These outcomes have implications for the way PB processes are to be explained. We started this article by pointing to the specific features of the V4 region in terms of politics, economics, socio-cultural characteristics, and administrative arrangements. These are macro-factors, and if they had any explanatory power, we would expect to see commonalities in the way PB processes are designed rather than variation. At an abstract level such commonalities are indeed seen, but in the day-to-day practice of PB a lot of variation is visible. At this concrete level, macro-level factors might therefore have less explanatory power. Rather, the actual design of PB processes, whether to initiate them and how to design them, depends on individual actors at the local level.

In almost all cases, the initiative lies with civil sector organizations (the core actors during the starting phase of PB especially in Czechia and Slovakia) or the mayor. The latter often has some political goals, and PB is expected to serve these goals. The political motivation was especially stressed by the Hungarian experts:

It is always the mayor and the city council from the opposition who support PB. The government and government-friendly municipalities are ignorant towards PB.

This situation may be related to a general lack of accountability and responsibility in the region (see, e.g., Veselý, 2013). The “political background” at the local level seems most important for the initiation of PB. This aspect is most visible in Hungary, where local leaders from opposition parties use PB as a tool to promote themselves. The patronage of PB initiatives is also often politically based with the identification of an initiative with a party, or sometimes just a single politician.

Furthermore, the explanation of the elements distinguished within PB designs could differ. Whether or not PB processes are initiated most often depends on the goals and expectations of local actors and evaluations of pilots in PB at the local level elsewhere. The amount of money allocated for such processes is likely to be explained by an existing surplus or deficit in the municipal budget. The extent to which proposals are publicly deliberated upon or only evaluated regarding their feasibility by local officials might well be determined by the preferences of the local administration, and whether voting takes place. The outcomes thereof are determinative for the implementation of successful proposals, depending on the vision of the local council and whether they are willing to abandon part of its prerogative to decide upon the budget. However, more research into this (e.g. case studies focusing on PB practices in selected cities) is necessary to understand the practices better.

6. Conclusions

The goal of our paper was to conduct a comparative analysis of PB processes in the Visegrad 4 countries. The research question to be answered was formulated as follows: “What is the dominant design in PB in the V4?” Analyzing PB processes in these countries showed similar features. On the whole, PB processes still belong to the group of “the Porto Alegre model adapted for Europe”, as concluded in the literature published almost a decade ago. This answer is based on the analysis in which we first described what PB designs had been distinguished theoretically, secondly how to determine what the dominant design is in the V4 region, and third, an investigation into the type of design that is actually dominant in this region.

The answer given is, however, only valid at a more abstract level of PB designs. Factors and information investigated in case studies and their comparative analysis might explain the (small) amount of money involved, the (limited) participation by residents, and the (limited) extent to which local councils are prepared to abandon their prerogative to decide on the municipal budget. Looking at PB processes in practice, it is seen in the V4 region that the actual practices vary over municipalities, even within one and the same country. The explanations for the question of whether or not such processes are initiated in a certain municipality, what the amount of money involved is, whether deliberation and voting take place, and whether the final word is given to the local council or to the participants in the PB process, seem to be idiosyncratic. Mostly, the roles of local civic organizations, the mayor, and the opposition in the council are determinative for initiating such processes. The deficit or surplus in the municipal budget seems to determine the amount of money allocated for such processes. The preferences of the administration seem to determine whether they themselves decide upon the feasibility of proposals or whether the participants in the PB process can vote on the desirability of the proposals.

Hence, the specific fact on PB processes in the V4 countries is the “political background” of PB implementation. The patronage of PB initiatives is often political. It involves the identification of such an initiative with a party, or sometimes just a single politician (mayor). It may also determine the sustainability (continuity) of PB in a municipality. This (in combination with other critical issues mentioned) calls for in-depth research into the characteristics of local leaders and networks, their preferences, and the motivations resulting from the perspectives of local administrators, citizens, and NGOs.

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