

Divergent Paths to Participatory Budgeting: Poland's Experimentation vs. Czech Caution in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové

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Abstract: The article compares the evolution and current design of participatory budgeting (PB) in Poland and the Czech Republic, focusing on the case studies of Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové. It shows that although both countries began implementing PB after 2010, in Poland the process took on a more experimental and large-scale character (over 300 local government units), and in later years became regulated by national legislation, whereas in the Czech Republic development was slower, based on the good practices of other municipalities and lacking dedicated nationwide regulations. The PB processes in both cities fit into a typology typical of wealthier democracies, with common requirements such as consistency of projects with strategic documents, implementation within the city's territory, public accessibility, and the possibility of rejecting projects that generate excessive maintenance costs. At the same time, they differ in scope (in Hradec Králové only "hard" investment-type projects), process design (territorial units and deliberation in Gorzów versus a purely city-wide level in Hradec), and voting techniques (D21 versus conventional voting supported by public debate). The comparative analysis indicates that adopting the D21 method in Gorzów could better reflect the distribution of opinions where not all residents are able to participate in deliberative meetings, whereas Hradec could benefit from introducing local (neighbourhood) projects and formal spaces for discussion of proposals prior to their submission, which could potentially increase residents' interest and improve the quality of submitted projects.

Keywords: public participation; participatory budget; social innovations

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1. Introduction

Strengthening the role of citizens in the decision-making processes of public authorities has long been one of the key directions of reform in most countries around the world. The debate initiated in the second half of the twentieth century on the need to enable citizens to co-govern public affairs directly affecting them has generated numerous practical instruments within the broad field of public participation (Fung, 2006; Rowe & Frewer, 2005).

Public participation is defined in various ways, yet these definitions share a common core: the inclusion of residents in co-decision-making processes regarding issues that concern them. The use of different forms of public participation by public administration is expected, among other things, to increase administrative effectiveness and improve the efficiency of public spending by aligning the types and scope of services provided with citizens' needs (Barbera et al., 2016; Creighton, 2005; Everatt et al., 2010).

These practical solutions are grounded in earlier research such authors like S.ArNSTEIN (1969), S.Langton(1978), D.M.Connor(1988) or D.Wilcox(1994), 1994). In 2006, the International Association for Public Participation developed a set of core principles for the practice of public participation (the "IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation" (IAP2, 2018)). In line with the core idea of public participation, it states that citizens affected by decisions should take part in the decision-making process. Their participation should be empowering, and citizen involvement should lead to decisions that represent a consensus between the needs of both sides (citizens and decision-makers). Participants should influence both the decisions taken and the course of the consultation process itself. At the same time, the process should guarantee access to information necessary for participants to express their views, as well as access to information on how their involvement has influenced final decisions. The Spectrum of Public Participation distinguishes five main levels of participation (defined by aims and expected outcomes/promises) and example tools for each level: Inform (fact sheets, websites, open houses), Consult (public comment, focus groups, surveys, public meetings), Involve (workshops, deliberative polling), Collaborate (citizen advisory committees, consensus-building, participatory decision-making) and Empower (citizen juries, ballots, delegated decisions). As Rowe and Frewer note, "in public participation, information is exchanged between members of the public and the sponsors [government bodies]" (Rowe & Frewer, 2005).

One mechanism that meets these criteria is participatory budgeting (PB). Its origins date back to the 1980s in Porto Alegre (Cabannes, 2004), and its grounding in universal principles, combined with its flexibility and ability to be adapted to local specificities, has led to its diffusion worldwide (Dias, 2018). The main distinguishing features of PB compared to other instruments are usually captured in five criteria that it must satisfy (Sintomer et al., 2008). First, "the financial and/or budgetary dimension must be discussed; participatory budgeting involves dealing with the problem of limited resources." Second, "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)." Third, "it has to be a repeated process (one meeting or one referendum on financial issues does not constitute an example of participatory budgeting)." Fourth, "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)." Fifth, "some accountability on the output is required."

Goldfrank (2021) argues that PB was initially perceived as a way to give voice to the excluded, to stimulate the development of civil society organisations, to make infrastructure and service provision more equitable, and to enhance transparency while limiting corruption.

Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke (2008) contend that “participatory budgeting allows the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances.”. It should be noted that the goals and format of participatory budgeting (PB) vary significantly depending on the world region. Wampler, McNulty, and Touchton (2021) identify four distinct groupings of PB adaptation based on a systematic multi-factor analysis (table 1).

