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## DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION BY NON-GOVERNMENT ACTORS IN URBAN REGENERATION GOVERNANCE

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### Abstract

This paper employs critical discourse analysis to examine how Warsaw citizens (residents) perceived and organized the narratives of their participation in the governance of urban regeneration between 2004 and 2016 and how this evolved over that period. The study reveals citizens' discursive practices, such as the construction of positive and negative identities of the relevant social actors, the binary opposition between 'us and them', the development of new interpretations of urban regeneration, and finally, the gradual elaboration of a model of empowered citizenship. Drawing on the concept of democratic urban regeneration policymaking, the research suggests that in the case of Warsaw, one can speak of a shift from a citizen discourse of rebellious participation in non-deliberative governance towards one of more consensual and empowering participation in more deliberative governance.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy, democratic inclusion, citizens' discourse, urban governance, Warsaw

## Introduction

Much attention has been paid by political scientists to citizen participation in local policymaking. The issue of "consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organisations or institutions responsible for policy development" (Rowe and Frewer 2004, 512) is analysed with reference to the theory of deliberative and participatory democracy. This theory is currently most frequently applied by political scientists analysing the involvement of social actors in governance (Hilmer 2010, 44–45). Governance may be depicted and examined in a number of contexts. One of them is urban policy. Urban governance is defined as a process of governing a local community in which urban authorities set the aims and coordinate the actions of public, market and third-sector institutions. Urban governance is expected to contribute to strengthening values such as transparency, responsibility, and democracy within urban policy (Pierre and Peters 2012, 74). Participatory urban governance incorporates democratic involvement of citizens and deliberation (Fischer 2012, 458). However, even though citizen participation is considered an important part of democratic urban

decision-making, one finds little resident involvement in post-communist cities (and what little there is tends to be tokenistic).

In Warsaw, the development of urban regeneration projects on a larger scale did not occur until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Programs have been based on two strategic documents: (1) the Local Urban Regeneration Program for the years 2005–2013, adopted in 2008 (Office of the Capital City Of Warsaw 2008) and (2) the Integrated Urban Regeneration Program until 2022, adopted in 2015 (Office of the Capital City Of Warsaw 2015). Since 2015, urban regeneration activities have also been subject to the provisions of the Urban Regeneration Act of 2015, which introduces two obligatory forms of public participation in the urban regeneration process: (1) public consultation and (2) establishment of the Urban Regeneration Committee, a consulting and advisory body. In many areas of public policy, there is a formal rule requiring that residents be allowed to participate in the urban decision-making process. However, their involvement is often a facade. The most well-developed (though not free of shortcomings) practices of deliberative inclusion of citizens occur in urban regeneration policy. Warsaw was selected as a case study due to its public authorities' extensive experience in organizing activities involving residents in urban regeneration projects. The inhabitants of Warsaw show great interest in urban regeneration.

Polish political scientists have examined the issue of citizen participation in urban regeneration governance. Existing studies have explored institutional and legal conditions of participation and civic dialogue in cities (Pawłowska and Radzik 2016). Moreover, researchers have studied the role of local officials, local councillors and social councils in participatory urban governance (Radzik-Maruszak, Haveri, and Pawłowska 2020; Pawłowska and Radzik-Maruszak 2021). They have also sought to analyse selected tools of citizen participation, such as public consultations, local referenda, participatory planning and designing, and participatory budgeting (Radziszewski 2016; Jaśkowiec 2017; Daniel 2020). However, the topic is still insufficiently explored.

Despite growing interest in citizen participation in urban regeneration policymaking, relatively little is known about the issue of non-government actors' discursive practices, particularly the production of discursive representations in citizen participation. Farrelly and Sullivan (2010) argue that public managers involved in urban renewal schemes often cast citizens in the role of consumers rather than as partners. These neighbourhood scheme managers must deal with many contradictions and struggle to balance a market-orientated discourse with a neighbourhood partnership one. Another study by Kennelly and Watt (2012) explored the discourse of low-income and marginally housed young people vis-à-vis a local urban renewal project in Newham, one of six East London 'Olympic boroughs'. The study participants did not use the term 'gentrification', but the opinions they expressed about the results of the renewal project illustrate this direction of change. The local young people studied used dichotomies to describe the residential mix resulting from the change, distinguishing 'us' (the established poor residents) and 'them' (the rich newcomers). More recently, Galvin and Mooney Simmie (2017) focus on contradictions between the Irish urban regeneration discourses of officials and those of residents and community workers. The latter wanted to keep the community together and to protect it against fragmentation and gentrification. They produced a discourse of public values and emancipation.

