

An NGO wants to try if randomly selected people instead of politicians decide on the future of Budapest



Júlia Halász · DEMOCRACY · Friday, February 7, 4:43 p.m. · 155 · 2052

A new chapter begins in the life of 444.

I AM INTERESTED

“Put your hand up to someone who thinks it’s good to live in a democracy,” asked Brett Hennig, founder of the Sortition Foundation in 2017, to an audience at a TEDx event in Budapest . The people in the room, with the exception of a few people, all put their hands up.

“Who thinks current democracies are working well?” The next question was, but no one voted for it anymore.

Brett Hennig researched why modern democracies are rumbling everywhere in the world, and while it may seem like an obvious answer, “*because people are stupid,*” he didn’t get along with that answer. He came to the improper selection of our decision-makers, so for years he has been promoting various forms of lottery popular representation and has even written a book that the time of politicians is finally over. With its organization, it supports projects around the world, such as the upcoming Citizens' Assembly in Budapest.

How does a civic assembly work?

We randomly select a few people from the community, they discuss important issues of community life, they make decisions, and this decision is taken into account by the real holders of political power when making laws and regulations. Put simply, this is how a civic assembly works all over the world , from Canada, through Poland, to South Korea.

But there are also two very important details in the process that make more and more people find such meetings useful.

■ Participants are selected by lot, but in such a way that the meeting models as accurately as possible the demographic composition of the given community

(female-male ratio, age, education, income, place of residence, etc.).

■ The most critical point in the process is that participants need to be thoroughly informed before forming an opinion, getting to know different positions, reading studies, listening to experts, pitting their own arguments with others to make a responsible decision at the end of the meeting.

Budapest and climate change

It is planned that next week, a non-governmental organization called DemNet will ask the Ministry of the Interior for 10,000 randomly selected names and addresses in Budapest to invite the people of the capital to a two-weekend discussion on climate change. Miklós Zsófia was asked by one of the coordinators of the project, who promised that “it is not a thing copied from many foreign examples” that they are trying now.

444: From demonstrations by the Student Network to Grove Defenders, civilians have often tried to think together in different ways in recent years. Why do we often feel like such initiatives fail and how will the civic assembly you have organized be different?

Miklós Zsófia: We feel that there is a great will to do things, people organize themselves and they stand together for countless issues. There is a lot of knowledge among civilians and academics, a lot of tools and methods that could be used in practice, but for that, the political will to listen to people is essential.



📷 Photo: Júlia Halász

We are now more optimistic because we approached the Capital and felt open on their part, and even in a public conversation on Monday, the mayor's chief advisers also referred to the community rally as an ongoing project. We will carry our project anyway, but such a meeting makes sense if there really is a decision-making body, even at the local level, that is curious about the results.

We know of several examples where municipalities or governments order civic assemblies. In Ireland, for 15 months from 2016, a 100-member civic assembly complemented the work of the Irish Parliament and discussed important issues such as gay marriage or the abortion ban, and in these cases, even citizens' proposals eventually led to a constitutional amendment.

Since 2018, the world's first German-speaking community in eastern Belgium has been continuously operating an institutionalized civic assembly. A 24-member civic council identifies topics to be discussed by a 50-member civic assembly and makes proposals to parliament, to which they are required to respond. Although these rallies are commissioned and funded by the state, it is very important that they be independent of parliament. This is also why members change relatively frequently.

444: You always call your own project a community meeting, why?

MZs: Although the literal translation of citizens' assembly is civic assembly, we would like to use the name community assembly. We think it is a less rigid term, more inclusive and applicable in more situations.



📷 Photo: Júlia Halász

444: What can be achieved in two weekends with 50 Budapesters on a broad topic like climate change?

MZs: We don't want to say exactly what the topic should be, we are already involving non-governmental organizations and experts in the development of specific issues, but it will definitely be about how the city can be more livable. The aim is to make clear at the meeting some of the most important needs of the people of Budapest.

444: What about undocumented Budapesters?

MZs: We also thought a lot about how to involve, for example, the homeless or the rural people who didn't sign up for some reason but live here and therefore are also affected by what decision the assembly makes. We have now found no better way to do this than to talk to representatives of different advocacy groups and share their views with the participants in the meeting. But I also do not rule out the possibility that we will also work with polling companies to find out more about the people living here, for example.

444: What happens if I find your invitations in my mailbox and I feel like attending, and what happens if I don't, but let's say my neighbor would love to go?

MZs: Invitations are non-transferable. We will have a method of control, and we will even exclude those who may be found to be working for a party or decision-making body. We hope that hundreds of thousands of invitations will be sent out, of which we will draw the 50 people who will eventually be able to participate, taking into account demographic parameters. The Sortition Foundation will help us a lot in doing this, their practical experience is huge.

It may sound trite, but it would be about bringing together 50 average people from different life situations, different backgrounds and a wide range of knowledge, taking into account each other's perspectives, to make a well-considered, quality decision.



📷 Photo: Júlia Halász

444: How do you want the participants to devote all their energy to processing all kinds of information and nerve-wracking plenary sessions by sacrificing two weekends?

MZs: Other decision makers do it professionally, for money, so we can't expect participants to undertake it for free, obviously they will get benefits and also a financial contribution, probably in the form of vouchers. This is also the case with most foreign examples.

444: The project is funded by the Sortition Foundation, weren't they afraid that many would reflex from a foreign-funded civic initiative?

MZs: I see it as a meaningful way to carry out our projects as transparently as possible, to communicate about them as openly and in detail as possible, and to respond to all inquiries. I am confident that if we do our job professionally, it will not be possible to get involved.

