

PARTICIPATORY INNOVATIONS IN HYBRID REGIMES
PARTICIPATIVNE INOVACIJE U HIBRIDNIM REŽIMIMA

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PROMISES AND CHALLENGES OF DELIBERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY INNOVATIONS IN HYBRIDE REGIMES: THE CASE OF TWO CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN SERBIA¹

ABSTRACT

A worrying trend of autocratization that has been spreading globally in recent years, has thrust forward a new wave of appeals for deliberative and participatory democracy as a remedy for the crisis. With a few exceptions, the majority of participatory and deliberative institutions were implemented in stable democracies. The efforts to institutionalize participatory and deliberative models are almost completely absent in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries. Yet, 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 quite openly authoritarian institutions, as well as a potential pathway to democratization. The pace and scope of these developments in the undemocratic societies of the Western Balkan region, in terms of both bottom up and top-down democratic experimentation, call for a better understanding of their internal dynamics, and their social and political impact. Responding to this need, the articles in the special issue focus on social movement mobilizations and deliberative experimentation.

To begin with, our introductory article focuses particularly on understanding the possible role deliberative institutions could have in hybrid regimes. It looks at the first two cases of deliberative mini publics (DMPs) ever organized in Serbia, analyzing their rationale, specific design, implementation, as well as considering the possible role deliberative institutions could play in the hybrid regime of Serbia.

KEYWORDS

deliberation,
deliberative mini
publics, citizen
participation, citizens'
assembly, social
movements, hybrid
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¹ The paper is based on research conducted within the framework of the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Network: Active Citizenship: Promoting and Advancing Innovative Democratic Practices in the Western Balkans.

1. Introduction

A worrying trend of autocratization that has been spreading globally in recent years brought forward the newest wave of appeals for deliberative and participatory democracy as a remedy for the crisis (Suteu 2019). This phenomenon has been covered extensively in scholarly literature; recent works, both empirical and theoretical, often include theoretical debates with the mainstream theories of democratization, as well as discussions on the misconceptions of the very concept of deliberative democracy. Challenges to political elites, from the labor movement to the *indignados* – have traditionally nurtured a participatory and deliberative vision, extending the forms of legitimate political involvement well beyond voting (Della Porta 2020). Challenging the liberal conception of democracy from the perspective of participation beyond voting has become the backbone of the rising tension between traditional liberal understandings of democracy and the wave of more participatory democratic thinking.

On the one hand, social movements continue to engage in democratic innovations as a means to increase participation of citizens, responding to the crisis of representative democracy. They experiment with new ideas in their internal organization, and they spread these ideas into institutions (Della Porta, Doerr 2018; Fiket et al. 2019). Democratic experiments within civil society and social movements have been inspired by the same principles of participation, deliberation and empowerment. Aside from engaging in internal practices of democratic innovation, social movements are institutional innovators, executing this role in a variety of ways and with different results. 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 undemocratic societies. They do not only transform states through struggles for policy change, but also produce innovative ideas and alternative knowledge and express a fundamental critique of conventional politics, experimenting with participatory and deliberative ideas (Della Porta, Diani, 2006).

On the other hand, the growing lack of interest of European societies' citizens in participating in political life through traditional instruments of representative democracy has caused a renewed concern in the EU and its member states for the promotion and encouragement of deliberative institutions (Reuchamps, Suiter 2016). This has resulted in a process of democratic engineering inspired by the principles of participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy. Democratic experimentation along these lines, which can be observed in many EU countries, gave rise to the promotion and institutionalization of deliberative institutions (town meetings, citizen assemblies, neighborhood councils, citizen juries, participatory budgets, etc.).

Democratizing effects of deliberation have, however, been not only a matter of intense political but also academic debate for over 20 years. Still, with a few exceptions the majority of deliberative institutions were implemented in stable democracies.

Efforts to institutionalize deliberative institutions are almost completely absent in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries. Yet, while deliberative institutions and other participatory democratic innovations are generally unknown in Serbia and the region (aside from worker self-management in Yugoslavia; see Pateman 1970; Unkovski-Korica 2013), public and political representation in Western Balkan 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 and the potential pathway to democratization (Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021).

The pace and scope of these developments in the undemocratic societies of the Western Balkan region, in terms of both bottom up and top-down democratic experimentation, call for a deeper understanding of their internal dynamics, and their social and political impact as both individual cases and parts of a greater cycle of social movement mobilizations and institutional experimentation. Responding to this need, the research team gathered within the framework of the Jean Monnet network “Active citizenship: promoting and advancing innovative democratic practices in the Western Balkans” defined two sets of research goals. The first regards the organization of deliberative mini publics (DMPs) within an undemocratic institutional setting, while the other is directed towards strengthening dialogue between conceptual perspectives, approaches and fields around deliberative and participatory forms of democracy in an authoritarian setting. This special issue aims to present the findings of the research done within this JM network. However, these studies will approach social movement mobilizations and deliberative experimentation from different angles.

To begin with, our introductory article will respond to the overall framework of the special issue outlined above, but it will particularly focus on understanding the possible role deliberative institutions could have in hybrid regimes. It will focus on the first two cases of deliberative institutions (DMPs) ever organized in Serbia and will analyze their rationale, implementation, and possible effects. The three articles that follow focus on one of the DMPs held in Serbia. Namely, in her article Janković analyzes the content of the discussion between citizens and shows that ordinary citizens use articulated arguments and reasons when expressing their opinions in group deliberation and that they can make reasonable and informed choices. Fiket, Ilić and Pudar Draško compare attitudinal data before and after the Belgrade DMP in order to analyze the effects of public deliberation on citizens’ political capacities and attitudes regarding political participation in hybrid regimes while Đorđević and Vasiljević, using a similar method of analysis, explore the effects of public deliberation on the participants’ knowledge, attitudes and preferences.