Studies covering Poland are much less extensive, and many aspects of urban regeneration discourse production by non-government actors have yet to be studied. Therefore, the

present article takes up the question of the discursive strategies used by residents in constructing and promoting urban regeneration discourse. The research aims to provide new knowledge on the social construction of meaning around citizen participation in Poland. The paper seeks to examine the issue of discourse production by non-government actors through a case study in Warsaw and show how change processes depend on social power relations (i.e., the positioning of residents versus officials in policymaking).

Specifically, the analysis explores (1) how Warsaw citizens (residents) perceived their participation in the governance of urban regeneration in 2004–2016, and (2) how they discursively promoted their perceptions in the decision-making process within a context of shifting social power relations. Drawing on the established concept of ‘democratic urban regeneration policymaking’, the paper reveals the complexity and the problematic nature of including citizens in the policy co-production process.

The study draws on both primary and secondary data, namely press articles and in-depth interviews with residents. The author undertook textual analysis (content analysis of selected articles focusing on the construction of meaning around citizens’ inclusion in urban regeneration policymaking) and discursive practice analysis (concerning selected articles and interview transcripts, and regarding the strategies that promote citizens’ perceptions of their participation in decision-making within a changing social context). The paper contributes to Polish qualitative political science by providing a new application of Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis framework (Fairclough 2003, 2013).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The paper begins by presenting a theoretical background of the research. The author subsequently examines the research methods and findings of the original empirical study. Finally, the article ends with a conclusion section.

## **Democratic urban regeneration policymaking**

The issue of citizen participation in urban regeneration decision-making is usually conceptualized with the concept of governance (Farrelly and Sullivan 2010; Atkinson et al. 2019). Some researchers posit alternative approaches, drawing, for instance, on Lefebvre’s notion of space, Engeström’s Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Holand and colleagues concept of positionality and social identity (Galvin and Mooney Simmie 2017). These perspectives are useful for examining citizens’ involvement in policymaking as a transformative process of civic education and development. However, they offer little purchase in capturing the power relations inherent in discourse production. In view of this, Vandebussche (2018) draws on relational dialectics theory to map the ways stakeholders’ relate in urban regeneration contexts over time. However, this treatment of discourse production by residents is limited to meanings (‘value clusters’) and does not concern the discursive practices (e.g., rhetorical strategies).

Theoretically speaking, the present study draws on the concept of democratic urban regeneration policymaking. It contrasts with the predominant perspective, which focuses on social practices of governance, and shifts attention away from the way urban regeneration decision-making is produced discursively, especially by non-government actors. The concept of democratic urban regeneration policymaking goes beyond this limited approach. It seeks to aid our understanding of discursive strategies used by residents in constructing discourses of citizen participation in urban regeneration policymaking. This

concept lies at the nexus of the neighbourhood empowerment model of governance, participatory and deliberative democracy, and a policy-as-discourse approach.

The neighbourhood empowerment model of governance is a type of governance focused on encouraging *direct citizen participation*, based on the assumption that the neighbourhood is the appropriate level “for re-engaging citizens in the context of declining public involvement in conventional local politics” (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 64). Here, the proximity of the locale and problems (concerning inhabitants’ everyday lives) is seen as a factor that increases citizen participation. The inhabitants of the neighbourhood are thus perceived as citizens. In realizing their citizenship, they are supported by local authorities (with civic education or capacity-building) within civic forums or co-production initiatives. Such supporters aim to promote citizen participation, making it generalized and inclusive. Lowndes and Sullivan state that “through participation, citizens gain (in a Tocquevillian sense) an appreciation of the wider public interest and the needs and contributions of all sections of the community” (2008, 65).

Against this backdrop, the involvement of social actors in urban regeneration policy-making can be understood as “the inclusion of individuals, groups or entire local communities in making public decisions on matters concerning them” (Ogrodowski 2017, 1). Furthermore, the deliberative inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process in public policies can be an indicator of the democratic quality of these policies and of the very political systems in which they are formulated and implemented. This is especially true in the light of the maximalist definition of democracy this study employs, which holds that it is not only elections and voting that play an important role, but also the “strong democratic ethos, functional political rights and participation in governance” (Merkel and Gagnon 2016, 91).

