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## FAILED EXPECTATIONS: CAN DELIBERATIVE INNOVATIONS PRODUCE DEMOCRATIC EFFECTS IN HYBRID REGIMES?<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Participation in deliberation in stable democracies produces effects which are beneficial for democracy, while the results of deliberative innovations in non-democracies are more ambiguous. This article contributes to the debate about the effects of participatory democratic innovations on attitudes, related to democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation, in the increasingly ubiquitous hybrid regimes. We present the evidence collected from the participants before and after deliberative mini publics (DMPs), held in Serbia in 2020. Serbia is an exemplary case of a recent wave of autocratization, which had led to it becoming a hybrid regime, and it had no track record of deliberative innovations. When conducting the mini publics, we introduced an innovation in the standard design, by including active citizens – representatives of local initiatives or social movements particularly interested in the issue of DMPs. We could not find evidence that the democratic innovation affected attitudes of participants regarding democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation. However, we did find that participants of the DMPs became less satisfied with the functioning of the democracy on the local level. We argue that the anti-democratic wider context of hybrid regimes can produce adverse effects when introducing participatory democratic innovations, at least when it comes to this specific dimension of political participation. We conclude with the suggestions for further research, and a call for consideration of the wider political context when designing democratic interventions in hybrid regimes.

### KEYWORDS

deliberative  
democracy, mini public,  
democratic innovation,  
citizen participation,  
hybrid regime, Serbia

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## 1. Introduction

As democratic governance has been in decline globally, in both consolidated and emerging democracies, a new wave of studies on how to make democracies more resilient has emerged. One of the most prominent approaches in both academic and political debates, centered upon civic participation in democratic processes, was the deliberative approach. Following a forceful theoretical argumentation in favor of deliberation, decades of empirical research showed that participation in deliberation in stable democracies produces different effects, beneficial for democracy. At the same time, since the early 2000s, hybrid regimes, essentially autocratic regimes that still maintain formal elements of democracies, have proliferated globally.

However, there is a gap in research that would establish if there are possible effects of deliberative, participatory practices on attitudes about democratic participation and democracy in hybrid regimes. We argue that the empirical findings from participatory innovations in consolidated democracies need not travel well to the contexts of non-democracies or hybrid regimes. And, even though some forms of participatory innovations have been implemented in such contexts, from China and Russia to Turkey, there is still no sufficient research on the connection to the citizens' related components of the quality of democracy.

In order to address this gap, this paper contributes to the debate about the effects of participatory democratic innovations on attitudes related to democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation in hybrid regimes, by presenting evidence from deliberative mini publics (DMPs) held in Serbia in 2020. We focused on the case of Serbia, because it is a paradigmatic case of a sharp democratic decline in the last decade, leading to the establishment of a hybrid regime.

We employed a repeated measures design, surveying the participants before and after the deliberative mini public. As we do not find statistically significant changes in expressed attitudes before and after deliberative mini publics, our analysis fails to find sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that democratic innovations in hybrid regimes do not affect attitudes of participants regarding democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation. However, we did find that participants of the DMPs became less satisfied with the functioning of the democracy on the local level, so we could reject our null hypothesis and confirm, at least when it comes to this specific dimension of political participation, our second hypothesis, that the anti-democratic wider context of hybrid regime can produce adverse effects when introducing participatory democratic innovations.

Even though we found either no changes in attitudes, or adverse effects in attitudes towards democratic participation, positive changes were identified in relation to more competent political participation, since participants' knowledge on the topic of deliberation is enhanced towards more precise, elaborated

and inclusive information, encompassing different perspectives (in this volume: Đorđević, Vasiljević 2022).

Together, these findings should serve as guidance for further research on the use of participatory innovations in non-democratic environments, and as a precaution for political actors and democracy promotion entities to take into consideration the wider political context when designing new democratic interventions.

In the following sections, the case of Serbia will first be positioned in the theoretical context of both participatory democracy and its deliberative perspective. This will be followed by the presentation of the relevant participatory democratic empirical data from Serbia as a hybrid regime, a section on the research design and empirical analysis, and the article will close by the conclusion with the contextualized discussion.

## 2. Participatory Perspective on the Quality of Democracy

From a participatory perspective, the democratic malaise in stable democracies has been observed mainly through the progressive disillusionment of citizens with electoral politics, decreasing participation and interest towards politics, declining trust in institutions, and the overall detachment of the citizens from the institutional political sphere (Scharpf 1999; Merkel 2014; Mansbridge 2020), declined public support for democracy (Norris 1999; Bellucci, Memoli 2012), and citizens' lack of the sense of political efficacy (Rahman, Gilman 2019).

In other words, the criteria used for the *assessment of the quality of democracy from a participatory perspective* primarily refers to the *interest of citizens in politics and their willingness and capacities to participate in political life*. Democratic citizens need to be “enabled to know about politics, to voice their opinions, and to properly choose their representatives” (Caprara, Vecchione 2017: 305).