Table 1. Groupings of PB adaptation (Wampler et al., 2021)

Type	Primary Regions	Key Drivers	Core Objectives
Deepening Democracy through Community Mobilization	Wealthier democracies	Centrist/center-left governments, inspired by Porto Alegre	Promote social inclusion, combat apathy among marginalized groups (without full redistribution rules)
Social Development and Accountability	Global South, resource-strapped countries	International organizations (e.g., World Bank, USAID)	Small-scale projects for development outcomes and accountability foundations
Mandated by National Government	Geographic variation	National directives to local governments	Alter local policymaking processes via top-down mandates
Efficient Governance and Digital Participation	Wealthier democracies	Government officials with resources/staff	Modernize policymaking (consultative for efficiency); enable digital tools for participation

As can be observed, it is not always possible to directly compare the solutions applied in participatory budgeting across countries. In this context, the comparison of PB arrangements in Poland and the Czech Republic undertaken in this article appears well justified. These countries belong to the Visegrad Group (V4 – Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary), and a comparative perspective is enabled by their shared history, similar geopolitical conditions, economic interdependence and convergent interests within the EU. They form part of a relatively coherent region of Central Europe that exhibits similar developmental and political trends.

2. Research Aim and Method

The widespread diffusion of participatory budgeting processes worldwide has led most countries, to a greater or lesser extent, to attempt to use this instrument. In Poland and the Czech Republic, the beginnings of PB date back to the years 2012–2014. In subsequent years, however, the trajectories of development in the two countries diverged. The primary aim of this article is to analyse and compare the evolution, institutional architecture and practical functioning of participatory budgeting in Poland and the Czech Republic through the lens of two medium-sized regional centres: Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové. By focusing on cities that share similar demographic and functional characteristics yet operate within different national regulatory and participatory contexts, the study seeks to identify both convergences and divergences in PB arrangements, to reconstruct residents’ preferences as expressed in project proposals and voting, and to derive context-sensitive recommendations for the further development of PB in each city. In doing so, the article links local-level institutional design choices to broader debates on public participation, co-production and the typologies of PB observed in wealthier democracies, particularly the “Mandated by National

Government” and “Efficient Governance and Digital Participation” models. The following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: How have participatory budgeting processes evolved in Poland and the Czech Republic?
- RQ2: Do cities in Poland and the Czech Republic with similar demographic and functional characteristics employ comparable PB solutions?
- RQ3: What are the patterns of residents’ preferences as expressed through proposals submitted to participatory budgets?
- RQ4: Which solutions can be indicated as feasible or desirable for implementation in the PB processes of the analysed cities?

These research questions translate into the following more detailed objectives:

- To reconstruct the national trajectories of PB development in Poland and the Czech Republic, with particular attention to the role of legal regulations, incentives and constraints on local governments, and the diffusion of organisational know-how (RQ1).
- To map and compare the institutional design of PB in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové, including the scope and types of eligible projects, the division of funds, procedural stages (submission, verification, deliberation, voting), and the voting techniques used (RQ2).
- To examine the thematic structure, spatial focus and investment vs. “soft” character of projects submitted and selected within PB in both cities, treating them as an empirical expression of residents’ preferences and needs in the context of relatively well-developed infrastructure (RQ3).
- To assess the scale and dynamics of citizen participation in PB processes and to interpret these patterns in light of broader trends in active citizenship in the V4 countries, as documented by Eurostat surveys and the literature on determinants of participation (RQ3, RQ4).
- To identify, on the basis of the comparative analysis, those institutional solutions (e.g. voting methods, territorial structuring of funds, deliberative elements, measures counteracting digital exclusion) that appear transferable or adaptable between the two cases and could enhance the inclusiveness, legitimacy and effectiveness of PB in each city (RQ4).

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design, combining elements of horizontal institutional comparison with document analysis and basic quantitative description of PB processes and outputs. The selection of Gorzów Wielkopolski (Poland) and Hradec Králové (Czech Republic) was based on purposive criteria: both are regional capitals with comparable population size and functional importance in their national settlement systems, both have relatively high levels of infrastructural development, and both have implemented PB for several years (in Gorzów since 2013 and in Hradec Králové since 2024), which makes it possible to analyse not only institutional blueprints but also actual practice.

