



BRATISLAVA PARTICIPATORY BUDGET

CASE STUDY REPORT & ANALYSIS



Participatory Budgeting
for Sustainable Development
of V4 Capital Cities



Prepared by Utopia



Authors:

Eva Riečanská & Peter Vittek

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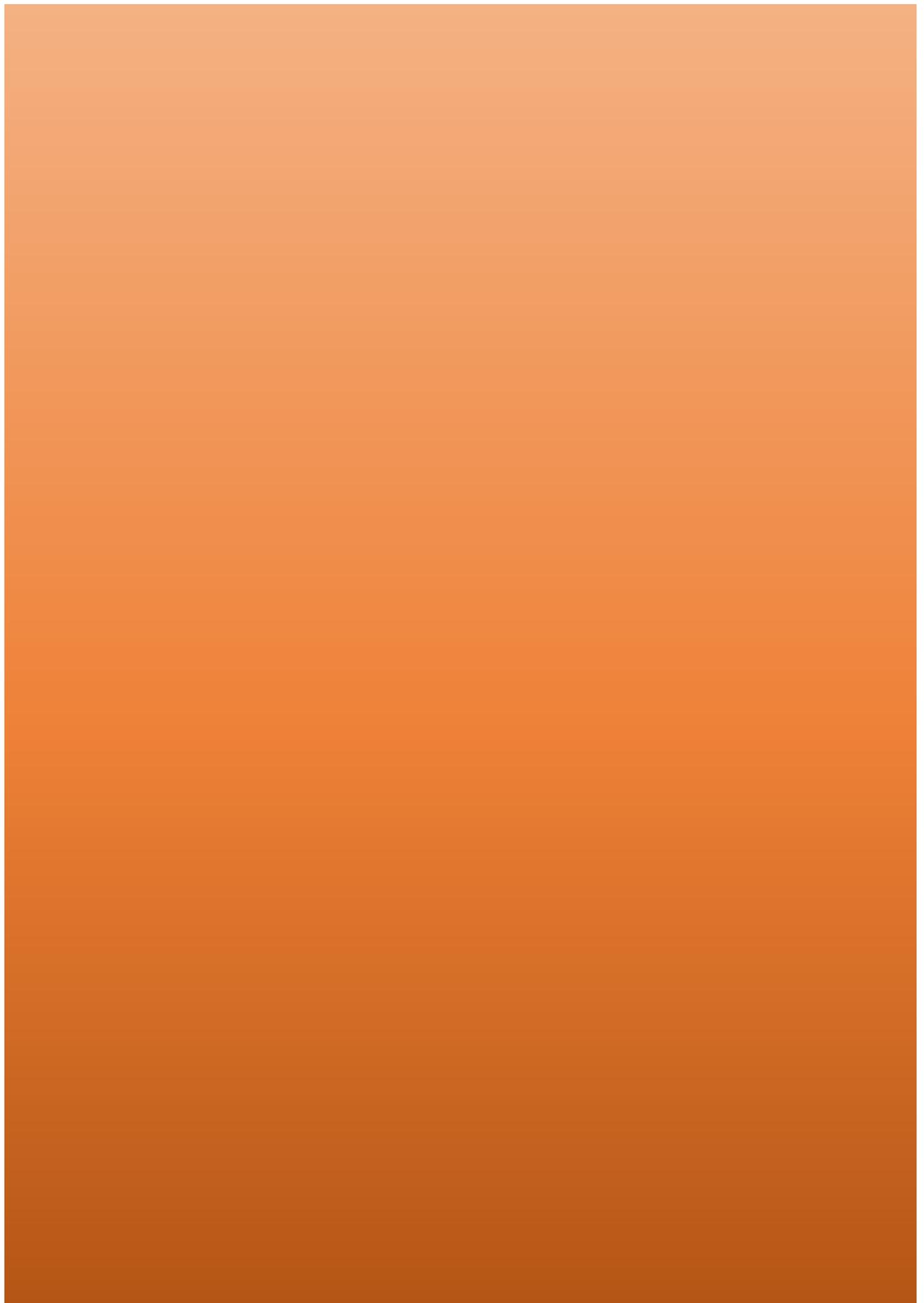
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PREFACE

Data used in this case study come from several sources – written documents, interviews with relevant actors and personal experiences. We analysed documents, reports and other related written outputs published or otherwise produced over the course of eight years (2010-2018) during which the association Utopia initiated and have been developing processes of participatory budgeting in Bratislava and other cities in Slovakia. The analysed documents include official results of particular years (editions) of the participatory budgeting cycle, rules of the participatory budget, press releases and press conferences, recordings from public meetings and evaluations for the process. Other important sources are personal experiences of members of the association Utopia. We also used comments and observations by people involved in the participatory budgeting process – individual citizens, members of various NGOs, local government representatives or employees of the local office.

HOW IT BEGAN IN BRATISLAVA

The beginnings of the participatory budget in the Slovak capital city of Bratislava are closely linked to the activities of the civic association Utopia. The NGO Utopia was established in 2010 with the main mission to strengthen democratic processes in society and combat various forms of social exclusion. It strives to develop, promote and implement social innovations which have a potential to make society inclusive in a very broad sense. The organisation promotes participatory democracy, development of environmentally responsible cooperative and solidarity economy and is part of the open data movement. The introduction of the participatory budgeting process within public administration institutions in Slovakia was considered to be one of the tools to reach these goals.