*Citizen's sense of political efficacy* has been also identified as one of the key indicators of the quality of democracy from a participatory perspective. Political efficacy refers to “an individual's perceived ability to participate in and influence the political system” (Yeich, Levine 1994: 259). Departing from the single concept of efficacy, scholars moved to a two-dimensional conceptualization of internal efficacy meaning individual political self-confidence and external efficacy, referring to a sense of government responsiveness to citizens' demands (Craig et al. 1990; Niemi et al. 1991). The recent studies introduced a dimension of collective political efficacy as system responsiveness to collective demands for change, in an attempt to de-individualize the political efficacy as a precondition of political mobilization (see: Caprara, Vecchione 2017; Bandura 1997; Craig, Maggiotto 1981).

Political participation of the citizens and overall quality of democracy is also shaped by the *levels of political trust* (Norris 1999). Since the formulation of the social capital theory, it was argued that political and social trust represent attitudes that strongly affects the stability of democracy (Putnam 1993,

2000; Inglehart 1997; Braithwaite, Levi 1998; Warren 1999; Sztompka 2000; Denters, Gabriel, Torcal 2007).

However, the research shows that the relationship between trust and participation is not so simple. While political trust is conventionally treated as beneficial for democracy, the lack of trust combined with a strong sense of political efficacy could be also considered as the optimal combination for participation (Gamson 1968). Besides, empirically, political trust is related to the *citizens' satisfaction with democracy* (Zmerli, Newton 2007), which is another measure that has been used to assess the quality of democracy. More precisely, satisfaction with democracy represents one of the measures of political support of the citizens for the specific political regime.

The observations about the state of democracy based on these measures stimulated important contemporary discussion about different ways citizens participation could enhance democracies (Mayne, Geissel 2016, 2018), grounded on the older argument that more participation could engage citizens and increase their sense of political efficacy and trust, leading to more positive attitudes to democratic processes and practices (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984).

### 3. Improving the Quality of Democracy through Participation in Mini Publics

One of the most prominent approaches to democratic citizens' participation in both academic and political debates, is the deliberative approach. The 'transformative' power of deliberation (Warren 1992; Chambers 2003) in expanding the democratic sphere is one of the distinctive elements of deliberative theory. In a broader sense, deliberation is expected to induce democratic transformation of the political process, its outcomes, and the actors involved (Habermas 1984; Benhabib 1996; Gutman, Thompson 1996; Dryzek 2000). The decision-making process and its outcomes would become more legitimate and democratic as actors become better informed, more interested, more rational and reflective. The opinions and preferences of citizens could be transformed in the direction of public-spirited, more consensual, more common good oriented (Rosenberg 2005) and more trusting towards the institutions (Stoker, Evans 2019). In contrast to the 'aggregative' model of democracy, where the opinions and policy preferences of the actors are simply aggregated, in the 'deliberative' model they are transformed through a process of deliberation that produces various democratic effects, both for the individuals and for the collective decisions they make.

Empirical research on deliberation is mostly based on the use of deliberative mini-publics, arenas (citizens juries, deliberative polls, citizens assemblies, Planungszelle, town meetings etc.), arenas in which a sample of citizens, selected from the population affected by some public issue, discuss that specific issue (Goodin, Dryzek 2006; Warren 2009; Smith, Ryan 2012). The design of DMP is inspired by key principles of deliberative democracy (inclusiveness, exposure to different opinions, reasoned opinion expression and making of a collective decision), but it can vary from one DMP to another. However, they

all share some common basic features, aimed at ensuring the achievement of the ideals of deliberative democracy through moderated small group discussion, facilitated interactions with politicians and experts and formulation of the policy proposals (Fiket 2019).

More than fifteen years of empirical research on deliberation confirmed the hypothesis that participation in deliberation in stable democracies produces different “democratic” effects. Deliberation makes citizens develop *more interest in politics* and *more trust in institutions* as they learn how democratic processes are working (Grönlund, Setälä, Herne 2010). They become *more supportive of the democratic system* (Luskin, Fishkin, Jowell 2002; Fishkin 2009; Mansbridge 2010), their *satisfaction with democracy increases* (Fiket, Memoli 2013) and their *sense of political efficacy develops* (Morrell 2005; Spada 2019).

The main idea of DMPs is that deliberation has a positive effect on the health of democracy. However, the focus of empirical research on deliberation, especially regarding non-democracies, remained primarily concerned with understanding the effects of deliberation on specific political decisions and not the wider context of the quality of democracy.

Research on deliberation in non-democracies is predominantly based on the Chinese case, where, as a part of institutionalized political process, the Chinese Communist Party has been increasingly implementing deliberative institutions within the system characterized by a strong authoritarian role (He, Warren 2011, 2017; Zhou 2012; Yan 2018). The findings from the Chinese experiences show that, overall, deliberative models of participation implemented within Chinese society could provide a way through which the citizens may influence political decisions. Still, on the other hand, they also mainly served authoritarian policymakers to legitimize the decisions and to make the process of decision-making smoother (He, Warren 2011). Deliberations were focused on and structured in the way to ensure ‘problem solving’, leaving apart their capacity to exhibit the political contestation and to empower citizens (Leib, He 2006; Jayasuriya, Rodan 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

More precisely, empirical research done on numerous deliberative experiences held in China showed that deliberation within authoritarian regimes have *minor positive effects on the quality of democracy seen from a participatory perspective*. Participation in deliberative processes significantly *increases political interest* and has a *minor effect on citizen satisfaction with the political system* but it does *not affect citizens’ sense of political efficacy* (Yan 2018). As underlined by Yan (2018), the almost complete lack of influence of deliberation on citizens’ attitudes towards participation may be best explained by the political rationale that underpins deliberative institutions in China and that is to “improve governance and enhance authority” (He 2014).

