Democratic Innovation at the Sub-national and Local Level

At Pázmány Péter Catholic University and Andrássy University Budapest

On 27 November 2026

Democratic innovation is often discussed in relation to national political institutions and the transformation of representative democracy. Yet many important experiments with new forms of participation, representation and decision-making take place below the national level. Cities, municipalities and regions have become key arenas in which citizens, political representatives and civil society actors test new forms of democratic governance.

The local and sub-national levels seem particularly well suited to such innovation. Political decisions are closer to citizens' everyday lives, and interaction between citizens and institutions can be more direct. Local referendums, citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, digital platforms and other forms of consultation and co-decision have therefore gained increasing attention. At the same time, democratic participation at this level is embedded in different traditions of local self-government, federalism and decentralisation.

However, new participatory instruments do not automatically produce more or better democracy. They raise fundamental questions of participation, representation, legitimacy and political responsibility. Who participates, and who remains underrepresented? How do new participatory mechanisms relate to elected institutions? Under what conditions can democratic experiments become durable elements of political decision-making?

These questions also require a multi-level perspective. Local and regional democracy does not operate in isolation: it is shaped by national legal frameworks, political institutions and public debates. At the same time, innovations developed locally may influence national reforms or travel across borders. Cities and regions are increasingly connected through European and transnational networks, while global challenges often become politically tangible at the local level. The local level can therefore be understood both as a laboratory of democratic innovation and as an interface between local, national and transnational democracy.

The conference will explore democratic innovation from conceptual, comparative and empirical perspectives, with a primary focus on the local level. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between representative, direct, participatory and deliberative democracy, as well as to the interaction between different levels of democratic governance.

How can democratic participation be strengthened at the local and regional level? How do local innovations interact with national institutions and transnational developments? Can democratic innovations travel across political levels and borders? And to what extent can local experiences contribute to the broader development of democracy?

This event is jointly organised by Andrássy University Budapest and Pázmány Péter Catholic University and forms part of the "Changing Orders Research Programme – Focus Area 2: Democratic Innovations", supported by the Swiss-Hungarian Cooperation Programme.

This event is the third of a series of four conferences in the context of the "Changing Orders Research Programme – **Focus Area 2: „Democratic Innovations"** of the Andrássy University Budapest, supported by the Swiss-Hungarian Cooperation Programme.

PROGRAMME:

Andrássy University Budapest (Andrássy Hall)

Introduction

09:00-09:15 Komáromi, László / Madarász, Csaba / Pállinger, Zoltán Tibor

1. Panel: Local Democracy in Hungary (09:15-12:30)

09:15-09:45 Kurunczi, Gábor
Using 'Extra-Legal' Instruments to Achieve More Democratic Decision-Making? – Examination of Alternative Instruments of Direct Democracy, with Particular Regard to Practice in Hungary

09:45-10:15 Barlai, Melani
From Rules to Practice: Poll Workers and the Local Implementation of Democracy in Hungary

10:15-10:45 Madarász, Csaba
Some Preliminary Theoretical Considerations on the Implementation of the Constitution-Making Process at Local Level

10:45-11:00 Coffee Break

11:00-11:30 Oross, Dániel
Reducing the Negative Effects of Climate Change: Lessons from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest

11:30-12:00 Kiss, Alexandra
Democratic Innovations in Hungarian Local Governments: An Overview of Participatory Practices

12:00-12:30 Komáromi, László
Barriers to Political Participation in Hungarian Political Culture

Lunch Break 12:30-14:00

Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Dean's Council Room)

2. … and beyond (14:00-18:00)

14:00-14:30 Barbato, Mariano
Subsidiarity and the Ambivalence of Participation

14:30-15:00 Prole, Dragan
The Local Community: From Socialist Governance to an Agent of Democratization

15:00-15:30 Serdült, Uwe
Participatory Budget Governance in Switzerland: The Case of Geneva

15:30-15:45 Coffee Break

15:45-16:15 Pautsch, Arne
Can Deliberative Processes Help Make Direct Democratic Processes at the Local Level More Objective? A Proposal for Legislative Reform from Baden-Württemberg

16:15-16:45 Pállinger, Zoltán Tibor
Popular Sovereignty from Below: Direct Democracy in Multi-Level Political Systems

16:45-17:15 Kaufmann, Bruno
Democracy City – The Infrastructure for a Government Run by Everyday People

17:15-17:45 Sack, Detlev
Civil Assemblies, Deliberative Reasoning, and Artificial Intelligence. The Benefits and Pitfalls of Confronting Different Systems of Knowledge

Concluding Remarks

17:45-18:00 Komáromi, László / Madarász, Csaba / Pállinger, Zoltán Tibor