As one of the founders of Utopia puts it: Utopia sees the participatory budget as realisation of the “Right to the City” in the sense as this concept was formulated by Henry Lefebvre and David Harvey.

Since its inception, Utopia has been systematically promoting the concept of participatory budgeting within a more general framework of the concept of participatory democracy. Even before the actual practical implementation of the participatory budget in Bratislava, Utopia had organised a series of educational presentations and public lectures about participation (including a multidisciplinary academic conference in Autumn 2010) and published articles in the national media about examples of participatory budgeting processes from abroad as well as reports from attempts at participatory budgets introduction in other places in Slovakia that Utopia had already initiated.

On the basis of academic writings and theoretical analyses, its own experiences and discussions with organizers of participatory budgeting processes in other cities, Utopia adopted and strives to practically implement a model of participatory budgeting that should meet the following criteria:

1. Subject of the process are public budgets or their part (participatory budgeting does not equal public planning)
2. Citizens' participation has a direct impact on the outcome of the budgeting process (the process goes beyond mere consultation)
3. Citizens decide about the rules governing the process
4. The process contains elements of deliberation (it is not a referendum or a plebiscite)
5. The process enables citizens to monitor public expenses
6. It is an iterated process, i.e it is repeated regularly (a one-time process is not an example of participatory budgeting)
7. Ideally, the design of the process follows redistributive logic (e.g. the poorest neighbourhoods get more resources, the process contains elements of gender mainstreaming and the like)

MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Main arguments for promotion of participatory budgeting reflected the mission of Utopia:

- it strengthens democracy and provides people with the possibility to truly take part in decision-making process
- it contributes to citizenship education: people have a chance to get a hands-on experience with public administration, how it works and what the division of responsibilities is, and they can better understand their municipality and the needs of their fellow citizens
- it increases transparency and efficiency of public administration: the involvement of citizens narrows the space for corruption and inefficient use or squandering of public funds
- it contributes to social justice especially through efforts to involve those who usually do not participate in decision-making, it enriches decision-making by providing the space for the inclusion of their points of view and contributes to better fulfilment of their needs
- it cultivates community life and improves the relationship of citizens with their own town or place of residence

THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO IMPLEMENT PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN BRATISLAVA

Utopia was founded in the year when the local election took place, so during the election campaign the organisation was actively seeking political allies who, if elected to the office, would support implementation of the participatory budgeting. Simultaneously, Utopia was organising active people who would help mobilise others to take part in the process. Utopia approached with its participatory budgeting proposal all candidates running for the office of the Bratislava city mayor – in the end two of them included the participatory budget in their political program: Milan Ftáčnik who proposed that until the end of his term in the office the amount of finances for the participatory budget would gradually reach 1 percent¹ of the total municipal budget and Ján Budaj and his *Zmena zdola* (Change from Below) party who proposed to start with the amount of 2 percent and gradually increase it. The municipal budget was 200 million euros.

It was Milan Ftáčnik who won the municipal election and he tried to stick to his campaign promise: in July 2011 at a press conference mayor Milan Ftáčnik and representative of Utopia Peter Nedorščík announced the launch of the pilot scheme of the participatory budget that was designed to test the proposed decision-making mechanism in a shortened time and promote the idea with the public at large.²

After the press conference an information and educational campaign was launched. It comprised:

- organisation of public meetings
- presentations and workshops
- launch of a website
- using of the social media
- publishing of both original and translated texts about principles of participatory budgeting and examples from different countries

1 See: https://issuu.com/ftacnik2010/docs/volebny_program_maly_skladacka

2 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkQwP8UYhF8>

Public meetings served as first contacts with citizens, for dissemination of information about various forms of involvement in the process and for the first rounds of collection of ideas for the pilot participatory budgeting process. In parallel, presentations and workshops were organised for anybody who wanted to be involved in the process more closely or learn more about the concept as such.

The series of presentations and workshops encompassed the following topics:

- a) the right to the city and the philosophical basis of participatory budgeting
- b) what is participatory budgeting
- c) examples of various forms of participatory budgets in the world
- d) electronic participation
- e) public deliberation as technology of democracy
- f) economic implications of participatory budgeting

The target group was not just citizens, but also local politicians and municipal office employees. A number of citizens who attended these educational presentations later became part of the core organisational team of the participatory budget.

Hence, the Municipality and Utopia agreed to work together to gradually create a viable participatory process. The pilot process that was running from July to December got 15, 000 euros from sponsorship funds, 10 projects were submitted and 200 people participated. The ranking of the projects was decided at the final public deliberation meeting³ preceded by a series of meetings of thematic communities of those who drafted their project proposals. In November 2011, after the presentation of the results of the pilot scheme, the Municipal Assembly passed a resolution on the allocation of funds for the participatory budget for the following year 2012. All 37 municipal deputies voted in favour of the resolution. However, in the end the allocated amount of money was only 30,000 euros while Utopia requested the amount of 100,000 euros.