The fifth article, written by Šoć, theoretically examines the view according to which the more citizens deliberate about politics, the less likely they are to participate in the realm of the political, providing to this special issue much-needed theoretical reflections on deliberation and participation.

The three articles that follows will focus on the case studies of the social movements in Serbia (Iguman, Mijatović, Nikolić), Bosnia (Nikšić, Hasanović, Adilović, Kapidžić) and Macedonia (Markovikj and Damjanovski). Those contributions will allow us to better understand the role, goals, mobilization capacities and possible democratization effects of the civic initiatives and social movements in Western Balkan countries.

In the rest of our introductory paper, however, we will focus on the understanding of the possible role deliberative institutions could play in the hybrid regime of Serbia. The first part of our paper will discuss the relevant theoretical arguments followed by the discussion about the level of development of citizen participation within Serbian institutional and extra-institutional contexts. The third part of our paper will discuss the design and implementation of the first two deliberative mini publics ever held in Western Balkans while in the final part we will draw some conclusions regarding the role deliberative institutions could play in hybrid regimes.

2. Understanding Hybrid Regimes and the Role of Deliberation in Democratization Process

Hybrid regimes are those composed of both democratic and authoritarian elements, and although the term has been specifically articulated in the 1990s (Karl 1995), it has become an umbrella term for concepts that have since emerged for non-democracies such as “delegative democracy” (O’Donnell 1994), “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 2003), “pseudo-democracy (Volpi 2004), “defective democracy” (Merkel 2004), “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky, Way 2002), “semi-authoritarianism” (Ottaway 2003), or “electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler 2006). One of the central disagreements among the democratization scholars about transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Schmitter, Karl 1994) is precisely regarding these different conceptualizations of regimes on the continuum between authoritarianism and democracy. We do not deal with these differences, rather focusing on how different government institutions in hybrid regimes behave as conflict management structures. We look at how they organize the struggle for “access to and the distribution of political resources, authority, and legitimacy” through different kinds of political participation, be it by individuals or collective agents (Jayasuriya, Rodan 2007: 775), and whether DMPs can be the engine of democratization in such conflict management structures. The role of conflict within studies of democratization is especially important in resistance to authoritarian regimes, so we also wished to stress both the role of democratic innovations in taming the conflict, but also the role of conflict in the design of new democratic innovative institutions.

Democratization studies (Huntington 1993) have been prioritizing elections and electoral institutions, neglecting deliberation as an important aspect of democracy, despite the latter being unavoidable in the mainstream

deliberative democracy theory and practice. Like various development agencies invested in democracy promotion (Burnell 2007), we can similarly observe how some DMPs and other forms of democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting, have been promoted globally by the World Bank as part of good governance in many countries around the world, including non-democracies (Pateman 2012). Furthermore, as formal instruments that aim to solve problems of democratic deficit, above all visible in a lack of civic commitment and engagement in political life, a wide variety of DMPs and other models of democratic innovations have been institutionalized at local, national, but also supranational level (Fiket 2019).

According to John Dryzek, who introduced the idea of deliberative democratization, the central element of such democratization is a deliberative capacity that does not have to be sought solely in electoral institutions, but rather in many different forums and means. He defines deliberative capacity as “the extent to which a political system possesses structures to host deliberation that is authentic, inclusive, and consequential” (Dryzek 2009: 1382). Authentic deliberation stands for the inducement of non-coercive reflection, linking particular claims to general principles, and embodying reciprocity; inclusive deliberation assumes the presence of various interests and discourses, with the risk that people are not motivated to participate if that means hearing the other side (Mutz 2006); finally, consequential deliberation entails a direct or indirect impact of deliberation upon collective decisions, or social outcomes. Dryzek contributed to what has later become known as deliberative system theory (Parkinson, Mansbridge 2012), which does not prioritize particular arenas for deliberation (parliaments, governments, constitutional courts or specially designed forums such as mini-publics), thus allowing for the appearance of deliberative capacity even in countries that are not liberal democracies. Deliberative systems theory tends to link spaces where deliberation occurs with the overall political system, that is, to assess how DMPs as deliberative institutions can scale up and improve the deliberative capacity of the entire political system. In other words, the way in which different deliberative spaces relate to each other and then to non-deliberative spaces may be a prism through which one can observe both democracies and non-democracies.

Dryzek’s view is that deliberative democratization does not have to come just as a top-down reform of central state institutions. It is possible that a non-democratic regime may develop some deliberative capacity, and that in a situation of regime crisis “those schooled in it may be more likely to talk to rather than repress opponents as crisis looms.” There is the possibility that deliberative capacity “may also develop within society at a distance from state power, not clearly oppositional but not part of the administrative structure” (Dryzek 2009: 1383).

For instance, participatory budgeting was first invented by social movements in Porto Alegre in Brazil, at a time when this country was not considered a fully consolidated democracy. From Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting travelled the world in various shapes and forms, although losing much

of its radicalness or original transformative idea (Pateman 2012: 14). This is an example of a democratic innovation that originated in the oppositional public sphere and has become institutionalized due to electoral results of a progressive mayor and the Workers' Party of Brazil. The curious case of China and its development of deliberative capacity at the local level is tied with the top-down approach sponsored by the Communist Party of China with the aim to address the adverse side effects of rapid economic growth (He, Warren 2011). As our main goal is to discuss the role of DMPs in non-democracies, in a country with democratic backsliding and, according to some assessments, a country witnessing one of the fastest rates of autocratization (Alizada et al. 2021: 19), neither the Brazilian nor the Chinese case is directly translatable to Serbia, though perhaps the latter could be more instructive, as there were applications of DMPs there. It is still a matter of controversy whether these institutional innovations in authoritarian contexts can be labelled as democratic (Hinck et al. 2018). The debate is whether participatory and deliberative practices in an authoritarian context are a genuine opportunity for democratization or merely an attempt to legitimize the authoritarian government.

