1 Why Do We Need Participatory Democratic Innovations in Southeast Europe?

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People born and raised in former Yugoslavia still remember that the official narrative of that country was centered around working people and their participation in local communities and companies. The *differentia specifica* of the Yugoslav socialist model was self-management, the right (and duty) of each citizen to have an equal voice in all matters. This normative framework offered a solid base for economic and political participatory democracy. Of course, practice did not meet such standards, and decisions were mostly made in the narrow circles of power elites, whether in companies or local communities. The moment for this model was not right.

When we started the project "Active Citizenship: Promoting and Advancing Innovative Democratic Practices in the Western Balkans" in 2018, our conception of democratic innovations originated from several sources – our lived experience of the social movements that urged for more participation of the citizens, the rising debate in Europe and the world on the possible cures for the crisis of liberal democracy and, finally, our own specific (Yugoslav) memories about the political system that placed participation at the very core but failed to live up to its own principles. After the end of socialist Yugoslavia, the memory of this historical experimentation – which was truly remarkable for its age – could be considered a burden. Sole relics of that participatory element of the political system – local communities or *mesne zajednice* – were made so obsolete that very few today dare to advocate for bringing back power to the local communities.

However, the global turn to more inclusive governance models has enabled us to rethink the concepts of 'participatory governance' and 'democratic innovations' (Fung and Wright 2001; Ravazzi 2006; Smith 2009). We could go back to the historical experiences that might inform policymaking in Southeast Europe and use them to benefit the region at present. These types of innovations evolved around issues like low trust, low political participation and low political efficiency, which made them truly important and relevant for societies of Southeast Europe, which all suffer from these problems. It was clear that the traditional forms of participation have become insufficient to satisfy the growing complexity of the democratic processes, especially in autocratizing societies such as ones in Southeast Europe. Democracy was historically equated

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with freedom of speech and free and fair elections in the region. At a time when even these basic principles are being challenged in parts of the region, our effort is to understand what can be gained for democracy from the practices of participation and deliberation. Deliberation, especially, enhances political participation and strengthens the legitimacy of the given policy- or decision-making process. Deliberation envisages debate, discussion, rational consideration and revisiting key problems – all of which we find lacking in our polarized societies.

The importance of examining the possibilities of democratic innovations in political theory and practice lies in establishing a connection between the possibilities and limits of representative democracy and new social actors, such as social movements, as possible carriers of the process of democratic innovation. We departed from the assumption that the new arenas and modes of engagement pioneered by social movements can be an important part of the answer to the participation crisis. Considering the context of growing autocratization that has been spreading globally in recent years, we engaged with the newest wave of appeals for participatory and deliberative democracy as a remedy for the crisis. The public and political representation in Southeast European countries has been growing in the last couple of years: there has been a trend of citizen mobilization in the form of social movements and local civic initiatives, which are both a symptom of unresponsive and more openly authoritarian institutions, as well as a potential pathway to democratization (Delibašićet al. 2019; Fiket and Pudar Draško 2021; Pudar Draško et al. 2019). Some of the ways in which the new social movements in Southeast Europe try to engage in participatory democratic innovations is through their internal organization, building potential for its spillover to the institutional political arena. As self-reflexive actors, they experiment with new ideas of democracy that can become the basis for proposed changes in democratic governance, especially relevant in autocratizing societies. Their struggle to initiate debate on transforming conventional politics is one of the themes underlying this edited volume.

On the other hand, we followed the growing interest of the European Union (EU) and its member states in promoting and encouraging active citizenship through various participatory tools and methods. Mindful of the lack of interest of the European societies' citizens in participating in political life through traditional instruments of representative democracy, the European Commission initiated a large-scale innovation: the Conference of the Future of Europe, launched in 2021 in Strasbourg and directed toward renewing the commitment of all political actors and citizens toward a joint democratic future. The renewed interest in the challenges directed toward democracy has resulted in a process of engineering inspired by participatory and deliberative principles. The rise of democratic innovations observed in many EU member states has led to their further promotion and institutionalization.