3 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAAxs0w492w>

Nevertheless, in the year 2012 the first full-fledged participatory budgeting process took place in the city of Bratislava. To facilitate the process of organising people and involving them in the scheme, the “Community Centre of Generations” was established as a meeting space of thematic communities that started to work on developing citizens’ projects. Initially 5 thematic communities started to work: culture, environment, youth, seniors and transportation, later mostly the communities dealing with the environment, youth issues and seniors remained active. Also the Coordination Committee for Participatory Budget was established to facilitate communication between people involved in the participatory budgeting process and the Municipality. The Committee consisted of representatives of active thematic communities, experts from Utopia and the advisor to the city mayor.

Some of the active citizens later continued to take part in the process in the borough of Bratislava-Nové Mesto also after the proper participatory budgeting – as explained below – had been phased out at the level of the Municipality. As a matter of fact, one of the projects that was conceived and implemented as a municipal participatory budget project catalysed the introduction of the process in the city borough of Bratislava-Nové Mesto.

Thanks to the introduction of the participatory budgeting in Bratislava, several projects initiated and drafted by citizens were implemented. One of the most successful was the reconstruction of the abandoned cinema theatre Zora, which the Municipality was unable to properly manage or sell. A group of locals from the neighbourhood drafted a project to get money from the participatory budget and got funding for the reconstruction of the building which they also got to manage. To this day, the building serves its new purpose of a local cultural and community centre where people from the neighbourhood can organise their own free time activities.

CHALLENGES AND REASONS WHY PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING WAS CLOSED AT THE LEVEL OF MUNICIPALITY

Utopia cooperated with the Municipality until December 2013. The organisation had to terminate its cooperation due to lasting disagreements and lack of political will to resolve them.

The main problematic issues were:

- the amount of funds allocated for the participatory budget was too low and the Municipality was not increasing it
- the Municipality did not provide any support – including adequate funding for promotion of the participatory budgeting process with the public at large
- some citizens' projects were not implemented and some were not provided funds although they had been implemented
- The Municipal Assembly tried to influence the autonomy of the decision-making process of the participatory budget

Subsequently, Utopia published an open letter⁴ demanding that the shortcomings of the participatory budgeting process be addressed and resolved. Due to the fact that these demands were not met with a positive response, the organisation was no longer able to guarantee the quality of the process and had to withdraw from further cooperation with the Municipality. The Municipality renamed the remnants of the process to “Citizens' Budget” and limited people's involvement in it. At present, the scheme is still in place, although the problems that Utopia had pointed out are still present and they discourage people from any large-scale participation.

4 See: http://utopia.sk/liferay/rss-feeds/-/asset_publisher/Gjz3/content/id/2848386

EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGET IN THE BOROUGH OF BRATISLAVA-NOVÉ MESTO

The Borough of Bratislava-Nové Mesto (BANM) is located in the north-western part of Bratislava on the foothill of the Lesser Carpathians. It is part of the city district Bratislava III. Its area is 37,5 km², with the population of about 40,000 people. The borough is quite diverse in terms of its territory as well as social composition – its territory covers the city forest that is part of the Natural Park the Lesser Carpathians, a large industrial zone with remnants of one of the then biggest chemical plant in Slovakia where nowadays the homeless and otherwise socially excluded people find their “shelter”, but it also has a large area with sports facilities and a recreational zone and some neighbourhoods with lucrative real estate (Koliba, Kramáre). In its territory the largest hospital campus in Slovakia is located. It has several residential neighbourhoods with varied social composition (e.g. old residents, the elderly, newly built parts with younger people, the Asian community and the like). The borough annual budget is about 10-15 million euros.



Figure 1. Map of the Borough

As already mentioned in the previous part, the beginnings of the PB in the city borough Bratislava-Nové Mesto (BANM) is tied to the implementation of the participatory budget projects on the city-wide level. One of the few successfully finalized citizens' projects in 2013 captured the interest of the mayor of the BANM Rudolf Kusý who with several deputies of the Local Council helped to implement the project on the premises by planting trees on one the major streets in Bratislava. This way, people were able to resolve a problem which the Municipality – in spite of many appeals – had ignored for many years.

Rudolf Kusý, after several consultations with Utopia, decided to support the introduction of the participatory budget in his borough in Autumn 2013. At the beginning of 2014 the pilot scheme was put in place with the allocated funds of 20,000 euros. 15 projects were proposed of which 11 were implemented. People cast 768 votes. In this initial phase, the main agents of the process were members of Utopia and their enthusiasm to change the face of the Local Office.

In 2015, on the basis of evaluation of the pilot scheme and activities of the provisionally established Office for Participation, the regular Department for Public Participation was established, the statute of the participatory budget defining its form, mechanisms and competencies of involved stakeholders was approved and funds in the amount of 240,000 euros were allocated for the first regular edition of the participatory budgeting process.



Figure 2. Logo of the Participative Budget in BANM



Figure 3. Info flier “Here We Create Our City” published by the Department for Public Participation

At present, The Department for Public Participation has 3 regular internal part-time employees and 2 external collaborators. Since its inception, the Department focuses on two interrelated areas of public participation – participatory budgeting and participatory planning of public spaces.