The present research focuses on the discursive practices of neighbourhood empowerment governance. This type of governance is located next to three other forms of local policymaking: neighbourhood partnership, neighbourhood government, and neighbourhood management (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 65–66). It promotes a participatory democracy, an important part of which is deliberation. The author assumes that – since the neoliberal approach to governance is currently being contested (Berry 2014) – the validity of political authority over a specific urban policy can rest on the deliberative inclusion of citizens in the policy process. In this context, Cohen’s theory of deliberative democracy – and especially his five features of deliberative democracy (Cohen 1997, 72–73) – can be invoked to conceptualize the deliberative involvement of citizens in the policy process. Cohen’s approach is characterized by considerable pluralism: “deliberative democracy is a pluralistic association. The members have diverse preferences, convictions, and ideas concerning the conduct of their own lives” (Cohen 1997, 73). Thus, in this approach, policy decisions are made as a result of clashing discourses and arguments presented by numerous groups and social actors.

Therefore, one of the most important characteristics of participatory and deliberative urban regeneration policy is the presence of activities promoting the deliberative inclusion of citizens in policy communication. The discursiveness is given to these activities via language. According to Edelman (1988), one of the first analysts of the role of policy discourse in policy formation, authority in policy comes from a verbal construction and articulation of social issues. Actors *express their interests through language*, which also shapes the framework of policy communication.

Drawing on this theoretical perspective, the present paper analyses citizens' discourse of urban regeneration in the Polish capital city of Warsaw. In so doing, it explores how the citizens of Warsaw understood and produced narratives in connection to their participation in urban regeneration governance between 2004 and 2016 and how their narratives changed over this period.

## Theoretical framework

The framework for analysis is grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), which emerged as part of the discursive turn in policy studies. Such approaches acknowledge "the discursive (or semiotic or linguistic) character of policy, policy making and policy analysis which broadly aligns them with antipositivist and interpretative positions within policy studies" (Fairclough 2013, 177). CDA is "a theory of and methodology for analysis of discourse understood as an element or 'moment' of the political, political-economic and more generally social which is dialectically related to other elements/moments" (Fairclough 2013, 178). This is why CDA is particularly useful to study the discursive practices around constructing and promoting residents' perceptions in decision-making in a context of changing social power relations. CDA seeks to describe, evaluate, and explain existing realities. It is a three-dimensional framework of analysis that consists of (1) textual analysis, (2) discursive practice analysis, and (3) social practice analysis (Fairclough 2003). This study focuses on discursive practice analysis.

## Data and methods

The unit of analysis is Warsaw residents' narratives related to citizen participation in urban regeneration between 2004 and 2016. Due to difficulties in conducting interviews with residents involved in the urban regeneration projects (the study was carried out after the analysed projects were completed), the study is mainly based on the examination of 72 press articles on urban regeneration written between 2004 and 2016 in the left-wing-leaning national daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* (published in Warsaw since 1989). *Gazeta Wyborcza* was chosen because it is the most reliable newspaper in terms of coverage of the studied topic. The newspaper's archives give access to articles from many years. The newspaper has a local section dedicated to Warsaw.

The articles were selected through a keyword search of the newspaper database, using the keywords "deliberative inclusion of citizens", "urban regeneration", and "Warsaw". In the process of selecting articles for analysis, the author tried to avoid partiality or bias. A preliminary review of the articles focused on the meanings attributed to the issue of citizen participation by residents. The aim was to elaborate on how citizens understood (perceived) the issue of their participation in the urban regeneration decision-making and how this changed 2004–2016. Using open coding of the data followed by reflection and close reading, the author identified the three most general meanings attached to citizen participation in urban regeneration as constructed by residents and assigned them to specific time periods as follows: *participation as a formality* (2004–2007), *participation as protests* (2007–2011), and *empowering citizen participation* (2007–2016). The examination revealed the social context of changing power relations between the residents and officials. The analysis focused on citizen statements as directly cited by journalists. The author did

not study the journalists' opinions and comments related to their representations of citizens' views on urban regeneration. As a result, the study does not examine the mediated aspects of the reports nor undertake an analysis of media discourse.