A series of different models have emerged over time that attempted to improve democratic processes by increasing citizen participation. Across Europe, we have seen the rise of deliberative arenas, such as Citizen Assemblies,

Citizens' Juries/Panels, Planning Cells, G1000, Citizens' Councils, Citizens' Dialogues, Deliberative Polls and World Wide Views. Some of these models were even institutionalized, such as the Ostbelgien Model. Some focus on achieving informed citizen recommendations on policy questions, others on citizen opinion on policy questions and others still on citizen evaluation of ballot measures and permanent deliberative bodies. All these models have similarities and differences and are complex to varying degrees. Furthermore, their application has to be carefully designed, as not all models are appropriate for every country.

While the crisis of representative democracy in the EU resulted in a call for more democracy and tangible efforts to institutionalize different democratic innovations aiming to foster the effective inclusion of citizens, similar actions are almost entirely absent in Southeast Europe. Efforts to institutionalize deliberative institutions are very rare in these countries. In large parts of Southeast Europe, local self-governments do not encourage citizens to access relevant information and participate in the decision-making process. As the most common tool in Europe (Allegretti 2010), participatory budgeting was introduced into the region, but mostly through various international cooperation projects. In a telling fact, the penetration rate of this concept of budgeting in Serbia remains relatively modest; participatory budgeting is used in only 10% of cities and municipalities (Milosavljević et al. 2020).

Since deliberative institutions and other participatory democratic innovations are generally not well-known in the region, aside from the historical experiences of self-management in Yugoslavia (Pateman 1970; Unkovski-Korica 2014), we aimed to build on tested and researched practices within the social movements scene that have the potential to become institutionalized and provide space for voicing citizens' needs. Captured political institutions require the opening of new non-institutional arenas of politics, and all these initiatives demonstrate the citizens' willingness to participate and democratize societies. Through such demands for inclusion and participation, citizens look back and search for inspirational traditions. Still, they also look for other forms of participatory strategies for inspiration and democratic innovations – for example, plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This volume aims to contribute to the debate on the internal dynamics of bottom-up and top-down democratic innovation and their social and political impact, both as single case studies and as parts of a greater cycle of social movement mobilizations and *de facto* civil society experimentation in Southeast European countries. Contributions in this volume approach social movement mobilization and deliberative experimentation from different angles. Is civic engagement possible when new forms of autocracies, hybrid regimes, are advancing? Can we expect deliberative tools to become tools of citizen empowerment that could strike back and renew democracies? We are immensely grateful to the anonymous reviewers who saw the value in this endeavor to present research originating in Southeast Europe, including Hungary, and offer the first compelling insights seeking to provoke debate.

The structure of this volume facilitates a progression from broad conceptual and contextual discussions on deliberative and participatory innovations to a nuanced exploration of bottom-up struggles for active citizenship and more participatory democratic frameworks in Southeast Europe. In Part I, we establish the context by delving into contemporary debates about the role of participation in democracy. We also explore the circumstances that have pushed democratic innovations to the forefront of discussions on reinvigorating democracy in the region. We start with a contribution from Nenad Markovikj, Ivan Damjanovski and Zoran Ilievski (Chapter 2), who present an overview of the connection between social movements, active citizenship and democratic innovation – the three key concepts of this volume. Noting that both social movements and democratic innovations emerged as responses to the democratic malaise, the authors underscore their distinct approaches. While social movements lean into protest strategies to voice discontent and challenge exclusion, democratic innovations seek institutional channels to foster more inclusive democratic practices. However, instead of underscoring differences, the authors invite scholars and practitioners to pay more attention to synergies of social movements and democratic innovation in bolstering active citizenship. This perspective is empirically explored through contributions in Parts II and III.

Building on this theme, Andrija Šoć (Chapter 3) posits that combating the rising tide of autocratization in the region is possible only through citizen participation. His analysis starts with dissecting the criticisms levied at traditional participatory models, including the complexity and capacity for participation, and the potential for manipulation and coercion. He proposes an extended participation model that prioritizes responsiveness and interactions between citizens and decision-makers. The goal is to establish a system of checks and balances that is both institutional and epistemic as a prerequisite for a vital democratic system.

The final contribution in this part (Chapter 4) shifts the discourse to empirical grounds by asking: What do we know about the current state of political participation in the region? Vujo Ilić and Čedomir Markov present the findings of a scoping review of academic research on political participation in the region since 2010. They observe a gradual increase in academic attention to this topic over the years, particularly in unconventional (e.g., protests and boycotts) and innovative (e.g., citizens' assemblies and participatory decision-making) modes of participation. While the analyzed literature heavily emphasizes single-country studies – Romania, Serbia and Hungary being the focal points – there is a marked absence of research concerning countries like North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. In addition to the general population, most studies looked into the participation of youth and active citizens, primarily focusing on what drives participation in the context marked by deep-rooted institutional distrust and political disillusionment. Ilić and Markov identify areas ripe for investigation, such as cross-generational differences in participation dynamics, the relationship between extremely polarized information

landscapes and participation repertoires, the nexus between informal institutions and political engagement and the backfire and spillover effects of innovative participatory practices.