The literature on DMPs in authoritarian contexts is dominated by the curious case of the People's Republic of China (Jayasuriya, Rodan 2007). This authoritarian deliberation (He, Warren 2011; 2017; He 2014) contains a mix of democratic and authoritarian elements: deliberation, participation, and some restrained citizen empowerment does take place in an environment of command rule, despotism, mistreatment of dissident groups, and violations of human rights. In other words, it is happening within an authoritarian state that has no obvious intention at overall democratization. Still, He and Warren (2017) do not think this practice is an oxymoron but a theoretical possibility. They assess deliberative authoritarianism as functionally driven, as a practice serving as a solution for the problems of governance and that can "provide the kinds of proximate and specific responsiveness that co-opt popular organizing and substitute for democratic empowerments" (He, Warren 2017: 156). It can also serve to regulate social conflicts emerging from economic, political, and social developments, as well as facilitate the complex governance that must follow such developments in China (He, Wagenaar 2018: 623).

For Chinese political elites, that is, in authoritarian deliberation, deliberative processes are used for carefully selected governance problems and with a clear idea to prevent the spillover from the controlled deliberative arenas to other non-selected arenas and topics (He, Warren 2017: 161). The real issue is whether another political development is possible, that is, whether democratization can spring from authoritarian deliberation. While He and Warren think that deliberation in this authoritarian deliberation serves to secure legitimacy and stability for authoritarianism, they nevertheless see democratization as a second possibility for political development that is not "likely at the moment" but not impossible in the future (He, Warren 2017: 161).

Both authoritarian and democratic regimes need legitimacy, the question is only what type of legitimacy is generated by different practices. There seems to

be a convergence of, on the one hand, the governance-driven impetus of democratic innovations in authoritarian regimes for regime survival (Woo, Kübler 2020), and on the other, a similar motivation for securing legitimacy and stability of representative democratic institutions (Warren 2014), when these are designed top down. This does not exclude the possibility of unintended innovations potentially leading to democratization or deepening democracy (Woo, Kübler 2020: 349). “Highlighting the governance-driven aims of participatory innovations, i.e. to improve the quality and acceptability of public policies in a quest for output legitimacy – a goal that can be common to democratic and non-democratic regimes alike – suddenly makes them less ‘unlikely’ phenomena in authoritarian contexts” (Woo, Kübler 2020: 350). Woo and Kübler in fact see a pragmatic logic in adopting democratic innovations by governments, authoritarian and democratic alike, as they are instrumental for good governance and ultimately obtain the acquiescence of their populations and secure the stability of the regime, whether democratic or not (Woo, Kübler 2020: 351). This conclusion may seem cynical against the backdrop of the normative pathos of deliberative democracy that wishes to generate democratic legitimacy, rather than mere stability and security of the political order, but it is of utmost importance nevertheless, as non-democracies tend to more and more include either pseudo-participatory institutions or ineffective projects of information and communication technology innovations (see Damjanović 2019), as well as in light of the findings that “no institution, technology, or discourses is inherently democratic” (Pepinsky 2020).

We contribute to this literature with the specific case of Serbia, which has once again ended up a hybrid regime. Previously the country had been classified this way during the rule of Slobodan Milošević, with the initial transition from a communist into capitalist society and the introduction of a multiparty system when elections were not free and fair. Following the “democratic transition” in 2000, there was a period of classification of Serbia as a semi-consolidated democracy, reverting by 2019 to a hybrid regime and by 2020 even to autocracy.

3. Serbia: Institutional Context and Citizen Participation

While the literature about democratization used to take into account the process of transition from authoritarian to democratic societies, and this has been a framework for much political science work on Serbia of the past three decades (Pavlović, Antonić 2010; Vladislavljević 2011; Zurnić 2019), we are writing in a period of not only democratic backsliding, but rapid autocratization of the country (Alizada et al. 2021), that is, during a reverse process of de-democratization. In our view, Serbia is, to use Woo and Kübler’s words, a softer case of authoritarianism (Woo, Kübler 2020): it still allows for democratic innovation, such as DMPs, to emerge from the academia or civil society (rather than exclusively top-down, as in a hard authoritarian state such as China).

Although the quality of democracy in Serbia has been deficient in the 2010s, democratic backsliding could be observed with the first electoral triumph of the Serbian Progressive Party and its influence in eroding “political rights and civil liberties, putting pressure on independent media, the political opposition, and civil society organization,” which was explicitly cited as the reason for downgrading Serbia’s classification from partly free (Freedom House 2020) to a hybrid regime. Elections in hybrid regimes exist and are to some extent competitive, but are not free nor fair: there is misuse of public resources and institutions, voter blackmail (threat of job loss in both the public and the private sector), unequal access to national media, while private media serve as official broadcasters of the ruling party. Indeed, due to a boycott by the opposition, parliamentary elections in 2020 have been assessed as “noncompetitive parliamentary elections” (Damjanović 2021). On the other hand, political and social mobilization of citizens² is impeded by the political opportunity structure (Tarrow 2005) formed within hybrid regimes characterized by competitive authoritarianism. The basic logic of political opportunity structure approach is as follows: citizens mobilization and social movements are influenced by the political environment that through constraints, possibilities, and threats affects the citizens and social movements capacity for mobilization and its possibility to reach collective goals (Koopmans 1999).

