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DISPATCH

The Ostbelgien Model: five years on

In 2019, a corner of Belgium made history when it established a new form of institutionalised citizen deliberation. Five years after its inception, the team of researchers following it reflect on the ongoing learnings emerging from the Ostbelgien Model.

by Pieter Velghe, Jehan Bottin, Christoph Niessen, Rebecca Gebauer, Ann-Mireille Sautter and Min Reuchamps | Jan 31, 2025

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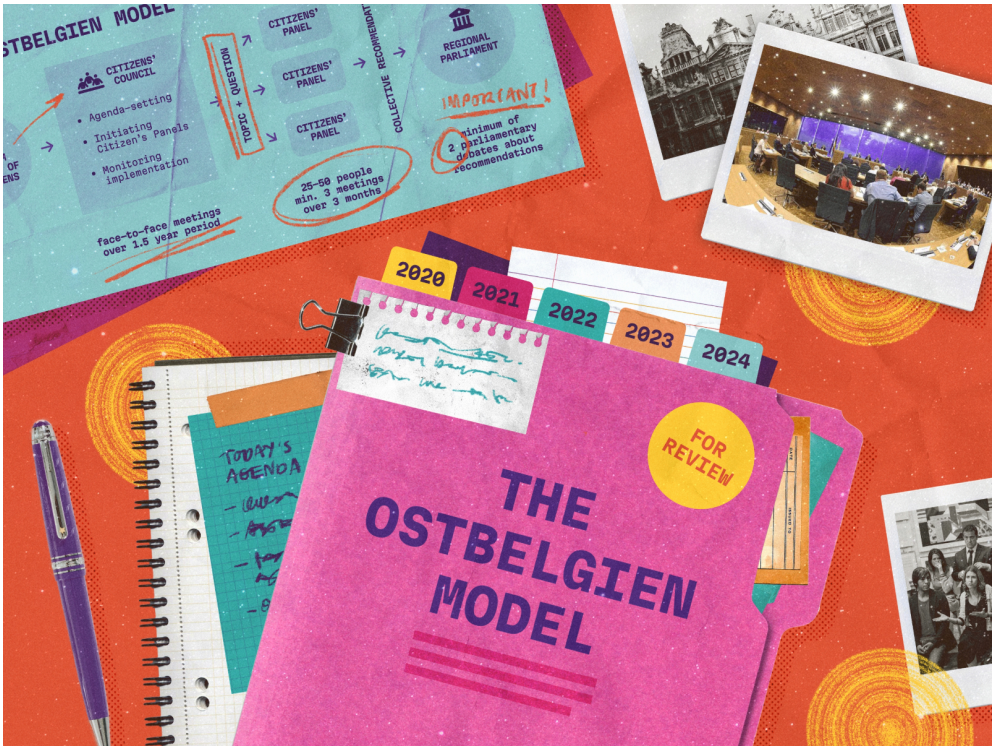


Image by Andi Lanuza

Despite being a relatively small community within the Belgian institutional lasagna, the German-speaking Community of Belgium (also known as Ostbelgien), holds legislative power over a variety of competencies including health, education and international cooperation. This entity became an unlikely laboratory for deliberative democracy when a group of local politicians decided to put into practice some ideas about starting an 'institutional wave' of deliberative mini-publics, after the 'deliberative wave' had been proclaimed. Their thinking was that this was the ideal place and time to experiment with and iterate institutionalised deliberative practice.

In 2019, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community set up the first-ever citizen deliberation process that was associated permanently with the

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work of a political assembly with law-making powers. The Permanent Citizens' Dialogue, also known as the Ostbelgien Model (OBM), is a forerunner of the wave of institutionalised deliberative mini-publics. It uses a combination of two citizen bodies: a Citizens' Council (Bürgerrat), that convenes Citizens' Assemblies (Bürgerversammlungen) to deliberate on a mandate set by the Council and formulate policy recommendations. In the last five years, the Permanent Citizens' Council has organized six Citizens' Assemblies, most of which have gone through the follow-up process foreseen by the Parliament and government.

In charge of the scientific observation, our team at UCLouvain has followed the project since its conception. Five years in, we take stock of the learnings that the OBM went through in its first years and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that newly institutionalised deliberative mini-publics can face.

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To start with, don't let the term 'permanent' deceive you into thinking this is a static process; in fact, it is

very dynamic. After five years, there is a sense that the groundwork has been laid but now is not the time to rest on the collective laurels. Or, to paraphrase the permanent secretary after a recently concluded assembly: once you think that you know how to run these processes, they will again surprise and challenge you.