In Part II, attention is shifted to the specific cases throughout Southeast Europe where social movements, civil society organizations and citizens join efforts to create and offer different, participatory models for the functioning of institutions. In Chapter 5, Jovana Timotijević and Iva Čukić present the challenging case of Belgrade's development, showing that the Serbian urban planning practice implies a significant lack of democratic capacity and is often performed at the level of or even below the formal minimum. They present one model currently being developed – participatory forums, analyzing the case of the Ministry of Space Collective. This civil society organization has attempted to translate this format, specifically to serve the process of creating and adopting urban plans in such a way as to reflect the public interest.

Nathan Siegrist continues with urban issues in Chapter 6, drawing on the literature on heterotopia, a conceptual framework for studying subversive urbanisms present on cities' margins and how it is shaped by urban governance and development. He draws the analysis of the Metelkova Mesto, a squatted autonomous cultural center in Ljubljana, showcasing the potentials and challenges of heterotopic collective action within the regional context.

Bojan Baća then presents the process of *political subjectification* of society's apolitical segments through contentious practices in what he names post-democratic Montenegro in Chapter 7. By dwelling on three specific social movements, he demonstrates how citizens constituted themselves as collective political subjects by performatively enacting their citizenship through resistance. The importance of being a political subject is especially relevant in Southeast Europe. Baća poignantly defends the idea of the civic autonomy crucial for citizens to challenge dominant power relations and attain political legitimacy to think, speak and act as relevant political actors on the public stage.

This section is closed with an agonistic reading of the pragmatic symbiosis of movements and political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Chapter 8. Jasmin Hasanović, Valida Repovac Nikšić and Emina Adilović analyze the recent case of the pragmatic symbiosis of the "Justice for Dženan" social movement and one political party in the local legislature of Sarajevo Canton. They present the opportunity to perceive the conflict between the nonaccountable institutions and the accountability-seeking citizens as a productive force that can unite citizens through engagement in a shared process.

Finally, Part III is dedicated to the innovations that led to the institutionalization of participatory practices. Mladen Ostojić opens the section with a historical theme in Chapter 9, presenting Yugoslav self-management as instructive for contemporary initiatives aiming to establish direct forms of governance in municipalities and cities. His chapter offers a detailed overview of the functions and modes of operation of local communities and their relations with the community at large, urban municipalities, and the city government deriving from the Yugoslav constitution from 1974.

After this historical case, Irena Fiket, Gazela Pudar Draško and Jelena Vasiljević return to the present with a comparative analysis of the two ideologically similar movement parties that operate in two different sociopolitical contexts – MOŽEMO! (We Can) in Croatia and the Zeleno-levi front (Green-Left Front) in Serbia. Their focus in Chapter 10 is on the normative framework of both parties to show how they articulate intraparty democracy in decision-making and program development.

Finally, closing the volume, Chapter 11 deals with Hungary. Eszter Kovács Szitkay, Dániel Oross and Boldizsár Szentgáli-Tóth present a contextualized report of three initiatives at the local and national levels. Their study discusses the key issue of democratic innovations in flawed democracies, concluding that even though these initiatives sound promising for revitalizing and strengthening democracy, they seem to get stuck at the level of 'being innovative processes,' as they could not yet bring forth the expected breakthrough results.

What can we conclude about the need for participatory democratic innovations in Southeast Europe? In the last two sections, this volume presents eight cases that argue that there is no good governance and true democracy without citizens' inclusion and participation. Common to all of them is seeking sustainable participatory democracy that would be inclusive and produce good decisions for all. Hasanović et al., Fiket et al. and Szitkay et al. firmly state that what we ultimately need to have a true participatory turn in politics are strong political actors who will be genuinely committed to citizen participation. We hope this book serves as a guide and testimony for those who engage in democratic innovations, even in very unfavorable circumstances, and that it may inspire steps toward institutionalization of innovative practices.

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