Serbian citizens are in fact described as passive and apathetic, distrustful of democratic institutions and political representatives (Todosijević, Pavlović 2017), and disappointed by the difficulty of influencing political decisions (Greenberg 2010). The sense of political efficacy, that is, the perception that own political actions can have an effect, of Serbian citizens is very low (Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021); the average turnout for parliamentary elections in the last 20 years has been declining (Jovanović, Vučićević 2020) and there is also a decline of civic engagement at the local level (Fiket et al. 2017). The dominant form of political participation in Serbia is still institutional participation, while non-institutional political participation is practiced only by a minority (Pešić et al. 2021; Fiket, Pudar Draško 2021). At the same time, recent studies have shown that in the last five years, there has been an increase in the use of non-institutional channels of political participation, such as protests and civic mobilization within the framework of the new social movements (Pešić 2017; Delibašić et al. 2019; Pudar Draško et al. 2019, Fiket et al. 2019, Pešić, Petrović 2020).

It is precisely due to the fact that as institutional citizen participation has been declining, there has been a growing number of extra-institutional civic initiatives and local movements, so that citizens can express their views and needs. We acknowledged this reality when designing our DMPs and made a choice to include grassroots movement representatives as participants alongside ordinary citizens in DMPs. But not just that – the topics that we selected as those to be discussed by participants in DMPs have been previously put

2 For more on this issue, see Fiket, Ilić, Pudar Draško in this volume.

on the agenda by grassroots movements. These topics – urban mobility and air pollution – have been topics around which these initiatives and movements organized as groups making public claims, formulating opinions and discourses. Finally, our design was not meant to be merely institutional empowerment of extra-institutional civic participation, but instead an attempt to avoid locking deliberation at the micro level which would then make it especially difficult in an authoritarian setting to scale up to the macro level. The next section of our paper deals precisely with the design and implementation of DMPs in Serbian context.

4. Design and Implementation of Deliberative Mini Publics in Serbia

Deliberative mini publics are citizen forums in which a sample of citizens, selected from the population affected by some public issue, deliberate on that issue (Goodin, Dryzek 2006; Gastil, Black, Moscovitz 2008; Warren 2009; Smith, Ryan 2012). The design of DMPs is inspired by key principles of deliberative democracy: inclusiveness, exposure to different opinions, reasoned opinion expression, and the production of a collective decision. Although deliberative theorists disagree on the type of inclusivity necessary for deliberation (Thompson 2008), they all consider it as a vital element (Habermas 1984; Cohen 1997). The main idea that stands behind the principle of equality is that differences between participants should not influence equal participation of all. Each participant should equally and freely contribute to the discussion so that all the various perspectives could be heard. This is strongly linked to the principle of exposure to different opinions that, in turn, presupposes some amount of disagreement on the topic of deliberation. Exposure to different opinions is recognized as a necessary requirement of deliberation by a majority of deliberative scholars, although they sometimes use different definitions and terms, such as ‘diversity of opinions’ (Barabas 2004), ‘cross-cutting exposure’ (Mutz 2006), and ‘state of disagreement’ (Thompson 2008). Exposure to different arguments is considered to be a cure for the self-selectivity of sources, which occurs when citizens discuss public issues with like-minded fellows (Mutz 2006; Fishkin 2009), selecting information that supports the views they already hold (Sunstein 2001). Discussion in which alternative opinions are suggested is a necessary condition not only for individual transformation but also for expression of reasoned opinion, given that in heterogeneous settings individuals are incentivized to base their arguments on justifications that could be ‘universally’ accepted (Habermas 1984; Cohen 1989; Mendelberg 2002; Gutmann, Thompson 2004; Thompson 2008). The actual design, setting, and purpose of DMPs may vary from one to another but they all share some common basic features, aimed at ensuring the achievement of the ideals of deliberative democracy (see Janković in this special issue). They involve a sample of the population that should be representative of a plurality of opinions and positions on the issue

(some of them, like deliberative polling, are based on random samples). The free and equal expression of all opinions within DMPs is further guaranteed by professional moderators ensuring a balanced participation and respectful environment in small group discussion. Further, the balanced panel of experts and politicians make sure the participants are exposed to different opinions and preferences, policy alternatives, but also values.

In an attempt to test, for the first time, the possibility of conducting DMPs in Serbian society, two citizen assemblies were organized by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (University of Belgrade)³ in Belgrade and Valjevo on 21 and 28 November 2021.

In order to make the official names of the DMPs more familiar to citizens at first glance, the research team chose to use the term citizen assembly, since deliberative mini-publics, as well as the concept of deliberation, are generally unknown to both Serbian citizens and political representatives. The citizen assemblies followed the “standard design” of DMPs, with one significant innovation, however: inclusion of active citizens, representatives of local initiatives or organizations who expressed publicly their attitudes and proposals regarding the issues under discussion. The justification for this variation in design was in response to the agonistic critique of deliberative democracy, i.e., the argument about the inadequate treatment of deep disagreement and conflict by the deliberativists who aim to rationally resolve and overcome it (Mouffe 2000; Connolly 2004; Tully 2008). Specifically, the agonistic critique of DMPs with randomly selected citizens is that they may easily end up as top-down technocratic applications that displace conflict, do not sufficiently include actors already involved in social conflicts and may have depoliticizing consequences (Westphal 2019). While it is often argued that agonism is better suited for theoretical analysis of protests, social movements or anti-systemic political actors, there are proposals to agonize institutions by way of suffusing them with agonistic principles of valuing conflict and allowing for the expression of differences, contingency and interdependence (Lowndes, Paxton 2018). This is what we have done by modifying DMPs against the background of agonistic principles and inclusion of a conflict-oriented mode of selection of participants. In other words, in addition to ordinary citizens, representatives descriptive of various socio-demographic categories of citizens of relevance for deliberation around particular topics, we included representatives

³ This project was carried out in cooperation with the European Jean Monnet Network ACT WB - Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans (<https://act-wb.net/?lang=sr>), coordinated by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade (IFDT), together with four more European universities and the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence. The planning and implementation of citizen assemblies took place through the cooperation of the Scientific Committee, comprising the following members: Irena Fiket (IFDT), Ana Đorđević (IFDT), Biljana Đorđević (Faculty of Political Science), Ivana Janković (Faculty of Philosophy), Gazela Pudar Draško (IFDT) and Jelena Vasiljević (IFDT), and the Executive Organization Committee (Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence and MASMI).

of the “parties who are involved in the particular conflict in need of solutions” (Westphal 2019: 201). Active citizens were included within small groups as participants and at plenary sessions as speakers.