While on the one hand, we could identify the literature with the findings of the positive democratic effects of deliberative models of participation in a

<sup>2</sup> See the introductory article of this special issue for a more detailed account of authoritarian deliberation (Fiket, Đorđević 2022).

consolidated democratic environment, as well as more ambiguous effects of authoritarian deliberation, the effects of participatory innovations in hybrid regimes are less known.<sup>3</sup> Based on the comparison of findings from deliberative experiences in democratic and non-democratic contexts, we argue that, following the logic of hybrid regimes, where formal democratic institutions exist, but are abused by ruling parties to maintain unfair advantage over opponents, citizens' attitudes might not be changing, or might not be changing in the same direction as expected in consolidated democracies. In the next section, we will introduce Serbia as a case of a hybrid regime, and then provide basic information about the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards dimensions of participatory democracy.

#### 4. Participatory Dimension of Quality of Democracy in Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Serbia

In the last two decades, democratic governance has been in decline globally, in both consolidated and emerging democracies. However, unlike the democratic collapses of the past, which usually occurred through revolutions, or military coups, the current wave of autocratization is characterized by a gradual decline (Diamond 2015; Bermeo 2016; Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann, Lindberg 2019). Increasingly, the autocrats rely on democratic mechanisms to gradually disassemble democracies (Lührmann, Lindberg 2019). As a result, hybrid regimes, that are essentially autocratic but maintain elements of democracies as a facade that conceal entrenched power in the formal institutions, have proliferated since the early 2000s (Levitsky, Way 2020).<sup>4</sup>

This type of regimes creates a new challenge for understanding citizen participation. Participation is not a value in itself, instead it is highly dependent on the context and relations with the institutions and actors (McQuarrie 2015). Systems with a dominant political party (as many hybrid regimes are) don't leave much space for citizens to believe in their own agency, and they find it difficult to envisage how politics can be changed (Karv, Lindell, Rapeli 2021: 17). The same is true for political efficacy, which differs across communities and depends on the environment (Wolak 2018; Karv, Lindell, Rapeli 2021). Democratic context matters when discussing the democratic effects of participation, and this is especially the case in the post-communist space, where democratic values and political practices (re)entered the political space nurtured in an autocratic and highly centralized political system (Chen et al. 2021).

In hybrid regimes, it could be therefore expected that more participation in formally democratic processes could have two-way effects on citizen-related

3 For example, citizen assemblies in Turkey, or participatory budgeting in Russia, more information available at the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy website [oidp.net](http://oidp.net) (viewed January 30, 2022).

4 They also drew the attention of scholars that defined them in different, but relateable ways, as competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky, Way 2002, 2010), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006), illiberal democracies (Zakaria 2003), and so on.

components of the quality of democracy: democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation (Mayne, Geissel 2016). On the one hand, it could empower citizens, and activate the “virtuous cycle” of political participation, as suggested by the democratic theorists, and empirical findings from democratic contexts. But on the other hand, it could also be producing adverse effects, by confronting empowered citizens with the hollowed-out institutions and abuses of power, diminishing their political capacities, and fortifying those skeptical of democracy in their convictions.

We selected Serbia as a case for implementing participatory intervention in a hybrid regime for two reasons - one, it is an exemplary case of recent autocratization leading to a hybrid regime, and two - there is no track record of deliberative innovations (besides the top-bottom participatory budgeting that had very limited effects). According to the V-Dem Institute, Serbia is one of the five countries that experienced the sharpest decline in their Liberal Democracy Index between 2010 and 2020 (Alizada et al. 2021). It has recently being classified as some form of hybrid regime, by a variety of authors and organizations that monitor the quality of democracy (Lührmann, Tannenberg, Lindberg 2018; Bieber 2018; Vladislavljević 2019; Levitsky, Way 2010, 2020; Repucci 2020; Alizada et al. 2021).

When selecting Serbia we took into consideration that participatory innovations are rare throughout the whole Western Balkans region. Besides two latest implementations of citizen assemblies in Bosnia and Montenegro<sup>5</sup>, both of which were supported by external democracy-promotion actors, there were, to our knowledge, no other similar interventions. Some participatory budgeting experiences in Serbia were recorded, mostly on a local level, and as pilot projects, but with unclear outputs and without longer-term sustainability (Milosavljević et al. 2020).

In this article we use the case of deliberative mini publics held in Serbia to test whether deliberative interventions can change the attitudes towards democratic participation in a specific setting of hybrid regimes. In order to proceed further, we also argue that there is a need for such interventions, as the existing attitudes are not strongly favoring participation.

## 5. Attitudes towards Democratic Participation in Serbia

Since Serbia has been classified as a full if imperfect democracy for only a short period of roughly 10 to 15 years at the beginning of the century, it is difficult to draw stronger connections between the quality of democracy and democratic participation. After the mass citizens’ mobilization in overthrowing the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, different measures of democratic

<sup>5</sup> Citizen Assembly held in Montenegro on November 4, 2021, more information available at [www.skupstina.me/me/dogadjaji/skupstina-gradana](http://www.skupstina.me/me/dogadjaji/skupstina-gradana) (viewed January 20, 2022), and Citizen Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, held in February 2022, available at [www.skupstinagradjana.ba](http://www.skupstinagradjana.ba) (viewed January 20, 2022).

participation have been declining, reflecting an alienation from the formal mechanisms of representative democracy.