The empirical material comprises three main groups of sources. First, a review of international and national literature on public participation and participatory budgeting was conducted, including classic works on ladders and spectrums of participation and more recent studies on PB typologies, diffusion and regional specificities. This review made it possible to situate the analysed cities within broader theoretical frameworks, especially the typology of PB adaptations proposed by Wampler, McNulty and Touchton (2021), which distinguishes, among others, PB mandated by national governments and PB oriented towards efficient governance and digital participation. Second, extensive desk research was carried out on source documents produced by local authorities, such as municipal council resolutions, mayoral decrees, PB regulations, explanatory notes, official reports, and information published on the cities' and PB platforms' websites. These materials provided the basis for a horizontal comparison of design features in both cities, including eligibility criteria, cost thresholds, categories and pools of projects, age and residency requirements, submission channels, verification procedures, appeal mechanisms, deliberative formats and voting rules.

Third, the study analyses data on PB projects and participation in both cities. For Gorzów Wielkopolski, the evolution of the PB model is traced from its introduction in 2013 to the 2025 edition, taking into account changes in the territorial division (from 5 to 12 districts), the introduction of city-wide and educational categories, the differentiation between "hard" (investment) and "soft" (non-investment) projects, and the development of deliberative "networking" meetings as a central mechanism for project selection and modification. The analysis includes the number of submitted, positively verified and ultimately selected projects, the distribution of funds across categories, and voter turnout levels in subsequent editions. For Hradec Králové, the focus is on the 2024–2025 PB editions, characterised by a city-wide model with small and large investment projects, clear cost thresholds guaranteeing minimum numbers of implemented projects, and the use of the D21 voting method with positive and negative votes and an exclusion threshold for highly polarising projects. Here, too, the number of submitted and approved projects, their thematic orientation (recreation, sports, leisure, public space) and participation levels are examined.

The comparative analysis proceeds in several steps. In the first step, the national context of PB development in Poland and the Czech Republic is reconstructed, with emphasis on the presence or absence of legal mandates, the stability of PB processes over time and the role of external actors such as NGOs and ICT providers (RQ1). In the second step, the institutional design of PB in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové is compared dimension by dimension (scope and nature of eligible projects, territorial vs. city-wide structuring, categories and pools, submission and verification, deliberative components, voting systems and measures addressing digital exclusion), in order to identify convergent and divergent features (RQ2). In the third step, the thematic structure of submitted and selected projects and the dynamics of participation are analysed, allowing for the identification of dominant patterns of resident preferences and engagement (RQ3). Finally, these findings are synthesised into a set of practically oriented recommendations regarding potential adaptations in each city, such as the introduction of the D21 method in Gorzów Wielkopolski

or the development of neighbourhood-level projects and pre-submission deliberative forums in Hradec Králové (RQ4).

The study is subject to several limitations, which should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, it focuses on two specific cities and a limited time horizon (especially in the case of Hradec Králové), which restricts the possibility of generalising the findings to all municipalities in Poland and the Czech Republic. Second, the analysis relies primarily on documentary and quantitative data provided by local governments and PB platforms; it does not incorporate direct surveys or interviews with participants, officials or facilitators, which would allow for a deeper insight into motivations, perceptions of fairness and satisfaction with PB processes. Third, while the study draws on Eurostat data and the literature on factors shaping citizen participation to contextualise observed participation levels, it does not attempt to statistically isolate the specific impact of PB design choices from broader macro-contextual, demographic, social and psychological determinants. Despite these constraints, the chosen research design makes it possible to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded comparison of two distinct PB models in Central Europe and to derive practically relevant lessons for local governments seeking to refine their participatory budgeting practices.

3. Results

3.1. Development of Participatory Budgeting in Poland and the Czech Republic

In Poland, the introduction of the first participatory budgets dates back to 2011/2012 and took the form of bottom-up initiatives (Kębłowski & Van Criekingen, 2014). Growing public interest in PB processes prompted Polish local governments to begin implementing such mechanisms in subsequent years (Pytlik, 2017). These initiatives were initially based on general provisions concerning public consultations. Despite the absence of dedicated regulations, PB gradually gained popularity among Polish cities as a tool of public participation, functioning de facto as an informal agreement between local authorities and residents, even where local by-laws were adopted. Commonly noted weaknesses included, among others, its voluntary nature, the lack of transparent procedures for programme design, the instrumental use of PB as a public relations tool for local authorities, and the absence of any obligation to incorporate consultation outcomes into local budget plans (Błaszak, 2019; Sroka et al., 2022). In addition, the acceptance of projects selected by residents, as well as the scale of expenditure and the implementation timetable, largely depended on the municipality's financial situation and the political decisions of the authorities (Olejniczak & Bednarska-Olejniczak, 2021). Nevertheless, by 2018 more than 300 local government units (out of approximately 2,400) had implemented PB.