Next, the author selected the texts for textual analysis that were representative of the three meanings and periods in the development of Warsaw's urban regeneration policy. The selection criteria were as follows: (1) the data had the potential to reveal residents' discursive strategies, and (2) every general meaning of citizen participation constructed by residents was illustrated by one article (to enable a detailed analysis of the text). The textual analysis encompassed three press articles published in 2006 (A1/2006), 2007 (A2/2007), and 2011 (A3/2011), respectively. The author implemented selected aspects of textual analysis in a fragmented way. Linguistic analysis at the micro-level (concerning the form of the texts) was omitted entirely. Thus, the author engaged with matters only pertaining to discursive practices used by citizens' to attribute meanings to their participation and how it was promoted in decision-making. The author applied Aristotle's theory of rhetoric (Richardson 2007, 156–177), attempting to find the most important constructions of discursive strategies used by citizens. The discursive practices were analysed in the context of changing social power relations. The author then interpreted the data referring to the concept of democratic urban regeneration policymaking.

The data collected through the analysis of press articles were supplemented with opinions expressed by urban activists, a researcher, and a city official/former urban activist. The in-depth interviews were conducted in May and June 2019. Five participants participated in the interviews (two women, three men; aged 35–60). The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. The participants included the Plenipotentiary of the Mayor of Warsaw for Urban Regeneration (the former urban activist). Three other interviewees were former citizen representatives in the Social Dialogue Committee for Architecture and Spatial Planning in Warsaw City Hall. Another person, the researcher, is a member of the Regeneration Committee for Warsaw's Integrated Urban Regeneration Program until 2022 (adopted in 2015) and represents citizens there (as of 2021). The interviewees were contacted initially by e-mail and telephone. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were digitally recorded, with the permission of participants, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. An inductive coding scheme was used in the analysis. Codes reflected topics that emerged from open coding. Since the data mainly related to the last period in the development of urban regeneration in Warsaw (empowering citizen participation, 2007–2016), it was used as supplementary information, deepening the knowledge from the discursive practice analysis of articles, and there are only a few quotes from interviews in the paper.

Throughout the research, the author adhered to the rules laid out in the Polish Sociologist's Code of Ethics.

## Analysis

### *Citizens' discursive practices regarding the formalistic nature of participation*

A textual analysis of the first text from 2006 (A1/2006) reveals that in the early stage of the development of urban regeneration policy in Warsaw (2004–2007), the deliberative

inclusion of citizens was presented in the citizens' discourse as a formality. Citizens produced this representation as a reaction to the actions taken by city officials. The citizens' discourse reveals that residents were treated somewhat paternalistically by the city, the district authorities, and experts. The citizens' representation underlines the problems in accessing the information concerning local public policy and the arrogant approach of the city officials when dealing with residents' needs and concerns.

As a result, one can observe that in the citizens' discourse, the residents assign a positive identity to themselves and a negative one to the representatives of the city. On the one hand, the citizens are presented as interested but somewhat uninvolved in the urban regeneration project. Citizens are energetic; they look for solutions to identified problems, making contact with the city officials to promote their ideas and seek feedback. The formalistic nature of collaboration between the city officials and the citizens is demonstrated by the former's use of the verb "to demand" to describe their actions ("*kazali*", "*nakazała*", A1/2006). Thus, the city officials do not ask; they demand from (order) the residents to accept the top-down decision-making. There is, therefore, an asymmetry of power between social actors; it is more typical of neighbourhood management (with the role of the city officials as directors) than the neighbourhood empowerment style of governance (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62).

This use of language by officials reflects the specific social power relations between citizens and city officials/local authority, marked by an asymmetry of voice in policymaking. The citizens are placed in a lower position, which presents a significant obstacle to their direct and effective participation in decision-making. Even if the public services and city officials are physically accessible, and the urban regeneration projects are implemented in neighbourhood areas or districts that are familiar to residents, the local authorities do not create platforms for collaboration with the citizens. Thus, the latter are not empowered but merely informed about the results of the top-down decision-making. The decision-makers, therefore, impose a passive role on the public, which diverges from the concept of deliberative democracy in Cohen's approach (1997). For Cohen, the problems of collective choice must be solved by a commitment to deliberative decisions; thus, the legitimization of policy decision-making stems from deliberation and justification of arguments that are put forward in the discussion. One can thus observe that this strategy of representation of citizens and city officials/city authorities reflects the ethotic mode of rhetorical proof (referring to the authority, expertise of the speaker, and the values he or she represents). It is used to shape the framework of policy communication (Edelman 1988).