In the following we describe and discuss the implementation of the citizen assemblies, focusing on the key phases: issue identification and framing, selection of participants, and deliberative discussions.

Phase 1: Identification and Framing of the Issues

The first citizen assembly centered around the issue of expanding the pedestrian zone and rerouting traffic in the Belgrade city centre. The second was held on the topic of air pollution in the city of Valjevo. Those topics were chosen by the research team for three reasons. First, they prompt strong opinions among citizens, as they are highly relevant in daily life, and local citizen initiatives had already organized different public actions aiming to raise public awareness and influence the decision-making process. Second, they are very different issues in terms of knowledge: air pollution is a highly technical issue on which one might expect information to produce changes in attitude due to knowledge gain and exposure to competing arguments presented in the document briefing and plenary sessions; on the other hand, expanding the pedestrian zone is an issue in which citizens could be considered experts. Third, while rerouting traffic in the city centre is an issue that could be entirely addressed at the local level, air pollution is a more complex issue, as it also encompasses national competences.

The main goal of this phase is to present the issues to the citizens in an inclusive and balanced way. To achieve this, it is necessary to identify stakeholders (politicians and experts) who will participate in the production of the briefing materials and the plenary discussions of DMPs. The way the issue is framed in briefing materials inevitably determines how the issue is discussed and understood; therefore, all relevant opinions, information, arguments and values regarding the issue must be presented in the briefing materials, and all the relevant, credible, competent, and, as far as possible, politically diverse stakeholders should be invited to comment on the briefing materials (Fiket 2019).

The first draft of briefing materials for the two DMPs was prepared by the research team and then sent to the stakeholders: representatives of citizen initiatives, experts, and decision-makers. All comments that arrived were accepted and included in the final version. The main problem encountered in this phase was a lack of interest from the majority of the politicians invited to comment. Therefore, their opinions and positions regarding the issues were represented in the briefing materials through the statements made to the media. On the other hand, the majority of experts contacted showed a high level of interest to contribute to the briefing materials and participate in the plenary sessions. Some of them reacted very positively to the whole idea of DMPs, underlining the necessity to organize similar initiatives on a regular basis.

Phase 2: Selection of Participants

The initial research plan was to gather 40 participants for each citizens assembly, but due to the unfavorable epidemiological situation, both events were held online and the targeted number of participants was lowered to 32 for each. The purposive sampling procedure was applied in selecting citizens in order to include not only persons who represent the population living in the affected areas in socio-demographic terms, but also citizens in some way affected by the public issues under discussion. In the case of Belgrade, those were city residents with physical disabilities; senior residents; parents of small children (up to 12 years old); local business owners and those whose place of employment was in the area. Activists who participated in group discussions in Belgrade were members of the following civic initiatives: “Pedestrians are not Marathon Runners” (*Pešaci nisu maratonci*), “The Ministry of Space” (*Ministarstvo prostora*) and “Streets for Cyclists” (*Ulice za bicikliste*). In the case of Valjevo, the invited participants were parents of small children (up to 12 years old); members of households with individual heating using either pellets, coal or wood, or else electricity, or who are on the public heating grid (from a heating plant); members of households from the outskirts of Valjevo, members of low-income households; employees of Krušik (the major polluter in the city of Valjevo). Activists who participated in group discussions were recruited from among members of the following civic initiatives: “Local Front Valjevo” (*Lokalni front Valjevo*), “Local Response” (*Lokalni odgovor*), “Eco Guerilla” (*Eko Gerila*).

Participants were assigned to one of the 4 moderated small groups for each assembly, seeking maximum variation in each group. Namely, each group comprised approximately 8 individuals, including at least one from the various categories and two persons from civic initiatives.

Once selected and invited, the participants were administered, through CATI, a questionnaire approximately 20 minutes long about their general attitudes, policy preferences, level of knowledge on the two policy issues selected for DMP, their general political orientation, participation and interest in politics and finally their standard socio-demographic data. In order to collect data that would allow the measuring of the effects of deliberation, the same questionnaire was administered once again, after the event (for findings on opinion changes, that took place as an effect of deliberation in Citizens Assemblies, see Đorđević and Vasiljević in this special issue). A week before the citizen assemblies took place, all invited participants were supplied with the briefing material, as well as information about the process of deliberation and DMPs design. All recruited participants were regularly followed up on from the recruitment stage to their presentation at the online citizen assembly. The impression of the recruitment team was that the selected and contacted citizens reacted very positively to the invitation and were eager to participate. In fact, there were only two last minute dropouts for each assembly. However, it should be noted that all the recruited citizens received a voucher for their participation, as is usual for DMPs that are not based on self-selection, that is, which aim to motivate those usually less interested or with poorer access to such events.

Phase 3: Deliberative Discussions

Once participants gathered in the online space, the deliberative event was structured as presented in table 1. This is the agenda for the citizen assembly held in Belgrade, but the one in Valjevo followed the same structure.