The Department is in charge of:

- preparation and coordination of the overall participatory budgeting process
- preparation and coordination of activities related to participatory planning of public spaces
- collection and systematisation of citizens’ ideas through the questionnaire “The Market of Ideas”

- organisation of public meetings
- organisation and coordination of participatory communities
- individual consultations
- cooperation with NGOs
- coordination of working teams within the Local Office and its particular departments
- communication and cooperation with the Local Assembly
- media presentation of its activities
- trainings and consultations with local governments and activists in Slovakia and abroad
- administration of the website pr.banm.sk

The current form of the participatory budget in in BANM is an outcome of a process that over the course of 4 years has had its ebbs and flows from its first introduction through the pilot scheme to the newly renegotiated rules after a crisis in 2016. During that year a major disagreement arose related to the overall decision-making process when the members of the Local Assembly refused to allocate money for the project whose main beneficiary were supposed to be homeless people although the project won the popular vote. The deputies thus violated the rules and statute of the participatory budget and compromised the autonomy of the process.

Subsequently, the Department for Public Participation organised a series of public discussions about the participatory budgeting process, talked with the deputies and local officers about problematic moments of the process and proposed solutions to the main points at issue. One of the most problematic points turned out to have been the incorporation of public deliberation into the decision-making process and its weight in its overall outcome. During these discussions the Department collected a number of people's reactions that were subsequently used in evaluation of the previous years of participatory budgeting in BANM. Citizens mostly agreed on the fact that the borough benefits from the introduction of the participatory budget. Almost all of them wanted the process to stay in place.

To illustrate this, we selected several of their statements:



...many of us are grateful that the participatory budget and participation as such is taking root. It may not be perfect yet, but it compels people to think about things that they otherwise may have not thought about.

When people have a chance to have their say about the nature of the place in which they live, when they can show their interest, then the form and quality of life in that place changes within 50 years. We do not see that yet, but we see that people are having a discussion here. Maybe 18 people are involved in it, but it is not just their discussion, what we see its part of a process that eventually will make a difference.

I can see that our neighbourhood tremendously benefits from the participatory budget...beautiful projects have been realised. And this year, some people, a narrow group of people, have come with a made up problem that got blown out of proportions. I am not saying that the participatory budgeting process cannot be improved, that there are no better ways to do, but this fuss about it is petty and senseless...

However, a few people also mentioned their concerns about introduction of elements of participation into the system of representative democracy and their negative stance towards “excessive” opening of the local government to the public. The idea that elected representatives will lose their position and control over the local government is met with some resistance and apprehension as some fear that participation will lead to the establishment of new illegitimate institutions that will take over the function of the current ones, i.e. that the process of participation will create an “alternative to the local office” – as one citizen put it.

Such concerns have been repeatedly voiced since the first launch of the city-wide pilot scheme in 2011 and they often reveal deeply rooted authoritarian views, uneasiness about radical political equality, social justice, more equitable distribution of political power and deepening of democratic processes.

Regularly repeated are also discussions about who has the right to propose projects and decide about the participatory budget. These issues have come up in discussions in other towns in Slovakia as well. From the beginning, Utopia has striven to promote a model that would include the largest possible number of people: anybody can propose a project and all people who are in some way affected by the project realisation should have the right to decide about it, i.e. not just those who are borough residents, but also people who temporarily live in the

given area or who spend much of their time there (they work or study there and the like). One of the most problematic points was the issue of incorporation of public deliberation into the decision-making process and its weight in its overall outcome.

The analysis of ideas raised in the discussion revealed the following key points:

- the participatory budget is a progressive form of providing services to citizens and hence it is important to have it
- each year the local government should allocate a lump sum of money for the participatory budget the amount of which should not be lowered
- the rules of participation should be defined beforehand and they should be as simple as possible
- the public deliberation should stay in place as part of decision-making and it should have an appropriate weight
- introduce a possibility/mechanism that would each year allow to include new experimental elements into decision-making – such system would allow to change the participatory budgeting rules once a year to incorporate experiences from the preceding year
- elected representatives (the Local Assembly, the Borough Mayor) can veto the projects only if:
 - 1) they pose a threat to people's health or lives
 - 2) they pose a threat to people's safety, security and property
 - 3) defame or disparage some social groups
 - 4) deepen social inequalities
- all barriers (formal/bureaucratic/financial) that complicate and delay the launch of realisation of projects should be removed
- the Department for Participation should make their communication with people more efficient, broaden the scope of participation to include other areas of public administration and strive to include increasing number of people into decision-making

- the openness of the Local Office to citizens should be gradually increased⁵

The discussion about the new rules took more than 6 months and resulted in new rules of the process. Hence, the year 2017 was running in a special regime. The problems discouraged some people from participation and only 7 projects were submitted, but all of them were approved via public deliberation, supported and implemented by funding.

