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By Radomir Aleksić, Luka Milovanović,
Mirjana Đorđević
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Civil society: a driver for democratisation from below in Serbia

Policy Recommendations

1. It is necessary to create mechanisms for better informing and educating citizens on the importance and power of civic activism and to encourage them to believe that change is indeed possible. That could be done, for instance, by exchanging best-practise examples of active advocacy that have produced results.
2. The concept of citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberative democracy like deliberative polls and citizen juries should be further developed and adapted to the situation and problems in Serbia.
3. It is important that civil society organisations actively work on the internal and external development of existing capacities as well as the creation of new capacities to assist marginalised groups, especially at the local level.

Abstract

This Policy Brief explores the concept of “democratisation from below” as a bottom-up approach to democracy, emphasising the active role of citizens and civil society organisations in promoting and sustaining democratic values. It highlights the various ways in which civil society organisations contribute to this process. The benefits of democratisation from below are increased citizen engagement, improved governance, more inclusive decision-making, and a stronger civil society.

This Policy Brief also provides specific examples from Serbia, showcasing the power of individual actions and initiatives to bring about positive change. It discusses how citizen education plays

a vital role in mobilising support for grassroots movements, as demonstrated by the successful campaign against lithium mining. Furthermore, it presents cases where individuals have used bottom-up democratic approaches to influence legislation, such as the “Marija’s Law” and “Tijana’s Law” initiatives. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of citizen assemblies and the role of civil society organisations in empowering marginalised groups.

Overall, this Policy Brief emphasises the significance of citizen participation, education, and civil society engagement in promoting democracy and achieving social change.



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Introduction

The concept of “democratisation from below” refers to a bottom-up approach to democratisation where citizens take an active role in promoting democracy rather than relying on leaders or elites to impose it from the top down. This process typically involves grassroots movements and civil society organisations that seek to empower marginalised communities and hold political entities accountable.

Civil society organisations provide a platform for citizens to voice their opinions, demands, and grievances. These organisations, including non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, and community-based organisations, can serve as intermediaries between the state and citizens and provide opportunities for people to participate in decision-making processes.

Some of the ways that civil society organisations can contribute to democratisation from below include:

- Education: Civil society organisations can educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens and help them understand political processes.
- Advocating for change: These organisations can push for reforms by highlighting issues such as corruption, human rights abuses, and the unequal distribution of resources.
- Mobilisation: They can motivate citizens to participate in democratic processes, such as elections, protests, and demonstrations.
- Providing a voice for marginalised groups: Civil society organisations can ensure that marginalised groups are included in the democratic process and their voices are heard.

There are many benefits to this approach, such as:

- Increased citizen engagement: Democratisation from below empowers citizens to participate in the political process. It encourages individuals to be informed, voice their opinions, and take part in decision-making. This leads to a more active and engaged citizenry, fostering a sense of ownership over democratic processes.
- Improved governance: By holding leaders accountable and promoting transparency, democratisation from below can lead to better governance and reduced corruption. When citizens are actively involved and demand accountability, it creates pressure for better governance and more responsible actions from political entities.



- More inclusive decision-making: Bottom-up democratisation processes can ensure that marginalised groups are included in the political process. By empowering these groups and providing them with a platform to express their concerns and interests, it helps to address systemic inequalities and promote equal representation and participation.
- Stronger civil society: Democratisation from below strengthens civil society organisations, such as non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, and community-based organisations. These organisations play a crucial role in promoting democratic values, protecting human rights, and advocating for social change. A vibrant and active civil society is essential for the functioning of democracy as it provides checks and balances against power.

In Serbia, civil society actors are responsible for all these benefits, usually throughout the various different projects they are implementing, and there are many examples of good practise. Whether it is an initiative undertaken to modify specific sections or articles of laws or even entire legal frameworks, as exemplified by Tijana's and Marija's Laws, or a citizen-driven endeavour like the "Kreni-Promeni" movement aimed at averting lithium mining in Serbia. This can be explored through each of the functions of civil society previously mentioned.

Citizen education: a first step towards achieving positive change

If the main purpose of civil society is to keep the government honest, its fundamental function is to keep citizens informed about the processes that they themselves don't have time or expertise to follow. This kind of interaction with the public has the lowest levels of citizen engagement, where they are mostly passive recipients of information, but on the other hand, it has the biggest reach.