<p>Agenda for the citizen assembly in Belgrade – Expansion of the pedestrian zone and rerouting traffic in the city core</p> <p>(Online event, November 2, 2021)</p>
<p>9:40 - 10:00 Virtual Gathering of Participants</p>
<p>10:00 - 10:15 Introductory Speeches</p> <p>representative, EU delegation to the Republic of Serbia representative, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory</p>
<p>10:15 - 11:30 Group Discussion I</p> <p>Description: Separate small groups discuss independently with the help of a moderator. These discussions take place simultaneously in separate virtual rooms. The focus of the discussion is on the formulation of the questions and suggestions related to the topic, which will be directed to the experts in the next session.</p>
<p>11:30 - 11:40 Coffee Break</p>
<p>11:40 - 12:40 Plenary Session with Experts and Representatives of Civic Initiatives</p> <p>Description: The plenary session with experts and representatives of citizen initiatives, where representatives of groups present their questions and proposals. Clarifying questions about the feasibility of the proposal (policy, solutions), as well as additional information participants asked for.</p>
<p>12:40 - 13:10 Coffee Break and Lunch</p>
<p>13:10 - 14:25 Group discussion II</p> <p>Description: Separate small groups discuss independently with the help of a moderator. These discussions take place simultaneously in separate virtual rooms. Discussions are supported by additional information, with proposals (policies and solutions) formulated in the last portion, which are then presented to the plenary session with decision-makers.</p>
<p>14:25 - 14:35 Coffee Break</p>
<p>14:35 - 15:35 Plenary Session with Political Decision-makers</p> <p>Description: Plenary session with political decision-makers, where representatives of groups present proposals with arguments, and political representatives comment on these policy proposals.</p>
<p>15:35 - 16:00 Formulation of Final Proposals and Voting</p> <p>Description: Participants briefly return to small groups to eventually modify the proposals they have put forward in the plenary sessions (10 minutes). A poll is prepared based on the final proposals (5 minutes). Online voting for several proposals (with preferential voting) (10 minutes). Results announced at the end (5 minutes).</p>

Table 1. Agenda for the citizen assembly in Belgrade

The citizen assemblies gathered 31 participants in Belgrade and 33 in Valjevo, both divided into 4 small groups. A moderator and facilitator were assigned to each group. The role of the moderator in the deliberation process within the DMP must be clearly defined, as there is a risk that the moderator's own views and opinions can influence the discussion or that they could become involved in internal dynamics created among the participants. The research team therefore defined the approach to moderation as minimalist. This means that moderators were not allowed to intervene in discussions with comments or new arguments, but only regarding the strictly formal rules of discussion (time constraints, sequence of topics, etc.), or in the case of the violation of the principle of equality of participation in the discussion. Therefore, the discussions within the small groups were free of interventions by moderators, except towards the end when moderators helped formulate questions for the panels of experts and politicians. The team of moderators was expressly recruited and trained for the event. MASMI, the organization in charge of the recruitment and training of group moderators, selected and trained 4 moderators, all with previous experience in managing and leading group discussions in focus groups. The discussions in the groups went as planned and the participants showed that they can hold reasonable and respectful discussions with fellow citizens. What was also noticeable was the mutual encouragement and respect displayed by the participants within groups, as it provided an opportunity for almost every personal voice to be appreciated and publicly communicated through the group representative at the plenary session.

And while the group discussions went as expected (see Janković in this special issue for more details about small group discussions), we encountered major problems within the plenary sessions with politicians.

In the Belgrade case, only Marko Stojčić (Director of City Planning of the City of Belgrade), Radoslav Marjanović (President of the Stari Grad Municipality), Đorđe Miketić (Municipal Assembly Member) and Marko Bastać, (former President of the Stari Grad Municipality) attended the plenary sessions. The other invited politicians did not come, with the majority not even replying to the invitation, although it was sent several times and they were also contacted by telephone as a reminder.⁴ Those who did not attend the citizen assembly were the crucial decision makers in the issue under discussion. Therefore, the lack of their comments and responses to citizens' questions and proposals significantly undermined the quality of deliberation in the Belgrade Assembly.

The situation was similar in Valjevo, with the majority of invited politicians not showing any interest in participation, despite the research team's

4 The politicians who did not attend were: Goran Vesić (Deputy Mayor of Belgrade), Dušan Rafailović (Department of Transport), Ognjen Petar Todorović (Department of Transport), Gordana Marković (Department of Transport), Miloš Vulović (Department of Urban Planning and Construction), Jovica Vasiljević (Department of Transport).

effort to reach out to them. Invitations were sent to seven decision makers,⁵ but only Milica Spasenić, (Occupational Safety and Health Service at Krušik, the factory considered the main polluter in the region) and Ljubomir Radović (Representative of the opposition Local Front Valjevo in the City Assembly) attended the plenary session.

Even more relevant for the quality of deliberation in the DMPs and citizen perception of politicians' responsiveness is that even those decision makers representing the Assembly majority who did attend the Belgrade DMP (since none attended in Valjevo), did not even attempt to answer questions or give feedback to the group participants. The participants' disappointment with politicians after the plenary sessions, either with their arrogant stance in disregarding citizen questions and proposals (Belgrade), or with the fact they did not attend (Valjevo) was, in fact, articulated in the group discussions that followed the plenary with politicians. The data elaborated in the papers by Fiket, Ilić and Pudar Draško and Janković in this volume confirms those findings in a more systematic way.

At the plenary sessions, the experts expressed the same interest they had in the phase of drafting briefing materials. All the invited experts, both in Belgrade⁶ and in Valjevo,⁷ participated at the plenary sessions, making every effort to help citizens better understand the issues and related policies. Consequently, the participants evaluated the discussion with the experts very positively.

Overall, more than 80% of the participants were very satisfied with the experience of the assemblies. They claimed that their participation in the

5 The invitations for the assembly were sent to Aleksandar Purić (Department for Urbanism, Civil Engineering, Traffic and Environmental Protection), a representative of the Serbian Environmental Protection Agency, and Zoran Stepanović (Public Services Company JKP Toplana), but they did not even respond. The invitation was accepted by Đorđe Pavlović (City Assembly Member from the Socialist Party of Serbia) and Branka Antić (Department of Health of the City of Valjevo), although they ended up not attending.