5 See <http://pr.banm.sk/liferay/documents/282511/2759127/zaverecna+sprava+z+diskusie+o+pravidlach+PR.pdf/7fd84bc4-8373-4b6e-b88a-fc78c9fa527e?version=1.0>

THE CURRENT PROCESS IN THE CITY BOROUGH BANM

The participatory budget in BANM has three types of outputs:

1. citizens' projects
2. assignments
3. priorities

The purpose of citizens' projects is to enable people to implement smaller interventions into their neighbourhoods, innovate or start a new local public service, or to contribute to the life of their local community. The projects can apply for a budget of up to 5,000 euros and the proponents are always also involved in implementation of their projects – they act as project coordinators. It means that they present their project to the public and are responsible for their realisation. Nevertheless, the realisation always takes place in cooperation with the Local Office represented by officers from the Department for Public Participation. Hence, in this way, the Local Office opens to the public and citizens become their partners or even employees for the time period of the project implementation. Besides project coordinators, usually also other people cooperate on particular projects. Quite typical are common workshops or various forms of collective neighbourhood improvement or garbage cleaning. These citizens' projects are always implemented in the years following the finalisation of the participatory budgeting decision-making process. One of the most successful projects is the local bike repair workshops located on previously unused property of the local public library.⁶ The workshop is equipped with various tools for bicycle maintenance and volunteers regularly teach people how to repair their bikes. These workshops often take the form of a community gathering and cook-out party and feature various educational activities for children. Citizens' projects are very diverse and touch upon various local needs and services ranging from small reconstructions of public spaces to cultural and educational activities.

6 <https://www.facebook.com/cyklodielnabanm/>



Figure 4. Bicycle workshop

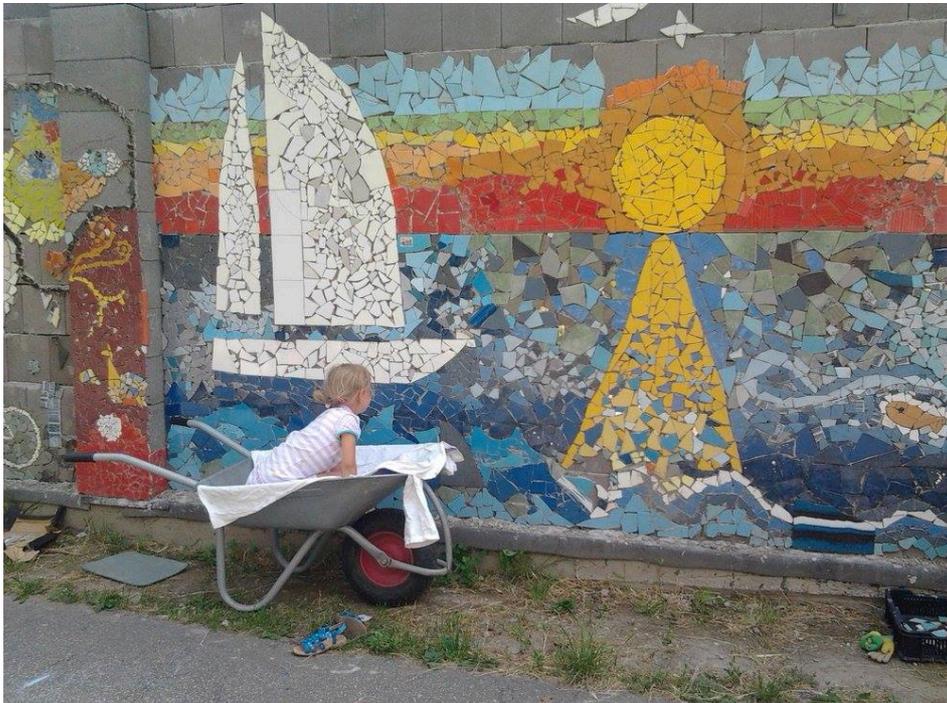


Figure 5. Community art project "Gaudi's Workshop"



Figure 6. Community garden “Vinica”



Figure 7. T3 street car now serves as a space for cultural events

Assignments are larger investment proposals that the Local Office implements on the basis of people's ideas. The ideas submitted by citizens are systematised into thematic clusters. The funding size of investments is not limited and given the complicated nature of some their realisation can take place within a time frame of several years. Thus far, the most successful assignment has been bicycle pathways. To facilitate the process, at the Local Office a special position of an officer for bicycle transportation was established to coordinate building of the bicycle pathways network. A part of this assignment is also elaboration of of the strategy of development of bicycle transportation in the borough. Hence, the assignment has become a permanent part of the BANM Local Office.



*Figure 8. Planning of a playground in the Kramáre neighbourhood
- one of the winning assignments in 2018*

Priorities are recommendations for the Local Assembly that should be reflected in the budget of the city borough. They show which budget chapters should be most supported not just in the coming fiscal year, but from a long-term perspective.⁷

⁷ In the year 2018, people could exceptionally vote also about issues the resolution of which is not in the power of the local government, but which will be taken into account in negotiations with respective institutions or individuals.

The commencement of each edition is in the Spring. From March to May the Department for Public Participation collects peoples' ideas that can be submitted via a questionnaire, e-mail, telephone, at public meetings and in person at the Local Office. At the beginning of each new edition, an information campaign about various forms of involvement takes place. The Department publishes a call for submission of ideas and announces dates of public meetings.⁸ In the first phase it is not necessary to submit a fully elaborated project, just its short synopsis. Anybody who has reached the age of 16 years can participate and submit a project proposal. After this initial phase, the ideas are analysed and systematised.



