

# Petersburg Citizens' Assembly Prototyping for internal capacity in a challenging political climate



## **The story**

In November 2021, a group of activists, city planners, architects, and facilitators convened to develop the first deliberative mini-public in St. Petersburg, Russia. The driving idea behind the Citizens' Assembly was to prototype: Despite the challenging political climate, organizers wanted to implement and learn in action, building up skills to be able to execute assemblies in the future.

## **The model**

The Assembly was composed of 29 participants recruited online via Facebook and community groups, in addition to Telegram chats. Participants were convened for two sessions in November of 2021. The deliberation was an agenda-setting exercise wherein an open space format was adopted to surface multiple topics that participants considered salient to a "common agenda." After deliberations ended, organizers convened an exhibit of the outcomes. They further engaged with municipal deputies and encouraged discussion about similar engagements with advocates within the bureaucracy.

## **Convening a bottom-up Assembly**

The bottom-up organization of the St. Petersburg Citizens' Assembly reflects purposive innovation around a history of state-sponsored deliberation in Russia. Absent regime-level democratization, consultative exercises are common at local levels. Frequently, these processes are convened by local public officials under federal programs and engage citizens on issues such as the beautification of public spaces (e.g., the design of a neighborhood park).

Noting how these top-down processes are constrained in issue scope and consequentiality, this tendency has been described as a form of "participatory authoritarianism" (Owen 2020). In contrast, the St. Petersburg Citizens' Assembly sought to create an extra-institutional public, convened, designed, and delivered by civil society actors. While this means that the process falls short of commonly held good practices, such as the OECD's principle of public commitment from a public authority, this condition reflects creative maneuvering in a challenging political context more than a flaw in the process.



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## **Prototyping and learning in action**

The key approach to this process, extra-institutional prototyping, represents an important possibility of action for practitioners working in conditions with limited political will around deliberative innovation. A key aspect of capacity-building in this process was on facilitation skills. Organizers mentioned the lack of a political culture of public deliberation. Recruiting facilitators with prior experience in other types of discussions, the Citizens' Assembly prototyped methods to imbue values of deliberative democracy in the facilitation styles. Running an actual assembly enabled facilitators to test practices and scenarios in action. Engaged advocacy with public authorities is no doubt an important avenue towards deepening deliberative democracy; however, in less open contexts, for example, when the state has control over existing deliberative practices, building deliberative capacities in non-state actors can also constitute a manner of deliberative deepening.

## **Challenges: Depoliticization of deliberative practice**

While the St. Petersburg Citizens' Assembly generated important knowledge and skills for the practitioners involved, there is also the risk of reproducing an emphasis on technical skills in a manner that depoliticizes aspirations for deliberative democracy. As one of the organizers of the St. Petersburg Assembly reflects, there are now numerous manuals dictating best practices on participatory urban planning in the country, without actual participatory democracy. In other words, such resources, while being technically robust, are simply tools "hanging in the air."