6 Experts and representatives of the civic initiatives that participated in the plenaries in Belgrade event were: Zoran Rubinjoni, (Centre for Urban Development Planning), Milena Vukmirović (Faculty of Forestry), Vladimir Đorić (Faculty of Transport and Traffic Engineering), Marija Maruna (Faculty of Architecture), Aleksandar Stanojlović (Architect), Ana Mitić Radulović (Center for Experiments in Urban Studies), Dubravka Lukić (Pedestrians are not Marathon Runners), Iva Čukić (The Ministry of Space), Zoran Bukvić, (Streets for Cyclists), Nevena Tarlanović (Association of the People with Disabilities)

7 Experts and representatives of the civic initiatives that participated in the plenaries in Belgrade event were: Vladimir Đurđević (Faculty of Physics, University of Belgrade), Dragana Đorđević (Institute of Chemistry, Technology & Metallurgy), Jelena Đuričić (Institute of Chemistry, Technology & Metallurgy), Aleksandar Jovović (Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, University of Belgrade), Marija Petrović Marković (journalist of Valjevska posla focused on air pollution), Jovan Grujić (Organizations „Eko Gerila Valjevo”) and Ognjan Pantić (Belgrade Open School). An invitation was also sent to Andrija Petrović from the organization „Da Valjevo prodiše” (Let Valjevo Breathe), but he did not attend.

assemblies greatly deepened their understanding of the problem at hand, approximately 85% of the participants said that the expert comments helped them gain a better understanding of the problem, and approximately 77% that after the discussion they better understood those they disagreed with. Unfortunately, the comments given by the decision-makers, according to more than 50% of the participants, helped little or not at all to better understand the problem. This was surely a consequence of the absence of response to the citizens' questions in the plenary sessions.

Although the plenary sessions with the politicians were the most disappointing segment of both citizen assemblies, there is a small difference between the behavior of decision makers that should be mentioned. In both Belgrade (capital of Serbia) and Valjevo (a smaller city in western Serbia), as well as in almost all local governments across Serbia (after 2020), key positions are held by the Serbian Progressive Party, which bears the greatest responsibility for democratic backsliding. There is a parallelism between centralization of the state and the ruling party centralization, thus it is commonly understood that many important decisions about local issues are made top down, not just by local political elites, but also by central party-political elites, based in Belgrade. This, along with the feeling that residents of Belgrade have more freedom to express their views and protest against detrimental policies compared to residents of smaller towns, leads us to say that Belgrade politicians possibly had greater freedom to join the citizen assembly in Belgrade, compared to their colleagues from Valjevo. Similarly, although DMPs as a format were unfamiliar to almost everyone, decision makers from Belgrade probably understood the importance of at least attending, precisely because there are more citizen initiatives and contentious issues in Belgrade than in Valjevo, where politicians chose to simply ignore the event, just like they tried to ignore the problem of air pollution for several years. In addition, the performance of those who took the opportunity to be in direct contact with citizens, outside the control of the local authorities or party, demonstrates their unfamiliarity and lack of experience in communicating with citizens as equals. It is not just that such forums in which citizens and representatives stand face to face do not exist, but representatives have for so long been alienated from non-staged communication that they failed to amend their approach and at least try to be sufficiently respectful.

While the online format of DMPs has probably made them less attractive for the media, journalists were to a certain extent similarly positioned as politicians – not interested in following the plenary sessions and most likely misunderstanding the purpose and potential of citizen assemblies. In authoritarian settings, with lack of media freedom, DMPs may have the potential to somewhat counter authoritarian manipulative and false information strategies (Richards 2018). To do this they must catch the attention of the rare independent media outlets, to scale up the influence of deliberation as a different type of civic communication.

6. Concluding Remarks

Is it worthwhile making DMPs in hybrid regimes, in countries that are neither leaders nor good students of deliberation? This question is especially pertinent when asked in some of the worst times of democratic recession and autocratization in Serbia (Alizada et al. 2021), when the regime controls a media landscape saturated with non-deliberative practices and the citizens mistrust not just institutions but one another (Stojiljković 2016; Stojiljković, Mihelj 2020). We have shown that politicians, especially those from the ruling parties, were not interested in participation in DMPs, while experts and citizens have been very receptive. Experts were keen to comment on briefing materials, take part in plenary sessions and respond to citizens' questions. We also received their feedback and greetings for months after the DMPs. Citizens have been very interested and almost all expressed that they have enjoyed the assemblies much more than they initially anticipated. Activists, representatives of civic initiatives, were glad to take up an opportunity to present their experience and acquired knowledge at a new venue. In a toxic media environment and very polarized public opinion (Kleut, Milojević 2021), respectful deliberation in group discussions about relevant public problems have resonated well with all citizen participants. Activists that have been part of the conflict either around different solutions for urban mobility in Belgrade or different priority measures to tackle air pollution showed to ordinary citizens both why the conflict at hand is not always rationally resolvable and negotiable (Westphal 2019) and how to lift up their democratic faith in the meaningfulness of public deliberation and activism which turn out to be needed after disappointing plenary sessions with politicians (see paper by Fiket, Ilić, Pudar Draško in this volume).