Figure 9. Public discussion

Ideas collected from citizens are analysed and processed between June and September. In this phase, intense communication with project coordinators takes place and people can develop their project ideas at series of working meetings with officers from the Department for Public Participation. During preparations of projects, the feasibility of all projects' outputs is consulted with respective local office departments. Those proposals that are not feasible to implement or are not in compliance with law or with the borough development documents

8 See e.g. <http://pr.banm.sk/liferay/vyzva-na-rok-2018/2019>

are excluded. This preparatory phase ends in September by a public presentation of citizens' projects and assignments.⁹ The public can ask questions and present their comments on particular citizens' projects introduced by projects coordinators or, in case of assignments, by officers from the Local Office. Comments from the public can be included into the final version of outputs before the commencement of the decision-making phase of the process.



Figure 10. Public presentation of projects

The public presentation of projects and assignments marks the beginning of the decision-making phase. Anybody who has a permanent residency in BANM and has reached the age of 16 years can take part in the decision making. The decision-making takes place in October and November and is comprised of voting and public deliberation. The decision-making phase is preceded by an information campaign: each household receives voting ballots and can also get additional ones at the Local Office or at voting stations which are in all borough libraries and senior citizens' centres. It is also possible to vote on-line. People decide about all three

9 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWshzMcntHYhAYBwOol1aZKPV41jJMMrT>

types of outputs (projects, assignments, priorities). In case of priorities, it is possible to vote for any number of thematic areas, in case of assignments people can choose from 3 presented assignments and they can vote for 4-8 citizens' projects.

The initial goal of Utopia was to introduce deliberation into decision-making process of the participatory budgeting and to ascribe to it the highest possible weight. Since the beginning, deliberation has been the most contentious feature of the process and subject of many discussions (see the following section for more detailed treatment of this topic). Therefore, the weight and form of deliberation have changed quite often. In the current rules of participatory budgeting in BANM deliberation is part of decision-making only with respect to citizens' projects and its weight is 30 percent of the overall outcome. The weight of the paper ballot is 60 percent and the internet vote is 10 percent. This voting weighting reflects an outcome of a complicated compromise between the public, the Department for Public Participation and members of the Local Assembly in BANM.

At the end, all outcomes of the whole decision-making process are presented to the Local Assembly and included in the budget breakdown for the coming year, which is usually voted on in November or December. The Department for Public Participation elaborates its annual report. Each year after the final phase of the process it is also possible to evaluate the overall process and propose changes.

The model of participatory budgeting in BANM allows for various forms of participation and decision-making such as:

- regular work of project coordinators
- involvement in projects realisation
- submission of ideas via a questionnaire
- participation in a discussion a public meeting
- public voting
- public deliberation

These particular forms differ in the intensity of participation. The aim is to make various levels of participation possible for the largest possible number of people while also provide ample space for those who do not want or cannot spend too much time on their involvement in decision-making. Regular work in the community takes a lot of volunteering time, but not too many people are interested in this form of participation – regular meetings of projects coordinators are attended by dozens of people. Others are more involved in less work-intense and time-consuming activities: they can get involved in projects realisation, propose their ideas through a simple questionnaire, they can take part in a discussion at any of public meetings, or simply cast a ballot in voting.

At present, citizens’ projects coordinators work in 9 participatory communities according to respective neighbourhoods. The activities coordinated by the Department for Public Participation currently encompass the following themes:

- parks and public greenery
- senior citizens
- the youth
- bicycle transportation
- public spaces and urbanistic development
- social development

Time Table of Activities	
January – February	evaluation of the previous year and of implementation of projects
March – May	collection of ideas (questionnaire, the Internet, telephone, public meetings)

May – September	processing of ideas, consultations with the Office (feasibility, costs, legal issues and compatibility with other binding documents such as the Plan of Economic and Social Development)
October – November	decision-making and processing of results

Overview of Participatory Budgeting in BANM 2014 - 2018

Year	Edition	Types of projects	Funds allocated	No. of proposed projects	No. of funded projects	Decision-making (deliberation/paper votes/Internet)	Total votes (paper/internet)
2014	The Pilot	citizens' projects	20 000 €	15	11	50/40/10	768 (176/592)
2015	1 st regular edition	citizens' projects	40 000 €	18	14	50/40/10	2440 (1011/1429)
		assignments	200 000 €	8	4	0/70;/30	
2016		citizens' projects	40 000 €	18	11	60/30;/10	1260 (780/480)

	2 nd regular edition	assignments	210 000 €	8	4	0/70/30	
2017	3 rd edition (special regime)	citizens' projects	31 349 €	7	7	approved by deliberation	approved by deliberation
2018	4 th regular edition (new rules) ¹⁰	citizens' projects	40 000 €	11	9	30/60/10	1583 (1014/569)
		assignments	1 mil. €	32	13	0/90/10	

10 According to the new rules, in 2018 people could vote for 2 types of assignments: assignments for the whole borough and assignments for neighbourhoods. Some of them are large-scale and long-term investment project that would take several years to implement.



PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROCESS

PREPARATORY PHASE

A



(A) announcements, "The Market of Ideas", consultations with citizens, public meetings

B



(B) data analysis and processing, systematisation and coordination of ideas with the Local Office, informing, preparation of outputs for PB

DECISION-MAKING



qualitative: public deliberation/quantitative: paper ballot, Internet voting

REALISATION



Evaluation



Improvement of Outputs
Better quality of Process
Involvement of Citizens in Process

PUBLIC DELIBERATION IN THE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROCESS

According to the *Centre for Public Deliberation*¹¹, deliberation is an approach to politics in which citizens, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in community problem solving and public decision making. Working with trained facilitators who utilize a variety of deliberative techniques, citizens come together to:

- Learn about the issue
- Talk with, not past, each other
- Consider diverse points of view
- Discover key tensions and values
- Spark new ideas
- Make decisions

The practice of deliberation is seen as the cornerstone of democracy and community politics. Deliberation connects people, even those with conflicting interests, in a way that allows them to make decisions and act in regard to problems or challenging circumstances. Deliberation can also reveal new possibilities for action that individuals alone did not see before.