In addition to the observations regarding positive and negative identity construction, it is significant to highlight the discursive juxtaposition illustrated by the binary opposition between 'us' and 'them', where 'us' refers to the citizens, and 'them' denotes the city authorities and officials. The latter group is perceived as not considering the citizens' point of view. As one of the residents stated: "They called us, showed us the plans, and demanded we be satisfied with the ongoing urban regeneration" (A1/2006). The sentiment that arises is a sense of citizen frustration with the city officials' disregard and arrogance. Such a discursive strategy of polarization aims to present residents as an inclusive community with specific needs, interests, and characteristics. One of the key objectives of a neighbourhood empowerment style of governance is to create cohesive communities of active citizens (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62). However, such communities should originate from collaboration and empowerment, not be a side effect of official mistreatment.

*Citizens' discursive practices related to the protest form of participation*

Groups of citizens are better placed to protect their interests when they are well-organized. Moreover, in general, the more empowered residents' movements are, the more active individuals (acting alone) are as well. This is the theme of the second newspaper article analysed (A3/2011). The text from 2011 shows how the policy discourse in 2007–2011 evinced a link between the deliberative inclusion of citizens in urban regeneration policymaking in Warsaw and the necessity of protest as a form of civic action to bolster citizens' position in governance.

One can see here a similar way of describing residents and city officials (based on the ethotic mode of persuasion). The latter "lack aesthetic sense and subtlety" (A3/2011). Moreover, they "organize the city without consulting the citizens" (A3/2011). Furthermore, their actions "are not seen as solutions to the residents' problems" (A3/2011). What is more, this time, the citizens are even more critical, openly describing officials' planning proposals as "caricatures" (A3/2011). In such a way, the residents express responsibility for the neighbourhood they live in and demand a voice in the decision-making processes, again assuming a binary 'us vs them' opposition in their representation (emphasizing the difference of interests between themselves and the officials).

However, the most crucial discursive strategy in the second text is the reference to the audience's emotions (pathos-related proof). The city's way of designing and implementing urban regeneration projects is discursively located in the context of the mistreatment of animals. The city officials propose a horse-drawn tram (horsecar) as part of the urban regeneration project. The inhabitants do not like the idea of an animal hauling a carriage filled with tourists. One citizen maintains: "Of course I would prefer to protest a more important matter, but I will not, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, allow a horse to canter down Chłodna Street!" (A3/2011). Here, we see the citizens discursively constructing new interpretations of urban regeneration issues (Edelman 1988), within which there is a new distribution of power and legitimacy. The citizens' discourse emphasizes that the residents only means of participating in urban regeneration policymaking in Warsaw is by organizing protests; contestation seems the only way residents can be empowered to participate in governance. Citizens justify this form of civic action via emotional arguments (calling for the protection of weaker human and non-human entities). It produces a very antagonistic political communication style between citizens and city officials/local authorities and reminds us that conflicting interests are an innate characteristic of governance (Edelman 2001). Some results of the contestation suggest that the "non-elite" can, through rebellion, force the "ruling political, economic or social elite" to make the framework for urban regeneration more pluralistic, participatory, and deliberative. This kind of citizen involvement can move the urban regeneration process closer to a "fully democratic urban pluralism" (Van Til and Van Til 1970, 321). However, it is not coherent with the assumptions of neighbourhood empowerment governance.

As a result of citizens' protests and other factors (e.g., new national legislation on urban regeneration, the Urban Regeneration Act of 2015), the city officials/local authorities have gradually started to involve the residents in the urban regeneration decision-making. Within this context, one can find that neighbourhood empowerment governance encourages direct citizen participation (participatory democracy), albeit participation based on consensus-seeking rather than contestation and demonstrations (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62).

*Citizens' discursive practices aimed at involving the mode of participation*

These two opposing approaches to deliberative inclusion of citizens in urban regeneration policymaking (i.e., official disregard and protests versus respect and consensual participation) have been seen in some parts of Warsaw since 2007. The different attitudes of local officials and residents towards citizen participation have existed in parallel. Some citizens used a protest form of civic action to become involved in urban regeneration policymaking, whereas others living in different districts were asked to participate in a well-organized consultation. The inclusion of citizens in decision-making has become more common since 2010. The third article selected for textual analysis (A2/2007) exemplifies this new tendency.