Since its conception, the process and its staff had to work out the process without much of a roadmap. Shortly afterward, they also had to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, more recently, a decree change and a government change after the regional elections – to name a few. The learnings are therefore very much ongoing; so much so that the name 'evolving' could be more fitting than 'permanent' to capture (and cherish) the changing and dynamic nature of the OBM.

One notable improvement is how the strategy around the presentation of recommendations has evolved. In the beginning, there were some issues with the uptake of the recommendations by Parliament since often recommendations that were being proposed already existed to a certain degree or were deemed too vague and therefore not possible to make into a law or decree. In response, citizens were encouraged to elaborate on the justification of recommendations, so that, if the exact formulation does not allow for a proper conversion into law, it may be possible for lawmakers to still work with the 'vibe' of an idea.

The Citizens' Council is the body that convenes a new citizen assembly after having selected its topic. This Council is also tasked with the follow-up of recommendations. Since their membership is composed of former members of the citizens' assemblies, with one-third of new members being replaced after each assembly, it took some time to have a healthy circulation of members – in addition to COVID making attendance more difficult. Therefore, it is remarkable that, slowly but surely, deliberative norms are taking root in the Council.

In addition, the Council also participates in the implementation of recommendations; with Council members and politicians regularly meeting to discuss the follow-up. This goes further than the original decree, where it is stated that the Council should be informed through writing on the process of the implementation of the recommendations. In practice, the Council plays an increasingly active role, as it regularly initiates informal meetings between relevant ministers, the committee president, and representatives of the Council to discuss the follow-up of recommendations. As a result, Council representatives are invited to sit in on committee meetings to follow the process of implementation from up close – to make sure on the one hand that politicians understand well the intentions of the citizens, and on the other hand to keep the latter directly informed on the status of the follow-up.

The original decree of the OBM has also evolved to incorporate the learnings so far. For instance, the original mandate for a citizens' assembly – a threshold of 100 signatures for a public-suggested topic to be considered eligible – has been removed, as it was rarely met. Now, any topic proposed by the public can be eligible. Another change is that now, at least one topic picked should be one proposed by the Bureau of Parliament, where all political groups determine the parliamentary agenda. This followed concerns from the Parliament that there should be more communication between them and the citizens, and for Parliament to also directly request citizens' advice on topics that will be a political priority in the months to come. This can be seen as a positive development if it allows for greater citizen input ahead of foreseen policy-making. At the same time, future attention is warranted to how much control over agenda-setting is exerted by Parliament.

Further changes were made to better reflect Parliament's administrative capacities: at first, there was the intention to hold one to three assemblies per year, but due to the heavy workload for the staff and the Council to follow up on recommendations from different assemblies simultaneously, the decree was amended to foresee five citizens' assemblies in each legislature, around one per year.

Institutionalised forms of citizen

> **deliberation remain in their infancy and more attention should be paid to their experimental and evolving nature.**

Permanent deliberative processes are an effective way to nurture the voice, agency, and civic skills of participants. For many, participating in a Citizens' Assembly awakens a feeling of belonging and care for the community they learn to see in a different light through their participation and meeting people from all walks of life. However, it also seems that for most people who are not accustomed to political processes or speaking up in public, a first experience in participation is not always enough to create the voice and agency needed to try to take more ownership of such processes.

For the Ostbelgien Model, the agenda-setting and follow-up powers of the Citizens' Council stand out and appear to be the main drivers of citizen ownership over the process. Furthermore, the anchoring of the process in an official degree rendering the organisation mandatory has secured its existence beyond the next elections, which seems not necessarily to be the case in other institutionalised citizen deliberation processes in Belgium, such as in Brussels or Wallonia.

Beyond this strong anchoring of the Ostbelgien

Model within the parliamentary framework of the German-speaking Community, the five first years have shown that institutionalised forms of citizen deliberation remain in their infancy and that more attention should be paid to their experimental and evolving nature. There is always a drive to formalise these processes, especially when embedded in formal institutions. This, however, can have a negative impact on the agency of the citizens, who believe that they have to strictly stay within certain predetermined boundaries. A big takeaway from five years of institutionalisation in Ostbelgien is to always allow enough space and time for flexibility, learning, and adaptation. This not only benefits the citizens but also the politicians who have to find their way of dealing with changing norms in a changing society and democracy.

This article is also available in German, French and Dutch.

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