



The Ostbelgien Model, Belgium

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The Story

On September 16, 2019, 24 randomly-selected residents of West Belgium were assembled to decide on the topics of the first institutionalized and permanent deliberative body in the regional government. As participants of the first Citizens' Council, they represented the beginning of the implementation of what is now called the Ostbelgien Model. This model has since produced numerous Citizens' Assemblies, deliberative bodies that are convened by a group of citizens and responsible for proposing policy recommendations on a topic chosen by that same group of citizens.

The story of the Ostbelgien Model does not, however, start in 2019. After the success of the G1000, some in the Ostbelgien government became more interested in citizen deliberation. In 2016, parliamentarians carried out a "study tour" of citizen deliberation in Herrenberg, Germany, Bregenz, Austria, and Freiburg, Switzerland. In February 2019, the government of Ostbelgien (the German-speaking community of Belgium) adopted a law that stipulated a model of citizens' assembly that would be integrated into the regional parliament. This led to a citizens' dialogue in 2017 consisting of 20 randomly-selected Ostbelgien residents.¹ After learning about the G1000 in

particular, then Minister-President of the German-speaking Community, Oliver Paasch, reached out to David van Reybrouck, an academic and initiator of the G1000. The resulting exchange prompted a discussion in parliament. In the summer of 2018, the G1000 was then invited to help construct a model of permanent citizen participation within the parliament, starting with creating a group of international citizen deliberation experts. The precise details of the bodies, their roles, how topics would be selected, and how closely linked to existing institutions those bodies would be was originally greatly debated.² Once a model was agreed upon, it was presented to parliament. While a majority of parties agreed to the model, the biggest party, the Christian Democrats, indicated that they would abstain from a vote because they preferred an ad hoc version of institutionalization. The official decree was then written and, after some political hurdles, the decree received unanimous support.³


The Model

Institutional linkage

The Permanent Citizens' Dialogue, as the entire model is officially called, is directly linked to the regional parliament



1. *Ibid*, page 4.
2. *Ibid*, page 5.
3. *Ibid*, page 6.



of Ostbelgien through decree. Inspired by the multi-body sortition model, the premise of the model is to have a deliberative system that runs parallel to the elected bodies in the legislative process with an agenda-setting body that is selected through sortition. It relies on sortition and rotation of selected participants and includes citizen participation at multiple points in the process.

Deliberative process

The Ostbelgien Model consists of three bodies: a Citizens' Council, a Citizens' Assembly, and a Permanent Secretary. The Citizens' Council is made up of 24 members who are randomly selected from a pool of people who have participated in previous Citizens' Assemblies from the model. One third of the members are cycled out every six months, such that at the end of the 18-month tenure of the Council, each of the 24 members is new from when it was convened. Among the primary tasks of the Council are to organize the Citizens' Assemblies, monitor the follow-up of the recommendations by the parliament, and oversee the Permanent Secretary. This includes determining the number of Assemblies in a given year, setting the agenda and questions for the Assemblies, and handling the logistics of the Assemblies. Notably, the Council assigns facilitators for the Assemblies and suggests experts and relevant stakeholders that Assembly members should listen to, but does not prescribe them.⁴

The Citizens' Assemblies deliberate on the topic and questions provided to them by the Council and provide policy recommendations. They are composed of 25-50 randomly-selected members, the demographics of whom are stratified along age, gender, geographical origin, and socio-economic status, though the Council can decide if other characteristics should be included in the sortition process for a given Assembly. After deliberations and putting forward proposals, Citizens' Assemblies members will also discuss their findings with elected representatives at three different intervals. First, the final results of the deliberations are given to the parliamentary committee topically relevant to the Assembly. A joint commission is then held between representatives of the Assembly and the relevant committee members. Once parliamentarians produce opinions on each individual proposal, and if they are not going to pursue a given proposal a justification must be given. Then, parliamentarians present their opinions with members of the Assembly. One year later, a final meeting is held to inform Assembly participants of how their proposals are being implemented.⁵

Lastly, there is the Permanent Secretary. The Permanent Secretary's job is to "provide 'administrative and organizational support'"⁶ to the Council and Assembly, as well as act as an advisor to the Council. They are appointed by the Secretary General of the Parliament and are a civil servant in the government.



4. *Ibid*, pages 8-11.

5. *Ibid*, pages 11-15.

6. *Ibid*, page 15.



Insights from this case

Exposure to citizen deliberation prior to institutionalization

As we see in a number of our case studies, many instances of institutionalized citizen participation were facilitated and expedited by the governmental body and citizens having some level of prior exposure to citizen participation. In this case, ad hoc citizens' consultations in the area, as well as a national citizens' assembly, afforded the elected representatives an entry point into citizen deliberation that eased the discussion of institutionalizing participation. This did not mean, however, that the process of institutionalizing citizen participation was straightforward or without hurdles. It did, though, provide the community with evidence of how it could work and how effective it could be.

Permanence in a fully integrated institutionalized model

Similar to other case studies, the Ostbelgien Model relies on permanency. As well as being an ecosystem of

deliberative bodies within the legislative body, it is also written into the laws of the region. Though this model is not reliant on permanence as its conduit to institutionalization, it is also not reliant on continued and renewed support from legislators like other case studies. In this case, there was some political reticence to making citizen deliberation a permanent fixture of the parliament, which was eventually resolved.

Nonpartisan oversight and collaboration

The G1000 held a unique position in the creation and implementation of the Ostbelgien Model. First, its being a part of the design process afforded the model a level of political ease because the G1000 was seen as a neutral expert collaborator. And second, representatives from the G1000 also followed up with the design and implementation of this model, producing "momentum."⁷





References

- Bertelsmann Stiftung. 2022. *The Ostbelgien Model. Institutionalising Deliberative Democracy* in [this link](#)
- New Democracy. 2019. *Ostbelgien Model (Belgium)* in [this link](#)