The rise of the authoritarian political party, the Serbian Progressive Party, in the last decade should be seen in light of the institutional weakness that provided insufficient democratic safeguards (Bieber 2018), but also the dramatic abuses of power, where on both national and local level, the authorities undermine the legal framework and the principle of rule of law, in parallel with the democratic institutions (Vladislavljević 2019; see also the discussion on autocratization in Fiket, Đorđević 2022).

Recent research points to a connection between the overall attitudes towards democracy and the democratic decline in Serbia, in line with wider findings in Europe. Lavrič and Bieber (2021) analyzed the empirical data for the Western Balkans region since the 1990s, and showed that support for democracy was declining, while support for a strong leader was increasing in most countries, including Serbia.<sup>6</sup>

However, looking more closely at the participatory dimensions, as well as a specific period of autocratization (from 2012 to 2020), a more complex picture emerges, when it comes to interest in politics, external and internal efficacy, satisfaction with democracy and attitudes towards participation.

Serbian citizens show relatively *low interest in politics in general, and somewhat higher interest in local politics*. The 2018 European Social Survey (ESS) found only 5% of respondents very interested in politics, and 16% quite interested.<sup>7</sup> The annual survey of citizen engagement conducted by Crta shows only 6% were very interested and 23% somewhat interested in politics in general in 2019, and longitudinal data also shows no substantial changes between 2013 and 2019. However, Crta surveys also show that the respondents were consistently more interested in local politics than in politics in general.<sup>8</sup>

Attitudes towards *external political efficacy* at the national level are mostly negative, but again they are slightly more positive at the local level. The 2018 ESS data shows only 6% of respondents think that the political system allows people to have a say in what government does a great deal or a lot, and 16% think it does so to some extent. Similar responses were given to a question about the political system allowing people to have influence on politics (6% a great deal or a lot, 14% some).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Crta annual citizen engagement surveys shows that the percentage of respondents that agree their engagement can lead to changes in the local community was consistently slightly

6 In addition, they point to the fact that an increasing share of citizens support both strong leaders and democracy, suggesting the alignment of citizens' attitudes with the type of regime being developed over time.

7 ESS Round 9 (2018), variable polintr (weighted). This is corroborated by Eurobarometer's Political interest index which identifies only 15% with strong interest (Wave 94.3, question C2, weighted), (European Commission 2021).

8 Data from Crta annual citizen engagement surveys 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

9 ESS Round 9 (2018), variables pspsgva, pspipla (weighted).

higher than those thinking they can influence things at the national level (17% and 14% in 2019).

Respondents have *low perceived internal political efficacy*, and they report low engagement in the local community. Citizens assess themselves as being very and completely able to take an active role in a political group in 10% of cases, while only 8.5% of respondents were completely or very confident in their own ability to participate in politics<sup>10</sup> (2018 ESS). In addition, low perceived internal political efficacy corresponds with the consistent findings of low reported engagement in the local community, with 87% in 2019 not actively participating in any action or initiative in the local community, and similar ratios existing in the last two decades (Crta 2019).

Citizens of Serbia state they *somewhat understand politics*. In 2019, 49% of respondents answered they know very little or don't know anything about politics in Serbia in general, largely consistent with the previous years. Similar ratios exist for knowledge about local politics, 53% reporting little or no knowledge in 2019 (Crta 2019).<sup>11</sup>

Respondents are *moderately satisfied with democracy* at the national level, while there are no systematic measures of attitudes towards democracy at the local level. 2021 EB data shows 44% of respondents are very and fairly satisfied with the way democracy works.<sup>12,13</sup> Crta annual surveys show 55% in 2019 agreed that regardless of all the difficulties, democracy is the best system for Serbia, which is a steady increase since 2014, and notable compared to the low scores in the previous decade (44% agreeing in 2007).

Finally, citizens have *positive attitudes towards civic engagement* at the local level. Even though citizens are not engaged locally to the same extent, Crta engagement audit shows 37% of them want to influence decisions at the local level, a slight increase since 2013, while on the other hand, a smaller percentage, 31% wants to influence decisions at the national level.<sup>14</sup>

We can conclude that the overall picture is a complex one. First, the respondents show low or average support for the participatory dimension of democracy. However, there are no pronounced trends of declining attitudes towards participation, with the exceptions of a slightly negative trend in the interest in politics, and a positive trend in believing that democracy is the best system for Serbia, when we compare periods from the beginning and towards

10 ESS Round 9 (2018), variables actrolga, cptppola (weighted).

11 This data on understanding politics is largely corresponding to the 2019 Eurobarometer responses, in which 59% totally and tended to agree they understand well what is going on in today's world, while 39% totally and tend to disagree (Wave 92.3 2019, question QC9.2, weighted), (European Commission 2019).

12 Eurobarometer (2021), question SD18a, weighted.

13 Satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country is 3.56, with 0 being extremely dissatisfied, and 10 extremely satisfied (ESS 2018, variable stfdem, weighted).