The year 2018 marked a significant change in the functioning of PB in Poland, as nationwide regulations were introduced to define its framework in local government units. These provisions established PB as a specific form of public consultation. They allowed residents, through annual direct voting, to decide on the use of a portion of municipal expenditure, while imposing an obligation to include the projects selected within the civic

budget in the municipality's budget resolution. The regulations also introduced requirements for equality and directness in voting rules, a prohibition on the municipal council removing or substantially modifying selected projects during budget deliberations, and an obligation for cities with county rights to establish civic budgets on an annual basis. At the same time, they left local governments considerable autonomy in designing PB, including the definition of formal project criteria, minimum numbers of supporting signatures, project evaluation procedures, appeal mechanisms against project rejection, voting formats, limits on the number of votes per resident, and methods for determining results. The introduction of these new regulations did not significantly affect the number of local governments implementing participatory budgeting.

Participatory budgeting in the Czech Republic started around 2014 in Prague (Svidroňová et al., 2025). According to Kukučková, Sedmihradská and Bakos, by 2018 nearly 20% of Czechs had the opportunity to participate in PB through 133 processes in 59 municipalities (Kukučková et al., 2025). The authors emphasise that, as local governments actively searched for more favourable arrangements in the areas of electoral rights, voting methods and the use of information and communication technologies, the number of PB processes steadily increased. Data collected by Agora CE indicate that in subsequent years the number of local governments implementing PB rose to over 90 (not all of them organise PB every year—for instance, in 2024 there were 94 such local governments, compared with 83 in the previous year)(AGORA CE, 2025).

PB in Czech municipalities is not regulated by specific, dedicated legislation. Instead, it operates on a voluntary basis under general public participation provisions in municipal budgeting—for example, citizens may submit proposals, comments or requests relating to the budget and have access to budget documents, minutes and resolutions. There are no formal participatory mechanisms such as project voting or earmarked PB funds (Brabec, 2019; Culková, 2024; Kukučková & Bakos, 2019; Marczevska-Rytko & Maj, 2021). Subsequent PB schemes in the Czech Republic are often developed by drawing on the experiences of other cities, while external support is frequently sought from organisations and companies that offer partially pre-designed solutions—adaptable to the specific characteristics of a given municipality—for the entire PB process, mainly in the form of ICT platforms. In practice, there is still an ongoing debate as to whether nationwide regulations, analogous to those in Poland, should be introduced to support these processes (Tomaskova & Buzkova, 2020).

3.2. Case Study – Participatory Budgets in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové

The participatory budget in Gorzów Wielkopolski was first introduced in 2013 as a follow-up to a survey conducted in December 2012 (U M Gorzowa Wielkopolskiego, 2026). From 2013 onwards, it operated on the basis of City Council resolutions on public consultations. Initially (2014), its design diverged from universal PB standards, as decision-making competences regarding which projects would be submitted to residents' vote were vested in the municipal authorities. As a result, residents were unable to vote on some projects in their districts (the city was divided into five districts) despite their formal and substantive correctness, and ultimately only about half of the duly submitted proposals

were put to a vote. In addition, the rules introduced a limit of one project that could be submitted by a resident and a maximum of two projects per district that could be implemented, regardless of the remaining budget.

In the next PB edition, the restriction on the number of projects submitted to voting was lifted and a second, city-wide category of projects was introduced, which allowed residents to cast two votes. From that point on, eligible projects had to fall within the catalogue of the municipality's own tasks, be publicly accessible and align with the city's development strategy. A major change occurred in the 2017 PB edition, when newly introduced discussion meetings (aimed at presenting projects and facilitating the exchange of views) enabled residents to decide on the implementation of district-level projects without the need for a general vote. At the same time, projects were evaluated during these meetings, which could grant positively received proposals additional points in the subsequent vote. In the first year, these changes resulted in the approval of all 39 district projects in 9 out of the 10 districts into which the city had been divided. Moreover, an educational projects category was introduced due to strong interest from the school community and the fact that educational projects had captured a large share of funds in previous years. However, in 2017 educational projects were only subject to submission and discussion by residents at a separate deliberative meeting.

