



INSTITUTE
FOR PHILOSOPHY
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THEORY

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE: THE POTENTIAL OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN SERBIA

Rebuilding trust and participation in politics

■ Introduction / Executive Summary

In light of discouraging trends, reflected in widespread distrust and disengagement from political processes in Serbia, **citizens' assemblies** offer a mechanism for including citizens in democratic processes, and increasing both civic participation and quality of debates around issues of public interest. Citizens' assemblies are best described as a deliberative democratic model which brings together citizens, experts, and decision makers, in order to openly discuss relevant issues, resulting in concrete policy suggestions and proposed solutions for the matters at hand. As these forms of democratic participation aim both to **encourage citizens** and hold **decision makers accountable**, they are also seen as a way to **rebuild trust** in political processes and institutions. As such, they have become widely recognized and institutionalized over the last two decades, at local and national levels, as well as the level of the European Union. With these goals in mind, in November 2020, two citizens' assemblies were organized in Serbia, within the Jean Monnet Network ACT WB, a project managed by the **Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory** at the University of Belgrade¹. Both assemblies were focused on highly relevant issues

for citizens of Belgrade and Valjevo, resulting in policy suggestions formulated after excessive discussions among citizens, with experts, and with decision makers. During the process, citizens demonstrated a **clear willingness to participate and contribute** to creating meaningful solutions based on informed opinions and inclusive conversation. The fact that around **80% of participants** stated that the assemblies **significantly deepened their understanding of the discussed problems**, and that the same percentage rated their satisfaction with the process between **8 and 10** (on a scale from 1 to 10), clearly points to the overall potential of citizens' assemblies in Serbia to motivate and engage civic action. While these pioneer processes may not directly influence decision makers, they offer increasingly important insights both in terms of citizens' motivations, and the outlook of achieving tangible results.

As a leading social science institution researching and promoting deliberative and participatory democratic institutions, IFDT will continue to explore these findings, and examine the prospect of **institutionalizing innovative democratic models** that contribute to the overall quality and relevance of inclusive discussions and civic participation.

■ Citizens' Assemblies – A Structured Approach to Deliberative Democracy

One citizens' assembly was organized in **Belgrade**, the capital of Serbia, on November 21, 2022, and another in **Valjevo**, a city in Western

¹ The Jean Monnet Network – Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans project is managed by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade, along with the University of Graz, the University of Sarajevo, the University of Turin, the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, and the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence. The project was supported by the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade as well. For more information, see: <https://act-wb.net/>

Serbia, on November 28, 2020. The first citizens' assembly was focused on the issue of **traffic mobility in the central city area**, while the second dealt with the growing problem of **air pollution** in Valjevo. Both assemblies consisted of a **group of citizens** (32 in Belgrade, 33 in Valjevo), **experts on the discussed issue** (10 in Belgrade, 7 in Valjevo), and **decision makers** (4 in Belgrade, 2 in Valjevo), with the caveat that several decision makers in both cities declined the invitation to participate. Groups of citizens were divided into four smaller groups in order to have more focused discussions, while conversations with experts and decision makers were held in plenary forms, with all citizens present and active in asking **questions**.

Although the assemblies were organized **online**, due to limitations posed by the Covid-19 crisis which affected certain citizens' ability to participate, citizen groups comprised various socio-demographic categories (age, gender, level of education), with an important difference between "regular" (6-7 per group) and "active" (1-2 per group) citizens, the second category representing activists from civil society organizations which had publicly reacted to the issues discussed. The assemblies also included **citizens who were especially affected** by these issues, such as parents with children, people with disabilities, or elderly citizens, in the case of Belgrade, and parents of dependent children or members of households that use individual

fireplaces fueled by pellets, coal, or wood, in the case of air pollution in Valjevo.

This methodology allowed for quality debates and processes structured around exchanges between all present stakeholders, resulting in well informed questions and thoroughly discussed policy suggestions, which were later forwarded to relevant decision makers.