14 The latest 2021 Crta audit shows 49% of respondents think that all citizens should always be actively engaged in politics, 20% that it is sufficient to vote in elections, while 28% think politics should be left to the politicians (Stojilović, Ilić 2022).

the end of the process of autocratization. In addition, attitudes towards efficacy are mostly negative, but respondents systematically better assess the efficacy and positively evaluate engagement at the local level, even though participation itself is low.

## 6. Hypotheses and Methodology

The empirical part of our paper aims to contribute to the question of whether participation in deliberative institutions implemented within hybrid regimes can contribute to improving the participatory aspects of the quality of democracy measured through the components of the *democratic commitments, political capacities, and political participation*, for which we can propose three hypotheses based on the insights provided in theory and empirical data.

We begin by proposing that the difference between the types of regimes prevents the empirical findings about the virtuous cycle of participation in democracies from traveling to non-democracies. It might be the case that the effects of the larger obstacles to democratic expression in the electoral or representative sphere completely overshadow any potential effects of non-electoral, participatory or deliberative processes. Our null hypothesis, therefore, is that participation in deliberative institutions in hybrid regimes does not affect attitudes of participants regarding democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation.

It might also be the case that deliberation can produce effects in hybrid regimes, and that the underlying mechanisms are the same, or similar enough to what is established empirically in stable democracies. Our first alternative hypothesis would be that the participation in DMPs in hybrid regimes positively affects citizens' attitudes. However, the anti-democratic wider context which revolves around emptying democratic mechanisms of their purpose, can also produce adverse effects in participatory interventions, so our second hypothesis is that the participation in DMPs in hybrid regimes negatively affects citizens democratic commitments, political capacities and political participation.

In order to test these hypotheses, we rely on the data we collected through questionnaires before and after the DMPs<sup>15</sup> held online in 2020<sup>16</sup>. We invited a sample of 31 individuals from Belgrade to participate in a one day long deliberation process on the issue of traffic mobility in downtown Belgrade. The purposive sampling procedure was applied in selecting citizens' in order to include not only those that in socio-demographic terms represent the population who lived in the defined areas of Belgrade, but also those citizens that were particularly affected by the debated issue, namely, citizens with physical

15 As explained in the Introductory article (Fiket, Đorđević 2022), in order to make the official name of our DMP more understandable to the participants, the research team chose to use the term Citizens Assembly given that the concept of deliberation is generally not well known in Serbia.

16 There were two DMPs held in Serbia in 2020, one in Belgrade and one in Valjevo. In our paper we used the data from the one held in Belgrade.

disabilities, senior residents, parents of small children, businesses owners, or workers located in the affected area as well as workers in the cultural institutions. The participants were selected from an initial sample through snowball, or chain referral sampling, by different samplers, meeting a pre-determined quota (Fiket, Đorđević 2022).

Our design of DMPs also included one significant innovation to standard design of the DMPs – inclusion of active citizens, representatives of local initiatives or social movements particularly interested in the issue<sup>17</sup>. The justification for this design came up as an answer to the agonistic criticisms towards DMP, which underline that random selection of citizens displaces conflicts in society, does not sufficiently include actors already involved in social conflicts and may have depoliticizing consequences, and as a tentative attempt to connect the grassroots mobilizations of the citizens with top-down citizens participatory arenas such as DMP<sup>18</sup>.

The discussion was organized in two rounds of moderated small group discussions, and two panel sessions – with experts and decision makers. Each of four parallel small group discussions involved two movements' representatives besides six regular citizens. The group discussions and plenary sessions with experts went as planned, while the politicians, most of which were from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which were invited to the plenary session mostly did not attend. Relevant to the interpretation of our findings, the only decision maker that did join the session, ignored the questions and proposals formulated by the citizens that participated in the group discussions (see the introductory article by Fiket and Đorđević in this special issue for more details).

The participants answered the same set of questions twice, before and after the DMP, which allowed us to compare their attitudes and assess the eventual changes, which will be discussed in the next part of the article. Several limitations of this design should also be mentioned at this point. Our design included only some experimental design elements, such as treatment and repeated measurements of attitudes, but it did not include control groups and, as most other studies of DMPs, it does not meet the standards of controlled experiment (Farrar et al. 2009). That means we could not isolate the effects of the treatment, as we can not exclude that the attitudes of the wider population were changing at the same time, due to reasons unconnected to the DMP. However, given our findings, in which we do not find statistically significant changes in all but one observed attitude, this presents less of a problem.

In addition, we should add that, due to the external constraints including the budget for the research, the exposure of the participants to the process was

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17 Active citizens who participated in group discussions were members of three civic initiatives: “Pedestrians are not Marathon Runners” (“Pešaci nisu maratonci”) “The Ministry of Space” (“Ministarstvo prostora”), and “Streets for Cyclists” (“Ulice za bicikliste”).

18 For more information about specificities of design of DMPs see the introductory article in this special issue (Fiket, Đorđević 2022).

quite limited – only one day, which means that our findings can be affected by “too little” treatment. In future research these elements of design should be addressed in a different way. Even though our sample size (N=30) could be considered adequate, a larger randomly selected sample, with the elements of controlled experimental design, would produce more reliable results. However, we believe that these findings, together with the direction of the observed change, offers some indications that could be further investigated.