In the process citizens representing a broad range of stakeholders come together and consider relevant facts and values from multiple points of view; listen to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them and consider the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to most public issues; and ultimately seek to come to some conclusion for action based on a reasoned public judgement.

11 <https://cpd.colostate.edu/what-is-deliberation/>

Hence, the deliberative approach contains several inherent core principles¹² that enhance participatory democracy and as such can have a positive impact on the quality of the participatory budgeting process:

1. Tough Choices: In a diverse democracy, public problems inherently involve competing positive values. Addressing these problems requires making tough choices—decisions defined by the trade-offs inherent in situations where multiple legitimate values point reasonable people in conflicting directions. Too often our other processes for public problem-solving, such as adversarial politics or technical, expert-based research, frame or study issues in ways that ignore these tough choices. Deliberative processes, on the other hand, focus on uncovering them and helping citizens work through such difficult decisions. Often, a critical result of a deliberative project may simply be the clear identification of opposing values underlying a public problem, which can have significant impacts for public knowledge and improved understanding.

2. Public Judgement: Public deliberation focuses on developing and improving public judgement. Public judgement represents a particular form of public opinion that involves consideration of relevant facts and ethical issues, the weighing of alternatives from multiple perspectives, and an understanding of consequences of those alternatives. Public judgement recognizes that some difficult decisions can never be truly settled. Therefore, while good information is certainly critical to decision-making, it is acknowledged that no amount of research can provide clear solutions to complex public issues. Due to the nature of public issues, often the best we can do is make temporary decisions based on the available information and a balance of competing interests and mutual respect across perspectives.

2. Democratic Governance: The deliberative approach presumes that public problems require engagement and coordination from the entire community – individuals, groups, non-profits, businesses, experts, educational institutions, etc. - not simply the government. It thus shifts the focus from government to governance. Often, the very act of coming together to talk can spark new ideas and motivations for action, as well as greater individual and

12 See Carcasson, Martin and Leah Sprain, *Key Aspects of the Deliberative Democracy Movement*. In: Public Sector Digest, Summer 2010. Available at: <https://cpd.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/01/carcasson-key-aspects-of-deliberative-democracy.pdf>

community responsibility for those actions. Broad collaborative efforts that move away from a focus on government as sole problem-solver can work to transcend political partisanship, empower local communities, and lead to more systemic changes that go beyond an ongoing focus on addressing symptoms.

3. Inclusiveness and Equality: To be legitimate, deliberative processes must strive to be inclusive and represent the whole community, and participants must be considered equal during the deliberation. No one's contribution is inherently more valuable than another's. The process brings together participants from different backgrounds, ages, ethnicity, political orientations, incomes, occupations, education levels, etc. It strives to addressing inequalities of power, getting beyond the "usual suspects" (i.e. those who usually participate or are more empowered to participate), and attract those who are usually not heard.

Hence, deliberation imagines a role for citizens as active and engaged problem-solvers working with others to solve community problems rather than being merely taxpayers, consumers, constituents, or voters. It calls for significant efforts that empower and put them in situations where they can work together, overcome conflicts, and help address critical public problems. This has important implication also for the process of participatory budgeting as deliberation shift the focus from competition for scarce resources towards a more collaboratively conceived process. Several concrete examples attest to this qualitative feature of deliberation when project proponents/coordinators decided to merge together similar projects and their resources and cooperate on their implementation, or when they decided to take some amount of money off from their own projects to support a good project that otherwise would not get the funding due to the limited amount of resources provided for the participatory budget.

In practice, however, public deliberation since the first of introduction of participatory processes has sparked controversy and many discussions. At the beginning, Utopia's proposal was that decision-making in the participatory budgeting process should take place primarily via public deliberation and voting was supposed to be just complementary. As already mentioned, this idea has not been truly embraced by the involved public and local assembly deputies. One point of contention concerns the actual weight of deliberation in the overall

outcome of the decision-making process. Some people feel that *normal voting should be given most weight, even a hundred percent, just like in the elections...public deliberation should have a consultative role and the role of qualitative assessment of projects to eliminate those that do not meet the criteria.*

Public deliberation is still considered to be a little suspicious and insufficiently representative form of collective decision-making. Many argues that a small group that usually participates in a public forum cannot be as legitimate as thousands of people casting ballots in public voting.

When deliberation is 60 percent of the total weight then someone who does not get enough paper or internet votes is at advantage. When they get a good evaluation in deliberation then their project could be supported even if they don't gain people's interest.