For grassroots movements to have any success in mobilising enough support for their cause, the first step is to inform and educate citizens on the issues they are trying to address. This is especially important when the subject is highly complex and technical, so even if citizens wanted to engage, they were reliant on activists to help them better understand the problem. One such problem in Serbia is lithium mining, an industry highly harmful to the environment. Recognising the threat to the environment, a citizen initiative called "Kreni-promeni" ("Go-change") started a public campaign, spreading information about the harmful nature of mining practises.

For grassroots movements to have any success in mobilising enough support for their cause, the first step is to inform and educate citizens on the issues they are trying to address.

At the outset of the campaign, the movement initiated the publication of a petition calling for the cessation of the Jadar project in Serbia, while providing an elucidation of the detrimental ramifications of lithium mining on the environment in the vicinity. The impact of this mining extends not only to the region proximate to the river but also to the neighbouring country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly affecting the Drina river area. Furthermore, it engenders air pollution and poses a significant threat to various forms of life. The treatment involving the use of aggressive acids results in the generation of toxic gases capable of dispersing across a radius exceeding ten kilometres, thereby causing erosion of the skin and respiratory afflictions in both humans and animals. Additionally, the proposed creation of 700 new jobs pales in



comparison to the 19,000 individuals reliant on agriculture who would be uprooted for the sake of mining operations.

The campaign had much more far-reaching consequences, as the petition was just preparation for the protest against the government. The most important consequence is that the government's U-turn came after weeks of protests against the Jadar project in the capital, Belgrade, and swathes of smaller towns across the country over the environmental and health impact of the project. But it is that first step of educating the citizens about the nature of the problem that is important here, as a large part of Serbia's population now understands why this issue is crucial, which was the necessary step towards mobilising enough support to organise successful demonstrations.

Changes are possible, even if you are just an individual

There are few examples of how an individual in Serbia can use "bottom-up" democratic approaches to fulfil its objectives and ambitions. Unfortunately, sometimes the background has been a tragedy that affected those individuals, who were ambitious and motivated to prevent them from occurring ever again. It started with Slobodan Jovanović, who drafted a law on stricter measures against paedophiles after a tragic event in his family. A law is commonly known as "Marija's Law" after his late daughter and was officially adopted by the National Parliament in 2013. The law foresees that the criminal offences of paedophilia and rape of minors cannot be statute-barred.

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Unfortunately, the same horror happened to Igor Jurić, after which he founded the "Tijana Jurić Foundation", named after his late daughter. The desire of parents not to see this happen to another child, shortly after Tijana's tragic death, turned into an initiative to amend the Law on Police as part of the search for missing children. Less than a month later, in August 2014, professors of the Faculty of Law in Belgrade wrote a proposal to amend Article 72 of the Law on Police, which prescribes the search time for children and minors. In the same month, Tijana's father, Igor Jurić, officially submitted an initiative to change that article. Less than a year later, after peaceful protests in the cities and tens of thousands of printed banners and messages from citizens asking "Why was Tijana's law not adopted?" the members of the National Assembly of Serbia adopted the proposal to amend the law at the session held on 16 July 2015. The amended article was symbolically named "Tijana's Law".

Shortly before adopting the law, Igor Jurić founded the "Tijana Jurić Foundation". The foundation was established with the aim of improving children's safety through preventive action and education. In order to have a broader network and a bigger impact, the Foundation became part of the "Center for Missing and Exploited Children", with the goal of protecting and promoting children's rights and improving their safety and security. The centre is a regional initiative, with a branch office in Croatia, but it is planned to expand and open a branch in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. This example clearly shows the potential spill over effects that activism can have.

There are many other initiatives that prove that people are using all legislative frameworks to make an impact in their society, like the initiative "Right to live Meri", which aims at establishing a Law on Ambulance in Serbia, or the initiative "Mame su zakon" (Eng. *Moms are Law*), which is also trying to address the issues in society by handing over draft laws to the National Parliament. These initiatives show how to use



all the tools you have to make an impact on society “from the bottom-up”. In addition to these initiatives by individuals (alone or through some organisation), which are addressing specific issues, there are examples in Serbia of how civil society organisations can have an impact on the benefit of marginalised groups, such as the Roma community, which will be explained later in the article.

Citizens decide: What are citizen assemblies?

Under the influence of various factors, a democratic deficit often occurs, such as voter apathy, limited access to information, media censorship (or concentration of media ownership), political corruption, economic inequality, and more. In Serbia, there has been a decline in parliamentary effectiveness and formal citizen participation. It has weakened democratic processes and hindered citizen engagement. This erosion could be a result of factors such as limited opposition influence, reduced transparency, or legislative changes that concentrate power in the executive branch.