In the empirical part of this article, we have employed simple descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) at T1 (before) and T2 (after the DMPs), as well as paired samples t-test for each of the seven items included, exploring in addition the directions of the change in the attitudes before and after the event. We chose t-test as the most appropriate statistical technique for the analysis of repeated measures given that we only compare two sample means, over repeated measures ANOVA, which would produce the same statistical significance, but would imply less straightforward interpretation. As t-tests are a classic statistical technique its description can be found in most statistical handbooks (Gravetter et al. 2020).

## 7. Analysis and Findings

In the empirical part of the article we first present the descriptive statistics and the repeated measures analysis, related to attitudes of DMP participants that we have classified as: *political interest/commitment, external and internal efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, and attitudes towards civic participation*. Further, we analyze the direction of individual participants’ attitudes change after the deliberative mini public. Finally, we discuss the participants’ evaluation of the DMPs.

Starting with the descriptive statistics, the mean of the participants’ attitudes *before* the DMP reveals the genuine interest in politics and political participation (Table 1). Participants claim to be interested in politics (general interest  $M = 3.17$ , and interest for the local government  $M = 3.47$ ), and feel capable of taking part in the group dealing with the political issues ( $M = 3.40$ ). They have no developed feeling that they usually don’t understand politics ( $M = 3.87$ ; 26% never feel they don’t understand politics), and strongly believe that citizens should engage more in problem-solving in their own environment ( $M = 4.77$ ; 97% fully and almost fully agree).

However, the participants feel externally inefficient when it comes to their own influence on the political system, even on the closest, local level ( $M = 2.13$ ). 71% of the participants claimed to have very little or no influence at all on the local government. Additionally, participants are inclined to be dissatisfied with the functioning of the democracy on the local level ( $M = 3.97$ ), which supports their feeling of political impotence. Half of all participants responded they are completely (value 0) and extremely dissatisfied (value 1) with local democracy.

Next we wanted to analyze the changes of citizens’ attitudes after deliberative mini public (Table 2). Paired t-tests didn’t identify relevant or statistically

**Table 1:** Citizens' attitudes towards participation before and after the deliberative mini public

Questions	T1 Mean	T2 Mean	T1 SD	T2 SD	Minimum	Maximum
To what extent are you interested in politics?	3.17	3.00	0.75	0.87	1 (not at all)	4 (very)
How interested are you in the work of local government?	3.47	3.30	0.57	0.7	1 (not at all)	4 (very)
To what extent does the political system in Serbia allow people like yourself to influence what the government does at the local level?	2.13	2.00	0.73	1.05	1 (not at all)	5 (very)
How much do you find yourself capable of actively participating in a group that deals with political issues?	3.40	3.37	1.16	1.24	1 (not at all)	5 (very)
Do you ever feel like you do not understand what is happening in politics?	3.87	3.03	3.39	2.55	0 (never)	10 (often)
How satisfied are you with the way democracy functions at the local level?	3.97	3.07	2.55	2.38	0 (fully unsatisfied)	10 (fully satisfied)
Do you agree that citizens should be more engaged in solving problems in their own surroundings?	4.77	4.83	0.5	0.46	1 (fully disagree)	5 (fully agree)

Sample N = 30

significant changes of attitudes after participation in DMP. However, even on this small sample, there is one finding that should be closely analyzed. There was a significant decrease in the satisfaction with the functioning of the democracy on the local level after the deliberative mini public ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ) compared to the answers before the event ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ),  $t(29) = 2.3$ ,  $p < .05$ , and with a medium effect size found ( $d = 0.43$ , 95% CI [0.05, 0.8]).

We interpret this finding as a sign of frustration of participants with the lack of real involvement by politicians which were invited, and either did not come, or participated in the event, but whose behavior led to further disillusionment of the participants with the local government (we discuss this further in the participants' evaluation below, see also the qualitative analysis in this special issue, Janković 2022). Compared to, for example, Fiket and Memoli (2013), where satisfaction with the democracy increased mostly after the session with the politicians, due to their understanding of the complexity of the decision-making process, our case suggests that session with politicians revealed the detachment of the political representatives from its constituency (Fiket, Đorđević 2022).

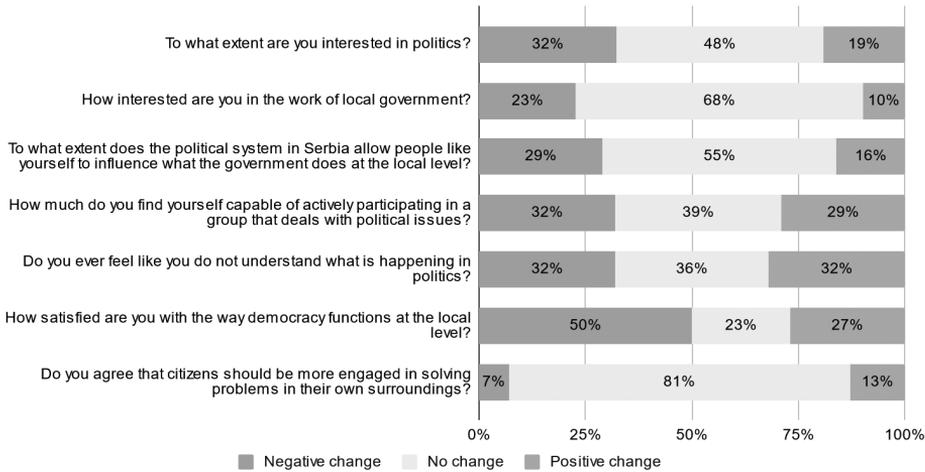
**Table 2:** Changes of citizens' attitudes after deliberative mini public