Amendments to national legislation and the introduction of regulations governing PB in Poland influenced the formula adopted in subsequent years. To preserve the deliberative character of the process, a rule was maintained that each project had to be presented and discussed at such meetings. At the same time, the number of districts was increased to twelve and the number of categories to four, with city-wide projects divided into "hard" (investment) and "soft" (non-investment) types. To avoid fragmentation of projects and dispersion of votes, the possibility of "networking" was retained—that is, combining several projects into one larger project during deliberative meetings, up to the maximum cost threshold per district project. These combined projects did not have to concern similar themes (for instance, "green" projects were merged with safety-improvement measures). For each category, maximum cost thresholds per project and total available funds were specified. Every district was guaranteed implementation of at least one project with the highest number of votes, while further projects were selected in descending order of votes until the allocated funds were exhausted.

The introduction of new categories increased the number of votes that each resident could cast (one vote in each category). To prevent the exclusion of residents from voting after abandoning the hybrid (paper-plus-electronic) voting system, mobile electronic voting points were introduced as a complement to online voting. To further enhance the inclusiveness of the process, the hybrid formula for project submission (both paper and electronic) was retained.

The analysis of the topics of submitted and voted projects indicates that, in terms of both scale and spatial coverage, the dominant initiatives concern the improvement of shared public space through the addition of small architectural elements (benches, waste bins), the expansion of green areas, and enhanced safety (new lighting, pavement reconstruction).

Table 2. PB in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Kralove

Type	2013	2014	2017	2019	2025	2024/2025
Allocation of funds	5 districts	5 districts	8 districts, City-wide, Educational	10 districts Educational	12 districts City-wide soft and hard Educational	Small and large
Limit on tasks to select	Yes - 2 per district	No - until funds exhausted	No - until funds exhausted	No - until funds exhausted	No - until funds exhausted	No - until funds exhausted
Limit on funds per task		Yes	Yes - per category (soft/hard split for city-wide)	Yes - per category and type (soft/hard)	Yes - per category and type (soft/hard)	Yes - per category
Number of votes	1	1	2	3	4	14 (10 "yes" and 4 "no")
Discussion meetings			Yes - binding decision for acceptance	Yes - as opinion form	Yes - opinion form and condition for voting submission	No
Submission form	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid
Voting form	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid	Electronic, with additional mobile points	Electronic
Submitted projects	273	228	150	191	169	49/54
Positively reviewed	140	125	109	103	101	21/16
Selected in voting	10	5	10	36	36	10/10
Selected in discussion			37+8			
Number of voters	15,774	50,216	15,340	9,227	4,420	2587/2406

The participatory budget in Hradec Králové has been in operation since 2024 (Magistrát města Hradec Králové, 2026). When preparing its first editions, the city authorities drew on the experience of other municipalities and on the support of the Munipolis (Mobilní rozhlas) online platform, which enabled the implementation of a framework solution tested in many local governments and its adaptation to the specific context of Hradec Králové. The model adopted in 2024 was not substantially modified in 2025. The core premise was to introduce a participatory mechanism at the city-wide level; within this framework, projects were divided into large and small categories. In 2024, 40% of the total PB budget was reserved for small projects, with the cost of an individual small project capped at one tenth of this amount, which guaranteed the possibility of implementing at least ten selected small projects. For large projects, the cost of a single project could not exceed one third of the funds earmarked for this category, meaning that at least three large projects could be implemented. According

to the adopted definition, a project is an investment (construction or acquisition of a facility) that brings benefits to the city and its residents, is accessible to the public for most of the day and free of charge, is non-profit in operation, can be implemented by the municipality of Hradec Králové on city-owned land, has annual operating costs not exceeding 10% of its acquisition cost, does not conflict with the city’s strategic plan, land-use plan or planned investments, and can be completed within two years of the end of the voting in which it was selected. This definition effectively excludes the implementation of “soft” (non-investment) projects.

Partial age restrictions were introduced (minimum 15 years), but participation was opened not only to residents, but also to those working or studying in Hradec Králové. The city authorities also chose to limit the “excessive activity” of individual citizens in terms of the number of submitted proposals, allowing each person to submit a maximum of three projects.