■ **The Citizens' Assembly in Belgrade – Organizing Traffic Mobility in the Core Central City Area**

The topic of the Belgrade citizens' assembly regarded traffic mobility – namely, the existing plan to expand the pedestrian zone in the core central city area. Throughout the discussion, one of the main impressions was that citizens were in general not familiar with the plan, nor were they aware of the existing debates, arguments for and against the expansion, or the overall consequences for the quality of city life (aside from the briefing materials they received prior to the citizens' assembly). Questions that came up during the **initial discussion** concerned public transport, traffic jams, green areas, pollution, mobility, as well as the city's identity, but without clarity in terms of possible positive or negative effects. Participants stated their

The processes followed an outlined structure, consisting of the following phases:

1. **Briefing prior to the assembly** (participants received balanced and informative material in order to get acquainted with all relevant information, perspectives and attitudes)
2. **Discussion and suggestions developed during the assembly**, including the following steps:
 - A) Initial exchange of opinions and first policy suggestions among citizens within groups
 - B) Plenary discussion between citizens and experts on the issue
 - C) Further discussions within citizen groups
 - D) Plenary discussion between citizens and decision makers
 - E) Final policy suggestions and voting within groups for 2-4 policy suggestions to be presented in the concluding plenary session
3. **Policy suggestions and voting results** (in the end, several selected suggestions were put to a vote among all participants)

initial arguments and doubts, and although there were differing preferences, the discussion resulted in a heavy load of questions for the experts in this matter.

The **discussion with the experts** proved to be the crucial step for citizens' understanding of the matter – the key topics covered the **lack of transparency and inclusion** in the plan, solutions for **traffic mobility**, causes of **pollution**, and plans for **green areas**. Extensive questions posed by participants ranged from including citizens and relevant experts in solving these problems, to specific concerns such as parking, environmental caution, inspection and oversight, and comparative experiences such as similar projects in Ljubljana and Paris. Participants found the experts' inputs **informative and encouraging**, as they provided clarity and additional arguments. At the same time, it became clear that there are still many unknowns even in the expert community – as one participant stated: „Maybe not even the experts themselves have a complete insight into what is exactly being done“. This phase of the citizens' assembly further proved the **importance of transparent and deliberative discussions on matters of public interest**, as well as citizens' interest to be informed and included in decision making that affects their daily lives and wellbeing.

Following another round of discussions among citizens' groups, participants had the opportunity to address their concerns in a **conversation with decision makers**, of whom many unfortunately declined the invitation to join the assembly. The main topics included studies and key reasons for expanding the pedestrian zone, expected benefits, solutions for traffic mobility, and the funding for this project. Some questions remained unanswered, and were later sent to relevant decision makers, but the effects of this phase of the citizens' assembly were ambivalent. Following the initial enthusiasm about discussing this issue with relevant stakeholders, participants were now **discouraged** by the fact that the plan to expand the pedestrian zone is practically underway. This sentiment was expressed by a participant who stated: "I feel great, totally hopeless". At the same time, some participants stressed the **importance of participation**, adding that it is not every day that citizens have the chance to discuss so many ideas and concerns with experts, decision makers, and among themselves.

Following the concluding discussions, participants selected and then voted on **specific policy suggestions** for addressing the discussed

issues. The final voting results ranked the suggestions that citizens perceive as most relevant, with the top three being: (1) Preserving **trolleybuses** in the area as an environment-friendly transport solution, (2) conducting **simulations** in order to test the suggested solutions, and (3) introducing **micro pedestrian zones** with bordering streets open for traffic, rather than significantly expanding existing ones.

■ The Citizens' Assembly in Valjevo – The Problem of Air Pollution

The second citizens' assembly followed the same structure, and it was focused on the pressing issue of **air pollution in Valjevo**. Devastating statistics on air quality have launched this city in mainstream news as **one of the most polluted cities in Europe**, and citizens are yet to see a sustainable solution. In fact, authorities have not published a complete register of the biggest polluters, but the state-owned Krušik, a company operating in the defense industry, is recognized as the main culprit, along with heating plants, and individual fireplaces. Civil society organizations have become more active in alarming the public and calling for action in the last couple of years, and the local government developed a **proposal of measures** for reducing air pollution in Valjevo. Although certain measures were put into action, to date, there is no comprehensive report on their implementation.