Attitude	Question	Mean change T2-T1	Sig. (2-tailed) for change
<b>Political interest/commitment</b>	To what extent are you interested in politics?	-0.17	0.362
	How interested are you in the work of local government?	-0.17	0.231
<b>External efficacy</b>	To what extent does the political system in Serbia allow people like yourself to influence what the government does at the local level?	-0.13	0.38
<b>Internal efficacy</b>	How much do you find yourself capable of actively participating in a group that deals with political issues?	-0.03	0.882
	Do you ever feel like you do not understand what is happening in politics?	-0.83†	0.241
<b>Satisfaction with democracy</b>	How satisfied are you with the way democracy functions at the local level?	-0.9	0.026*
<b>Attitudes towards participation</b>	Do you agree that citizens should be more engaged in solving problems in their own surroundings?	0.07†	0.489

Sample N = 30; \* Statistically significant,  $p < .05$ ; † Positive change from T1 to T2

Compared to the Chinese establishment's efforts to implement deliberation to legitimize their own governance (He, Warren 2011), Serbian counterparts made no efforts to engage with citizens. This finding is supported by other studies of the political perception of the Serbian citizens, where impotence manifested through political inefficacy and passivity was identified in combination with severely negative perception of the politicians (Fiket, Pavlović, Pudar Draško 2017; Petrović, Stanojević 2020; Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021).

The rest of the changes presented in Table 2 were mostly slightly negative, such as dimensions of political interest and external efficacy, including the one question referring to internal efficacy – own capabilities to take part in politically active groups. However, there were two changes in the positive direction that are aligned with the general experience of the citizens who participate in DMP, even though the changes were not statistically significant at the .05 level. Participants' perception of understanding of politics increased after the DMP ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ), compared to before ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 3.39$ ), even though the increase was not significant ( $t(29) = 1.2$ ,  $p = .24$ ). Also, the attitudes towards the need for civic participation very slightly increased after the event ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ) compared to before ( $M = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ), also without statistical significance ( $t(29) = 0.7$ ,  $p = .49$ ).

**Graph 1:** Individual participants' attitudes change after deliberative mini public in %

Additional descriptive statistics, presented in Graph 1, show the percentages of the direction of changes in individual participant responses, after the DMPs, compared to before, divided in three categories: percent of participants reporting negative change, positive, and no change. What we can see here is that there were more negative than positive changes in regards to all questions, except the *only* positive change - the increase in the number of participants believing that citizens need to be more engaged in their community (13% changed their attitude towards confirming this statement, compared to 7% who changed the attitude towards less believing so). The boldest change seems to be the decrease of satisfaction with the local democracy, which was also the most polarizing question - 50% were less satisfied compared to before the event, while 27% were more satisfied, and which was the only change in repeated measures analysis with statistical significance.

Turning to the participants' reactions to the process of DMPs, the deliberative process was very positively evaluated, with a mean of 7.84 points out of 10, and the quality of the discussion was evaluated as high ( $M = 8.39$ , out of 10). Table 3 shows additional responses: the respondents felt other participants respected their own opinions and attitudes ( $M = 4.29$ , 5-point scale), and found answers to their own statements respectful ( $M = 4.42$ ). Also, participants felt that opinions and attitudes of others in the group discussion were meaningful and justified ( $M = 4.26$ ). Discussion also led to higher interest in the issues that were discussed in DMP ( $M = 4.16$ ), which points towards the empowering effect of the deliberation on the citizens' interest in the community/political issues.

Comments of the experts and representatives of civic initiatives' during the plenary session were mildly helpful to participants ( $M = 3.32$ ), while the participation of the political decision makers was mostly negatively evaluated

**Table 3:** Evaluation of the process of deliberative mini public

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
The submitted materials were decisive for my final positions	31	2.32	1.45
My attitudes were treated respectfully by other participants	31	4.29	1.07
The responses of other participants to my opinions were in place	31	4.42	1.03
The opinions and attitudes of other participants seemed meaningful and justified	31	4.26	1.06
Participating in a group discussion improved my understanding of the problem	31	4.06	1.34
The comments of experts and members of civic initiatives helped me to better understand the problem	31	3.32	1.25
The comments of political decision makers helped me to better understand the problem	31	2.48	1.41
Participating in the discussion made me understand better those who disagree with me	30	3.50	1.33
The discussion made me more interested in the topic of conversation	31	4.16	1.19
I accept the final position of the group in which I discussed	31	4.42	1.12

Minimum value: 1 - I do not agree at all; Maximum value: 5 - I agree very much

( $M = 2.48$ ), which supports our interpretation regarding the reasons for the participants' decrease of satisfaction with the local democracy. Finally, it is interesting to note that, despite an overall very positive experience with the DMP, very carefully prepared material on the issue of the DMP didn't have significant influence on the final opinion on the discussed issue ( $M = 2.32$ ). We may conclude that precisely the deliberation, the ability to speak freely, to feel respect for one's own stance, and the chance to exchange arguments between the equals, contributed more to an overall positive impression of the participants.