Table 3. Voting algorithm (Magistrát města Hradec Králové, 2026)

Number of approved projects	Total positive votes per voter	Total negative votes per voter	Max votes per project per voter
1–5	2	0	2
6–15	5	2	2
16–30	9	3	3
31–50	13	4	3

The adopted D21 voting method (see more: Kukučková & Poláčková, 2021) provides for the allocation of both “positive” and “negative” votes. The voting algorithm (the number of positive and negative votes) is determined on the basis of the number of approved projects. A proposal that receives more than 33% negative votes out of all votes cast for it is not implemented. In 2024, voters could cast five positive and two negative votes for both - 12 small and 9 large voted projects (14 votes in total), and the same arrangement applied in 2025. After voting, separate rankings are compiled for small and large projects, and projects are selected for implementation in descending order until the budget allocated to each category is exhausted.

Analysis of projects submitted for voting in the years 2024–2025 indicates that they are primarily devoted to enhancing the functionality of public spaces associated with recreation (benches, meeting areas), sports (pump tracks, sports fields), and leisure activities (walking paths, informational boards at nature reserves)

4. Discussion

Although the first participatory budgeting processes in Poland and the Czech Republic emerged in a similar period – after 2010 – their implementation progressed at different speeds in the two countries (RQ1). In Poland, many local governments, including Gorzów Wielkopolski, chose to experiment with PB and to search for their own institutional solutions, which is clearly visible in the evolution of PB in that city. In the Czech Republic, by contrast, the process was less intensive, and successive municipalities tended to adopt solutions already tested elsewhere, as in the case of Hradec Králové. A further factor shaping the scale

of PB use has been the legal framework: unlike in the Czech Republic, in Poland PB has been regulated as a distinct – and in part mandatory – form of consultation with residents. Gorzów and Hradec Králové thus represent types of PB processes characteristic of wealthier democracies, namely “Mandated by National Government” (Gorzów Wielkopolski) and “Efficient Governance and Digital Participation” (Hradec Králové and Gorzów Wielkopolski).

An analysis of the legal regulations shows that, in both cities, projects must be beneficial for residents and located within the city, and residents decide on the use of part of the municipal budget through projects that fall within the municipality’s own tasks. In Hradec Králové, these tasks are restricted to investment “hard” projects. Projects must be consistent with strategic and spatial planning documents and legal regulations and may not infringe third-party rights or ownership; they must also be generally accessible to the public. In both systems, projects that would generate disproportionately high maintenance costs may be rejected. In each city, project selection is based on the number of votes obtained, yet the voting systems differ considerably. In Hradec Králové, the D21 method is a tool that enables a much more nuanced assessment of the degree of public acceptance of individual projects, since negative votes are visible and the adopted formula ensures that projects which sharply divide the community are not implemented. In Gorzów, this function is performed by discussion meetings; the developed model – involving project presentation, debate, networking and recommendation – embeds deliberation as an integral element of the process. This means that the role of residents who do not submit their own projects does not boil down merely to casting a vote. On the other hand, this may contribute to a decline in voter turnout, as there are districts in which only a “networked” project (composed of all projects in the district) is ultimately submitted to a vote and being chosen.

It should also be noted that in Hradec Králové PB participants may be both residents and persons studying or working in the city (with a lower age limit of 15), whereas in Gorzów Wielkopolski only residents are entitled to participate. This difference may stem from the fact that Hradec Králové is a major university center, which means that the actual number of people using public infrastructure on a daily basis significantly exceeds the number of permanent residents. Both cities currently rely on electronic voting, but Gorzów Wielkopolski has introduced additional arrangements to mitigate the effects of digital exclusion. On the basis of the above analyses, it can be stated that both cities use participatory budgeting to allow residents to propose and vote on projects, but they differ in scope, institutional design, project types and voting systems (RQ2).

With regard to the thematic focus of projects submitted and selected by residents (RQ3), it should be noted that it is typical of municipalities with a high level of development and good access to public infrastructure (Olejniczak & Bednarska-Olejniczak, 2025). In both cities, projects are concentrated on infrastructure (“hard” projects) serving leisure, sport, recreation and broadly understood safety improvements. In Gorzów, “soft” projects constitute only a minor complement to “hard” projects, enabling the organisation of joint activities. The creation of a separate educational category and the increase in the number of districts from

the initial five to twelve are further examples of the evolutionary adaptation of PB to the specific characteristics of the city and the needs of its residents.