Prior to the discussions with experts and decision makers, citizens shared concerns over their health, everyday lives, lack of transparency and relevant information, inertness of the authorities, as well as their recognition of CSO activities, and the overall urgent need to act together and find comprehensive solutions to this life-threatening issue. One of the participants summarized the gravity of the issue describing it as a "silent killer, if we consider the long run. But no one has ever considered the long run".

The **discussion with the experts** revolved around questions of specific health consequences, the main polluters, data on pollutants and solutions, the potential of green areas, steps that individuals can take for protection, and the need for sustainable heating models. Participants were left with **positive impressions** on this phase – although presented with alarming data, they appreciated the interest of experts, the provided advice, and explanations of unclear issues. What sparked **optimism** were concrete ideas for reducing

the existing harm, such as the use of biogas, methane, thermal waters, or heat pumps. On the other hand, the initial pessimism with regard to local government actions was only confirmed when almost all of the invited **decision makers** failed to show up, leaving numerous **questions unanswered**. Participants were curious about ways to keep informed, they had concrete expectations with regard to Krušik providing information and taking action, and they wondered whether anything at all was being planned or implemented. They were left **discouraged** by the fact that only two representatives were present (one of them an opposition member of the local parliament), but also willing to discuss concrete solutions, and the steps necessary for their implementation. In the last phase of the citizens' assembly, and after hours of extensive discussion, several **policy suggestions** were formulated and put to a vote. Participants voted for 10 suggestions, with the following three perceived as most important: 1) identifying the **major polluters** and switching institutions and businesses (including Krušik) to more environmentally-friendly solutions (**district heating**), 2) issuing **warnings** when air pollution is high and providing **information** on protection, and 3) introducing **subsidies** for households transferring to district heating and subsidizing heating prices.

■ A Demonstrated Need for Inclusive Deliberation, Accountability, and Further Efforts

Both citizens' assemblies demonstrated the growing need to **include citizens** in public discussions and decision making processes that directly affect their everyday lives. Air pollution, traffic mobility, and adjacent issues represent worrying examples of relevant topics that **remain untransparent and closed off** for civic participation. In the context of overall distancing from political processes, excluding citizens threatens to further deteriorate the outlook for democratic development in Serbia.

Conversely, when given a chance, citizens clearly show a **willingness to participate and contribute** to creating meaningful solutions based on informed opinions and inclusive discussions. The number and content of selected **policy suggestions** point to the potential of this participatory model to improve the quality of decision making processes in Serbia and foster the much needed inclusive **civic participation**. Participants' feedback shows additional benefits: **80%** reported that the entire process **deepened their understanding** of the problems, **85%** stated that the **experts' inputs** helped them gain a better understanding, while around **77%** said that they now better understood arguments they disagree with. When it comes to decision makers, however, **half of the participants** found their answers were not helpful, while many of the officials failed to respond to the invitation in the first place. Still, **80%** of all participants rated the process of forming policy suggestions and participation between **8 and 10**, pointing to a **major potential** of these initiatives. While citizens were encouraged by the chance to participate, they are only one side of the equation. Therefore, the formulated policy suggestions were forwarded to relevant decision makers, along with the questions that remained unanswered, in an attempt to promote **continuous inclusion** and foster government **accountability**. Having in mind the existing disengagement from politics, citizens need some confirmation that their **actions can bring results**, and that **authorities can be responsive**. The **scientific findings** and outcomes of this project point to a clear need for **further research** and implementation of deliberative models which aim to **bridge the gap** between citizens and processes that shape the quality of their lives. In order to enhance civic participation and **rebuild trust** in political processes, **future efforts** should focus on the prospect of **institutionalizing** these models, relying on comparative experiences that have proven effective in improving democratic practices and inspiring democratic development across the globe.

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