The overall experience of deliberation was such that it led all participants to state they would repeat it. The empowering effect of the deliberative process can also be inferred from the statements of all participants that they would take part in the locally organized action in the future. While two thirds (68%) said they would participate in a local action that contributes to their community, a third (32%) would do so if the action was initiated by fellow citizens, while none of them selected the answer "yes, if the local government initiated the action".

## 8. Concluding Discussion

We have focused our research and this article at the intersection of the contemporary discussion on democracy decline and the utilization of participatory democratic innovations for reinvigorating democracy. Particularly, our aim was to add to very scattered evidence on the effects of deliberative mini publics in non-democratic contexts – in hybrid regimes as one part of the (non) democratic spectrum that is not falling on its extreme ends.

The data we have collected from the deliberative mini public held in November 2020 in Serbia allowed us to analyze their potential effects on the citizens'-related components of democratic quality.

In general, we found no changes when it comes to political interest/commitment, efficacy (external and internal), and the attitudes towards participation components of quality of democracy. What we did find was a statistically significant negative change in satisfaction with local democracy, which, coupled with negative evaluation of the usefulness of comments made by political decision makers, points in the direction of hypothesized adverse effects of participatory innovations in the context of a hybrid regime.

These findings go against the established arguments that more participation in deliberative mini publics can engage citizens and lead to more positive attitudes to democratic processes and practices, and challenge them to consider the wider political context when discussing potential effects. Just like the findings from deliberative experiences in non-democratic regimes have minor positive effects compared to democratic regimes, hybrid regimes should be seen as a category in itself.

In planning participatory interventions as a way to make democracies more resilient, we need to consider that hybrid regimes are associated with a low sense of political efficacy and mistrust in formal institutions and elected representatives, which has to do with simulating democracy instead of practicing it. This is a different context compared to i.e. China, where top-down participatory innovations were employed to additionally strengthen and legitimize the authoritarian rule. Our findings, which are a product of (frustrating) interaction of participants and elected representatives, suggest that participants could see through this simulation. If deliberative practices should enhance democracies, then they need to be based on *genuine* involvement of all parties involved.

We also identified some positive findings - participants' sense of understanding of politics and attitudes towards the need for civic participation have improved, even though we could not report statistically significant changes. This should be seen in light of the positive changes identified in relation to the topics discussed at the DMP (Đorđević, Vasiljević, 2022). When citizens have relatively high interest in local politics, understand politics, and have positive attitudes towards democracy and engagement, then these engagements might have positive effects, if the engagement would be genuine from all sides.

Finally, these hypotheses should be tested in future research, which could vary types of engagement by elected representatives, as well as topics of

discussion. Also, given the limitations of our research design, these new interventions should include larger groups, expose them more to deliberation, and include control groups as well, in order to better capture the potential effects of deliberation. Our impression, based on these first deliberative mini publics in Serbia is that citizens are hungry for being taken seriously as *zoon politicon*, which opens avenues for designing different fora for participation, with perhaps different outcomes, if there is a genuine interest for creating politics in common interest.

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Irena Fiket, Vujo Ilić i Gazela Pudar Draško

## Izneverena očekivanja: mogu li deliberativne inovacije u hibridnim režimima imati demokratske efekte?

### Sažetak

U stabilnim demokratijama učešće u deliberaciji proizvodi efekte koji pogoduju demokratiji, dok su rezultati deliberativnih inovacija u nedemokratijama neodređeniji. Ovaj članak predstavlja doprinos debati o efektima participatornih demokratskih inovacija na stavove o privrženosti demokratiji, političkom kapacitetu i političkoj participaciji u sve prisutnijim hibridnim režimima. U radu predstavljamo rezultate ispitivanja učesnika, pre i posle njihovog učešća u deliberativnim mini javnostima (DMJ), održanih u Srbiji 2020. godine. Srbija predstavlja uzorni slučaj poslednjeg talasa autokratizacije, putem kog je postala hibridni režim, i pored toga nema razvijenu praksu deliberativnih inovacija. Prilikom sprovođenja mini-javnosti, uveli smo inovaciju u uobičajeni dizajn, tako što su uključeni i aktivni građani - predstavnici lokalnih inicijativa ili društvenih pokreta koji su bili posebno zainteresovani za temu DMJ. Naši nalazi nisu pokazali da je demokratska inovacija uticala na promenu stavova učesnika o privrženosti demokratiji, političkom kapacitetu i političkoj participaciji. Međutim, utvrdili smo da su učesnici DMJ bili manje zadovoljni funkcionisanjem demokratije na lokalnom nivou. Ovo objašnjavamo širim, anti-demokratskim kontekstom hibridnih režima, koji proizvodi neželjene efekte prilikom uvođenja demokratskih inovacija, bar kada se radi o ovim specifičnim dimenzijama političke participacije. Zaključujemo članak sa predlozima za buduća istraživanja, i preporukom da se prilikom dizajniranja demokratskih intervencija u hibridnim režimima uvažavaju specifičnosti šireg političkog konteksta.

**Ključne reči:** deliberativna demokratija, mini javnost, demokratska inovacija, učešće građana, hibridni režim, Srbija