As Dryzek (2009: 1389) stresses, the best chance to find deliberative capacity in authoritarian regimes is in the oppositional public sphere or in parts of society that may not be clearly oppositional, but that also do not belong to the administrative structure. Our experience supports this view: these DMPs were organized by an academic institution that draws strongly on bottom-up civic initiatives in the selection of topics and design of citizen assemblies. Just as the majority of democratic innovations are in the domain of policy-making and administration (Warren 2014: 38), one aim of our research project is policy oriented – for decision makers to take recommendations of the citizen assemblies into account and start using DMPs as an institutionalized practice of inclusion of those affected by decisions. How are we to understand the lack of interest from decision makers to meaningfully participate in these quasi-experiments that they themselves can claim as their own contribution to deliberative democratization? It is again useful to compare authoritarian systems with democratic ones. Authoritarian deliberation is situated within policy processes with the idea of reducing social conflicts arising from complex governing issues (He, Wagenaar 2018: 628). In China, as there are no multiparty elections, the Communist Party has more incentives to implement top-down authoritarian deliberation that may improve policies and thus enhance overall legitimacy

without much risk to the status quo. What if DMPs in non-democracies are designed and function according to a similar logic and motivation as those in democracies, which ultimately just wish to “preserve the legitimacy of established political processes through elements of reform and innovation that will ultimately ensure the political survival of the regime” (Woo, Kübler 2020: 348)? The crucial distinction in the way different regime types use top-down organized DMPs is in the connection they try to establish between electoral legitimacy and policy-specific legitimacy. China does not have this rationale – the Communist Party needs an additional source of legitimacy to ideology. Liberal democracies have been criticized that electoral legitimacy does not merely translate into legitimacy of every single policy, and their attempt to tackle the crisis of representative democracy is to integrate democratization of policy-making into representative institutions. What about competitive authoritarian regimes, where elections are not free and fair, but are sometimes more, sometimes less competitive? The dominant narrative of the Serbian ruling political elite is that if one party wins elections, it is entitled to implement any policy it deems justified. In Serbia, for the DMPs to have policy effect, it seems that they must be organized top-down, as state-supported DMPs instead of civil-society-led DMPs (Courant 2021) – bottom-up citizen initiatives in Serbia are rarely accepted by policy makers. At the same time, it would be reasonable to expect that the function of the state-supported DMPs in a hybrid regime would solely be to legitimize the authoritarian status quo. Everything else – giving an official mandate, funding, and media space for non-staged deliberation – is risky for the authoritarian regime, as it opens up a space for contestation of their final authority on all policy processes.

When DMPs are civil-society-led, they tend to lack institutional support, state funding, and sufficient time for deliberation, and this is especially the case in hybrid regimes. Being organized by academia or civil society, the response of the hybrid regime is to ignore them, thus making them politically ineffective. This response for a hybrid regime is rational because an authentic opportunity for democratization, in our view, can credibly come from critical civil society (social movements or civil society organizations, in this particular case from DMPs created by academic institutions and civil society actors). In a polarized hybrid regime, it might even be necessary that organizers have a clear stance of independence, so that they are not accused of being captured by the state or serving as its administrative staff with bad design and poor implementation. Otherwise, there is a risk of the widespread public distrust in authoritarian political institutions spilling over into the institutions of DMPs. This comes at a cost – DMPs would not be directly politically influential in terms of implementation of policies but may lead towards incremental advances in the deliberative capacity of the oppositional public that may one day scale up. If they cannot affect immediate policies, why organize them? One may wonder whether such micro-deliberative experiments can at all tackle macro-level discontent and whether they do this “sufficiently quickly and robustly so as to trigger visible change in democratic practices before populists

completely erode democratic institutions” (Suteu 2019: 490–491)? DMPs are certainly not a panacea for all the problems of hybrid regimes, and even if they turn out to be useful, they will not be sufficient remedies. Regardless of that, a critical oppositional public sphere experimenting with institutional innovations such as DMPs can enhance public trust, citizens’ sense of understanding of politics and attitudes towards the need for civic participation, politically articulate bottom-up led deliberative democratization that may one day have an official mandate by a more democratic government. DMPs designed as citizen assemblies in Belgrade and Valjevo can bridge the gap between apathetic citizens and local activists, and connect with the rest of the political system through a spillover into other non-approved arenas⁸.

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⁸ Our citizen assemblies, in fact, inspired a civil society organisation Ministarstvo prostora (Ministry of Space) to organize three participatory forums in Belgrade a year later, <https://ministarstvoprostora.org/2021/11/10/odrzan-prvi-participativni-forum/>

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Irena Fiket i Biljana Đorđević

Obećanja i izazovi deliberativnih i participativnih inovacija u hibridnim režimima: slučaj dve Građanske skupštine u Srbiji

Apstrakt

Zabrinjavajući trend autokratizacije koja se širi svetom poslednjih godina je pokrenuo novi talas poziva na deliberativnu i participativnu demokratiju kao lek za krizu. Uz nekoliko izuzetaka, većina participativnih i deliberativnih institucija je uspostavljena i sprovedena u stabilnim demokratijama. Naponi da se participativni i deliberativni modeli institucionalizuju skoro u potpunosti izostaju u Srbiji i drugim zemljama Zapadnog Balkana. Ipak, ono što je prisutno je mobilizacija građana u okviru društvenih pokreta i lokalnih građanskih inicijativa, koja je istovremeno simptom neodgovornih i sve očiglednije autoritarnih institucija, kao i potencijalni put ka demokratizaciji. Tempo i obim ovakvog razvoja demokratskih eksperimenata, kako onih odozdo nagore tako i onih odozgo nadole, u nedemokratskim društvima regiona Zapadnog Balkana, zahtevaju bolje razumevanje njihove unutrašnje dinamike i njihovog društvenog i političkog uticaja. Kao odgovor na ovu potrebu, članci u ovom tematu stavljaju naglasak na mobilizaciju društvenih pokreta i deliberativno eksperimentisanje.

Na samom početku, naš uvodni članak se posebno fokusira na razumevanje moguće uloge koju bi deliberativne institucije mogle da imaju u hibridnim režimima. Razmatraju se prva dva slučaja deliberativnih mini javnosti (DMJ) ikada organizovanih u Srbiji, uz analizu obrazloženja, specifičnog dizajna, sprovođenja DMJ, kao i sagledavanje moguće uloge koju bi deliberativne institucije mogle da imaju u hibridnom režimu Srbije.

Ključne reči: deliberacija, deliberativne mini javnosti, građanska participacija, Građanske skupštine, društveni pokreti, hibridni režimi, autokratizacija