

## BALKAN 2025 – DIRECT PARTICIPATION OF CITIZENS FOR TRUE DEMOCRACY

*\*This Paper was submitted to the Call for Papers on "Balkan 2025 – What Kind of Future Can We Expect?" to be presented at the Belgrade Security Forum 2018*

Irena Fiket,<sup>1</sup>Gazela Pudar Draško<sup>2</sup>

Beograd, August 2018

### 1. Political and civic passivity of citizens are deepening democratic deficit in Serbia

Widespread political and civic passivity of citizens profoundly weakens already fragile (defective) democracy of Serbia. Before all, as confirmed by our research<sup>3</sup>, there is a widespread belief among citizen that there is a lack of legitimacy and credibility of the election process and this substantially endangers chances for developing the true democracy. The situation is especially alarming in the smaller towns, with a reference to local elections and its irregularities, because local representatives are generally considered to be elected even before the elections even started.

*"Here, you know, a week before, or two or a month before, they start going from house to house. Do you want to vote for us? And when you do vote, he is practically breathing my neck to see if you voted. Is this voting? Is this electing?"*

Such belief together with extremely high distrust towards politicians represents a strong discouraging mechanism for any engagement of the citizens. People are tired of being worried and disappointed and therefore they become numb and passive, with complete lack of future horizon behind small personal paths. Even worse, less educated citizens do not refrain from stating a willingness to sell their vote

*„We are drawn into lethargy [...] System managed to persuade an individual that he doesn't deserve better or that it's not God given to live better..."*

. Consequences are seen in significant abstention from the electoral process due to the feeling that they are unable to change the situation.

<sup>1</sup> Irena Fiket is Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

<sup>2</sup> Gazela Pudar Draško is Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade

<sup>3</sup> The referred research of the political orientations and social engagement of the general population in Serbia, based on interviews and focus groups (qualitative data) was implemented by Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. See Fiket, Pavlović, Pudar Draško (2017) for published results.

*“We don’t even want to think about it [politics] anymore! The people is so resigned and tired, tortured, that things are considered on a daily basis only. Living day for a day...”*

Besides low level of participation in institutions of representative democracy, such as elections, most of Serbian citizens are not active in any kind of associations. Enrollment in the civil society organizations is considered as important political resource. Any membership, even passive, in a non-political organization has relevance to political behavior. Civil society is the motivating environment for the acquisition and development of democratic skills and attitudes, above all feelings of political efficiency. Citizens' associations, in fact, are seen as "the schools of democracy". Having this in mind, it is especially worrying that the level of participation of citizens of Serbia in “schools of democracy” is very low. They do show willingness to help other people, if somebody ask them to do so, but they show the complete absence of own initiative. The main reasons for non-activism are 1) lack of interest, 2) lack of time because of everyday struggle related to the satisfaction of personal and family basic needs and 3) lack of believe that own actions can make a change.

*„I want (change) a lot, but I can (do) very little“*

However, there is also the lack of knowledge on the possibilities of social mobilization. There is a prevailing belief that collective mobilization and actions for some common goal and improvement in community are not in the "jurisdiction" of the citizens who are powerless to move something.

As far as regard participation in institutions of direct democracy or political mobilizations, the situation is not brighter. When asked if they would like to contribute, launch or participate in campaign or protest or to do something that could affect life of the country, our respondents almost unanimously show the desire to do something while pointing at the same time to the two main constraints. One is their own personal limitation and the other is the perception on impossibility of any efficient citizens' political action in Serbia.

*„Not citizens... only those (politicians) who are at the top (can change something). Only they can influence and only they can decide what will happen, no matter what you do, or citizens in general, ... Some (people) protests! What did they do with those protests? Nothing! We have no clue; nobody can change anything. “*

*“Well, I think it’s impossible (to change something). If someone wants to change something, they need to have extreme security around!”*

Analysis, in fact, revealed the complete synergy between the (lack of) internal political efficacy of the citizens – the belief that one can understand politics and therefore participate in politics –

and the (lack of) external political efficacy – belief that the government will respond to one's demands. Citizens strongly believe that the government does not care about their needs. Therefore, not only we can talk about current political passivity but also about the lack of perspective for changing such conditions in the near future. Also in this case, there is almost complete ignorance and misunderstanding of the mechanisms of civil participation (protests) and existent institutional mechanism of direct participation that could be used in political engagement. In addition, there is a lack of direct experience in participation in democratic civic practices.

Even though the picture of democratic potentials of citizens in Serbia is surely pessimistic one, citizens do desire changes. They desire changes that would enable them to choose the politicians representing the interests of their constituencies. They want strong institutions and clear rules that will be applicable to all. Citizens urge for credibility, they want politicians who are close and responsible to them – closer to local level and focused on local tangible problems.