In Serbia, there has been a decline in parliamentary effectiveness and formal citizen participation.

The ruling party in Serbia has become overwhelmingly dominant. It raised concerns about democratic pluralism and the balance of power. When a single party gains a significant majority, it can limit political competition, stifle dissent, and consolidate power. This concentration of power often leads to informal decision-making structures, where key decisions are made outside of formal institutions, potentially bypassing checks and balances and weakening democratic governance.

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One of the ways to reduce this democratic deficit is through citizen assemblies. Robert Dahl defined “citizen assembly” as “an assembly of citizens, demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making”.¹ The most common level at which these assemblies operate is municipal or local. However, it is common to see them organised at the regional and national levels of decision-making.

Citizen assemblies can be an effective mechanism for involving citizens in democratic processes. In order to test this model in Serbia, two such assemblies were organised in Belgrade and Valjevo, where urban solutions and policies to solve the problem of polluted air were discussed. By taking part, citizens gain the ability to contribute to the formulation of policy recommendations in the public interest through an open dialogue. Their goal is to rebuild faith in political institutions and processes.

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In this way, civil assemblies are actually bodies that aim to involve citizens in discussions on issues of public importance. In practise, this means that citizens get the opportunity to be well informed and to participate in discussions with other citizens, as well as with experts and decision-makers, in order to create a valuable solution to

1 Oliver Escobar and Stephen Elstub, “Forms of mini-publics”, New Democracy 2017, p. 3.



the problem that is being deliberated upon. They represent the citizens' reaction to the problem of modern democracies and democratic practises, in which they are not sufficiently involved in the process of formulating and making political decisions that affect their lives.

The advantages of such citizen involvement are the awakening of interest, their understanding of the problem, and a transparent and inclusive decision-making process.

Marginalised groups: the help of civil society organisations

There are plenty of good practise examples of how civil society organisations can have an impact on improving the position of marginalised groups in a society, and one example is the joint European Union and Council of Europe ROMACTED programme, whose methodology is specifically based on a "democratisation from below" approach connecting marginalised groups and decision-makers on the local level. Its main goal is to foster the political will and sustained policy engagement of local authorities to enhance democratic local governance, build up capacity, and stimulate the empowerment of local Roma communities to contribute to the design, implementation, and monitoring of plans and projects concerning them. ROMACTED is a response to the recognised need for a more systematic approach to promoting the processes of community change and the engagement of local stakeholders in constructive dialogue. The programme invests in a multi-annual process involving different stakeholders at the local level.²

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The key objectives of the programme include:

- Enhancing political determination and promoting local development: This will be accomplished by providing capacity-building support to local authorities, enabling them to effectively contribute to local plans and projects. Additionally, the programme seeks to encourage the active involvement of Roma citizens in these initiatives.
- Empowering Roma citizens: The programme aims to empower individuals within the Roma community by providing them with the necessary preparation, training, and skill-building opportunities. This empowerment will enable Roma citizens to exercise their basic rights, enhance their capacities and skills, and effectively participate in community problem-solving processes.
- Strengthening institutional commitment and capacity: The programme strives to improve and expand the commitment, knowledge, and skills of public institutions involved in Roma inclusion efforts. By promoting the concepts of good

2 [ROMACTED HANDBOOK](#) - A manual development of local resources, joint action and empowerment of Roma communities, 2019, p. 7 (Accessed on 6 February 2023).



governance, the programme aims to enhance the institutions' ability to work towards Roma inclusion and effectively address the needs of the community.³

In summary, the ROMACTED Programme seeks to foster collaboration and inclusivity through a participatory working cycle. Its objectives include strengthening political will, supporting local development through capacity building, empowering individuals and communities within the Roma population, and enhancing the commitment and effectiveness of institutions in promoting Roma inclusion.

3 Ibid, p. 8.



About the authors

Radomir Aleksić, Programme Assistant, Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

Contact: rleksic@bfpe.org

Luka Milovanović, Programme Assistant, Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

Contact: lmilovanovic@bfpe.org

Mirjana Đorđević, Programme Assistant, Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society

Contact: mdjordjevic@bfpe.org

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Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE)
Rotenhausgasse 6/8-9
A-1090 Vienna
Austria

Secretary General: Paul Schmidt

Responsible: Susan Milford-Faber, Vedran Džihic

Tel: +43 1 533 4999

E-Mail: policybriefs@oegfe.at

Website: [ÖGfE Policy Briefs](#)

Project Website: [WB2EU](#)