Usually, the positive sides and advantages of public deliberation are seen by those who have experienced the process. They can appreciate its qualitative nature, the opportunity for making informed decisions and its flexibility in arriving at the final outcome – projects are always evaluated on the basis of some agreed-upon criteria and in-depth discussion. All participants get detailed information about all projects and can ask additional questions. Voting does not offer these possibilities. People can cast their votes without any knowledge of projects and without any confrontation with opposing views. One great advantage of deliberation is that it provides a space for finding consensus. In voting people can only chose from a fixed list of already pre-approved projects, while, as already mentioned, deliberation creates the opportunity for project adjustment, or merging of projects.

In deliberation the most active people can express themselves. Those who have really done their homework, who have read the projects... and I'd also taken into account both people's expert contribution and their real involvement in deliberation.

I've been through this whole participatory process with my project. In that year we all really cut down on our own project budgets so that more projects could the funding. And I truly think it was a good idea that more projects could get money.

Deliberation has an inbuilt control mechanism that voting does not have. Maybe we should rather consider the issue who will have the competency to decide in the deliberation process – it will be those people who find the time and those who are better informed than others.

At present, on basis of these discussions, public deliberation in BANM is not organised when people are deciding about assignments or priorities. It is only part of citizens' projects evaluation and selection and its weigh was lowered to 30 percent of the total result.

Deliberation in BANM is organised in the following manner:

It is open to the public, anybody can participate and anybody can take part in the discussion, but only project coordinators can decide about respective projects – they can evaluate all projects except their own. All coordinators know each other and they also know their respective projects as they take part in a common phase of projects preparation.

Public deliberation has a fixed agenda:

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Discussion about latest updates in projects**
- 3. Setting the criteria for decision-making**
- 4. Discussion about the correspondence of the project with the selected criteria**
- 5. Finding consensus and projects evaluation according to selected criteria (assignment of points)**
- 6. Final discussion**

At the beginning of deliberation, participants are asked to seek the best solution for the city part irrespective for their particular interests. Subsequently, they choose and decide about criteria for projects evaluation. They have to agree on 4 to 6 criteria. In the second part of deliberation, the discussion about correspondence of particular projects with agreed-upon criteria and their strengths and weaknesses takes place followed by evaluation. Each criterion is assigned points from 1 to 5 with 5 as the highest mark.

In 2017 people taking part in the public deliberation selected the following criteria:

- the impact of the project: number of project's beneficiaries
- the project contributes to decreasing social inequalities
- the project enhances active citizenship and participation and contributes to community development
- financial efficiency
- the project does not have a negative environmental impact or positively contributes to environmental protection

MAIN OBSTACLES IN THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN BANM

The main obstacles in the process usually are:

- a rather complicated nature of the process that many of its participants (including local deputies and local officers) are fully able to grasp only after the whole cycle of the process has been concluded
- not understanding the role of informed qualitative decision-making
- problems related to incorporation of the outcomes of participatory budgeting into the regular work of the Local Office
- legislative limitations of utilisation of public finances and their conservative interpretation by certain responsible officers (e.g. when signing contracts with projects coordinators some officers asked for documents not required by law)

COMMUNICATION AND THE MEDIA

The main communication tools of the Department for Public Participation are the internet website, the Facebook page, a regular double-page in the local newspaper *Hlas Nového Mesta* that each household receives in their post, public presentations of projects, assignments and other outcomes of the participatory budgeting process, a regular series of public meetings with inhabitants of respective neighbourhoods in the borough, distribution of invitations to public presentations and meetings, distribution of voting ballots.

In the local media, the media coverage of the participatory budgeting process has been quite good – some of them have published all press releases. Thus far perhaps the best coverage has been on the portal *bratislava.sme.sk*, which is the local edition of one of the main Slovak daily newspapers *Sme.sk*. Also the *Bratislava Television* has been covering the topic regularly. In the nation-wide media, the topic of participatory budgeting has been only covered through articles written by members of Utopia.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Prospects for the future development of participatory budgeting in Slovakia are still dependent on the political will of elected representatives. Hence, it is still very important what kind of candidates are elected to the office.

In the past two to three years, participatory budgeting has gained more popularity and it also became part of the agenda of the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Development of Civil Society. Several local governments started to implement it even without cooperating with Utopia which in the first years after the introduction of the concept of the participatory budget had not been the case. Also at present two regional governments established participatory budgeting. It, on one hand, means that participatory budgeting is becoming a regular part of public administration and it is possible that interest in its implementation will increase. Similarly, it is possible that this will lessen pressures to abolish or terminate the already existing processes. On the other hand, this increased popularity poses a threat to the quality of the process, as some processes do not contain any form of qualitative decision making or public meetings. There are pressures to simplify the process, which could lead to lessening of the transformative potential of participatory budgeting. It runs the risk of becoming just a formal indicator to increase the rating of public institutions (e.g. Transparency International assigns more points to those local governments that implement participatory budgeting).

The further development of participatory budgeting could be strengthened by legislative changes initiated by Utopia and the Office of the Plenipotentiary for the Development of Civil Society. The aim is to facilitate the implementation of participatory budgeting and to create methodology and quality standards for processes of participatory budgeting in Slovakia. Another impulse could arise from networking of individual local and regional governments and from their pressure to simplify citizens' participation in decision making.

The development of participatory budgeting in Slovakia could be hindered by increased popularity of fascist ideas in society and related rejection of democracy and democratic participation of various social groups in public policy formulation and public decision-making.