## **2. The need for direct participation of the citizens**

In spite pessimistic picture described previously, we have recently witnessed in this region different kinds of citizens' participation in initiatives against growing authoritarian tendencies. The examples of these bottom-up citizens' mobilizations vary from the so-called "colourful revolution" in Macedonia's capital Skopje to plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and a wide variety of civic initiatives at local levels in all countries of the region. For the sake of our argument, we emphasize three initiatives, regarded as the most successful in mobilizing citizens on the local level: Do not D(r)own Belgrade (Belgrade), Local Front (Kraljevo) and Udruženi pokret slobodnih stanara (Niš). Those initiatives emphasize importance of general socio-political ideas like social justice and wide participation of citizens in the formulation of public policies. Their actions are very pragmatic and specifically aim at dealing with problems at local, municipal levels, against the idea that policies concerning the quality of everyday lives of citizens could be implemented exclusively through top-down mechanisms. This is rightfully rooted in the perception that local is where most people feel the immediate effects of the politics. By stressing the need to bring back citizens into the policymaking they are indeed focused on their everyday needs and problems such as public transport, housing problems etc. reminding both citizens and government what the core of democracy is. All this initiatives testimony both, that there is a growing citizens discontent with, and lack of trust in, the existent institutions of democracy and, on the other hand, the willingness to engage in new forms of political participation that focus on local tangible problems of people. Through those initiatives citizens, in fact, manifested the willingness to participate in and democratize societies and this could represent a grounding base for formulating institutional modalities for direct participation of citizens in political life.

In such demands for inclusion and participation, citizens of the Western Balkans countries sometimes search for inspirational traditions, like socialist self-government modes, but they also look to other forms of participative strategies for inspiration, above all to (deliberative) democratic innovations already institutionalized in many EU countries at (not only) local level.

### **3. Promotion of institutions of direct participation of the citizens within EU Enlargement Strategy**

While EU Enlargement Strategy recognizes the importance of the strengthening the functioning of democratic institutions, it predominantly focuses on the national parliaments as tools of political action. Additionally, empowered civil society is mentioned in regard to inclusive structured dialogues on reform priorities, but without any further elaboration. However, we believe that Strategy needs to entail closer look on the introducing participatory democratic processes that would bring citizens closer to policy and decision making, starting from the local level. Such focus would be aligned to a renewed concern of the EU and its member states for the promotion and encouragement of active citizenship, resulted in a process of democratic engineering inspired by the principles of the participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Democratic experimentation along these lines, which can be observed in some EU countries, gave rise to the promotion and institutionalisation of (*deliberative*) *democratic innovations* such as public debates, neighbourhood councils, citizens' juries, participatory budgets, etc. Introducing these tools of participatory democracy into post-socialist and post-conflict societies of the Western Balkans, could lead to meaningful engagement of citizens.

### **4. Thinking for the future**

We argue here that participatory democratic innovations and on bottom-up citizens' mobilizations needs to be brought together in order to promote institutionalization of the innovative practices of direct involvement of the citizens, as an indispensable element for deepening and reinforcing democracy and in building the citizens' resilience to growing authoritarian and populist tendencies.

Therefore, we recommend:

- 1. Initiation of broader discussion with policy makers, civil society organisations, experts, media and citizens at local level in order to design appropriate institutions of direct involvement of the citizens at local (municipal) level following the model of participatory democratic innovations already implemented in EU countries.**

Due to its size, the local level is optimal level for the implementation of participatory innovations. We believe that ideal situation where all interested parties take part in solving socio-political issues, is possible only at the local level.

At the same time, inclusion of citizens fosters the local ownership of the policies among them. This reduces the possibility of conflict between local government representatives and citizens and increases the possibility of success of formulated policies.

Even though implementation of participatory democratic innovations model of citizens' engagement could be already promoted within existing legal and institutional framework, the changes in framework must be done in order to make it immune to current abuse and to motivate the citizens to use it.

2. **Institutionalisation of the new forms of innovative participatory practices that are shown to be successful in motivating citizens' participation.**

Normative framework of WB countries is sufficiently open for institutionalisation of various new practices of direct democracy (legacy of the socialist system). Existent institutionalized possibilities, as already said, are unfortunately not used and recognized as possibilities for citizens' involvement. It is necessary to think again, learning from socialist experience and learning from European Union practices, on the (re)new(ed) forms based on broader involvement of citizens at local level.

Giving to citizens the voice of local experts of everyday tangible problems motivates citizens to actively engage. Since citizens are those who know the needs and problems of the territory they live and work on, consideration of their preferences and opinions in policy making represent the best use of local potentials.

Failing to strengthen citizens' participation in a more substantial way could only lead us to a **negative scenario**:

- Further decline of democratic institutions and democratic values
- Empowerment and rise of nondemocratic elements and authoritarian, nationalistic and conservative values
- Stronger emigration of not only highly skilled, but also of all citizens that give importance to the civic values.

Moving towards more participatory model of democracy could open a space to a **best case scenario**:

- Citizens will be invited to participate in decision making at the local level
- Continuous application of such model on the local level will lead to empowered, informed and aware citizens that will be able and willing to participate in political arena and value their fellow citizens political attitudes
- Citizens who are practicing democracy at local level would become more interested and active at other levels of political participation.
- A change in election system may follow the stronger citizens' involvement, bringing elected members of parliament much closer to their constituencies, if election units would be designed on the county level.
- All this would make democracy more vibrant.