In the analysed paper (A2/2007), there is no apparent identity polarization between residents (positive) and representatives of the city (negative), as observed in the previous two. Here, citizens are described as interested in the development of their neighbourhood. Thus, their attitude is coherent with an identity as empowered citizens (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62). Furthermore, the city officials and local councillors show a willingness to collaborate with residents, launching urban regeneration projects in a way that co-produces with the citizens, remaining open-minded, and listening to residents and supporting their suggestions and feedback. Their discursive representation has all the hallmarks of the roles of animators and enablers, which are typical for the neighbourhood empowerment mode of governance (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62).

The message of the text (and the most important discursive strategy) is that the citizens are competent to participate in urban regeneration policymaking. They have the skills, the knowledge, and the will to do so. The citizens propose new projects themselves, considering their involvement in decision-making as an opportunity for themselves and the neighbourhood. Thus, they are presented as self-confident and respected by the city officials. This discursive strategy resonates with the ethotic rhetorical proof and aims at creating model empowered citizens who are trustworthy and credible for the audience. It assists in improving the position of residents in urban policymaking and limiting any voice or power asymmetries between themselves and the city officials/authorities. Reducing asymmetry is an important precondition for participatory democracy, a central part of the toolkit in neighbourhood empowerment governance (Lowndes and Sullivan 2008, 62). And it comports with Cohen's model of deliberative democracy, in which social actors recognize one another as having deliberative capacities (Cohen 1997, 72–73).

However, the citizens' discourse also sheds light on aspects of the context that make citizen participation difficult. The example of the Regeneration Committee (with an advisory and consultative role within the office of the Mayor of Warsaw) was cited by a researcher (a member of the Regeneration Committee for Warsaw's Integrated Urban Regeneration Program until 2022). The researcher described the Committee's work as "not the greatest success" (Researcher, 30 May 2019). This respondent explained that "the we-you formula on both sides" becomes problematic when "the social side confronts officials and officials defend themselves against the social side" (Researcher, 30 May 2019).

This illustrates an important change in neighbourhood governance in Warsaw over the period under study (2004–2016). Citizens have the opportunity to participate more directly and effectively in policymaking nowadays, thus becoming increasingly more involved in communication with city officials and local authorities. The voice of citizens has increased as a result. However, there remain many obstacles to the realization of partic-

ipatory democracy within neighbourhood governance. The latter remains insufficiently empowering, deliberative, and participatory.

## Conclusion

This research contributes to existing research by illustrating the development and change of citizen discourses of participation in urban regeneration governance in Warsaw. It seems that between 2004 and 2016, there was a shift in citizen discourse from one characterized by protest participation and emphasizing 'governance without deliberation' towards one featuring more consensual and empowering participation against a backdrop in which governance was gradually becoming more deliberative. However, when respondents' observations are viewed through the lens of democratic urban regeneration policy-making, some aspects of urban governance (as represented in citizens' discourse) remain insufficiently deliberative and participatory. This inchoate development in the deliberative dimension might be attributed to Poland's acutely polarized political scene. Nevertheless, the importance of this factor in the quality of deliberation warrants further investigation.

The examination helps shed light on the links between the discursive process through which the notion of citizen participation in urban policymaking is shaped and the impact of power relations on shifting perceptions of the role of citizens in Central and Eastern European post-socialist cities. After 1989, the economic system transitioned from state socialism towards liberal capitalism. Thus, a centralized, top-down approach to city governance gave way to a neoliberal one. As the countries of Eastern and Central Europe entered the European Union and neoliberal ideology subsequently came in for criticism (especially in the context of the financial and economic crisis of 2008–09), a more participatory and deliberative urban governance began to be promoted in Central and Eastern European post-socialist cities. These ideas stimulated interest in direct democracy among citizens and were reflected in Varsovians' strategies related to discourse production in urban regeneration governance.

Finally, the paper complements the understanding of meanings and strategies (discursive practices) used by residents in constructing discourse in policymaking. It shows the way citizens constructed positive and negative identities for relevant social actors, the binary opposition between 'us and them', and the construction of new interpretations of the issue of urban regeneration. The overall result was the gradual construction of a model empowered citizens. Nevertheless, further research is needed to assess the strength and sustainability of that model and how it might be extended over time.

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