The final issue concerns the scale of residents' participation in PB. In terms of the number of submitted projects, residents of Gorzów Wielkopolski have been more active from the very beginning of the process, which is also reflected in higher numbers of voters. At the same time, after 2020 there has been a visible downward trend in voter turnout in Gorzów, which can be partly explained by the aforementioned "networking" of projects that reduces competition and, in turn, the perceived need to participate in voting. Additionally to the above-mentioned a wide range of other factors can influence citizen participation. Barrett and Brunton-Smith distinguish macro-contextual factors (e.g. the electoral system, the structure and design of political institutions, and the historical, economic and cultural characteristics of countries), demographic factors (socio-economic status, ethnicity, generational cohort and gender), social factors (family, education, workplace) and psychological factors.

Eurostat surveys on public participation levels in 2015 and 2022 distinguish three types of citizen activity, capturing both horizontal participation (participation in formal voluntary work and participation in informal voluntary work) and vertical participation (active citizenship) (Eurostat, 2024). According to the survey methodology, participation in formal voluntary work is recorded when "the respondent [...] did any unpaid non-compulsory work for or through an organisation, a formal group or a club. It also includes unpaid work for charitable or religious organisations", whereas participation in informal voluntary activities denotes that a person "undertook any informal unpaid activities that were not arranged by any organization" (e.g. helping other people, including family members not living in the same household, or helping animals, such as caring for homeless or wild animals).

From the perspective of this article, the most relevant dimension is the level of active citizenship, understood as engagement in activities "such as participation to the activities of a political party or a local interest group, participation in a public consultation, peaceful protest including signing a petition, participation in a demonstration, writing a letter to a politician, writing a letter to the media". Participation in elections is excluded from this measure, as in some countries voting is compulsory. Among V4 countries, levels of the three forms of citizen activity differ. Notably, the level of active citizenship in the Czech Republic increased between 2015 and 2022, while in Poland it declined significantly, which may be one of the factors contributing to the decreasing number of PB participants in Gorzów Wielkopolski.

Table 4. Public participation levels in 2015 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2024)

Area/country	Voluntary Activities				Active citizenship	
	Formal		Informal		2015	2022
	2015	2022	2015	2022		
EU 27	18.9	12.3	22.5	13.8	12.1	7.2
Czechia	12.2	10.2	16.6	12.2	4.2	5.2
Hungary	6.9	5.8	7.8	10.1	4.7	3.6
Poland	13.8	7.4	50.6	22.1	7.3	3.6
Slovakia	8.3	7.5	18.8	10.6	2.8	4.1

Given that increasing citizen participation in co-governance processes is one of the key priorities of participatory budgeting, it appears that the two analysed local governments can meaningfully draw on each other's experiences (RQ4). In the case of Gorzów Wielkopolski, adopting the D21 voting method could be particularly important, as it more strongly reflects differences in residents' views, especially where some inhabitants are unable, for various reasons, to attend discussion meetings at which decisions on networking projects are made. In turn, in Hradec Králové, given the differentiated characteristics of particular neighbourhoods, it would be worth considering the introduction of local (neighbourhood-level) projects, which could increase engagement among residents of specific areas. In addition, formally enabling residents to discuss project ideas before their official submission could help to develop more robust and widely accepted solutions.

5. Conclusions

This comparative analysis of participatory budgeting in Gorzów Wielkopolski and Hradec Králové reveals distinct evolutionary paths and design features of PB. Emerging post-2010, Poland's PB advanced more dynamically through local experimentation and national mandates, as seen in Gorzów's deliberative "networking" model, while Czech PB emphasized tested, digital-efficient approaches in Hradec Králové (RQ1). Both cities prioritize resident-beneficial, city-bound projects aligned with strategic plans, but diverge in scope—Hradec restricting to "hard" investments—and voting mechanisms: D21's nuanced scoring in Hradec versus Gorzów's debate-driven deliberation, which risks lowering turnout via reduced competition (RQ2).

Thematically, projects focus on leisure, sports, and safety infrastructure, typical of well-developed locales, with Gorzów evolving "soft" complements and district expansions (RQ3). Participation scales higher in Gorzów initially but trends downward post-2020, contrasting Hradec's stability; broader Eurostat data (2015–2022) highlights Poland's declining active citizenship amid Czech gains, underscoring macro-, demographic, and psychological influences (RQ4). Ultimately, these cases exemplify "mandated" and "efficient digital" PB archetypes, enabling co-governance yet revealing trade-offs in inclusivity, turnout, and project viability.

Conflict of interest: none

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