PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES: TWO CASE STUDIES FROM SERBIA

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ABSTRACT: Based on citizens’ critical stance towards government decisions, the concept of participation is increasingly emerging in urban discourse. Its role is to facilitate communication between citizens and stakeholders and enable collective decision-making at both the local and state levels. An expectation is that digital technologies will reestablish a connection between the two sides, thereby strengthening trust in the planning process. However, citizen responses differ across various cases. In the context of Novi Sad, citizen engagement appears weak, contrasting with their current dissatisfaction with city affairs. On the other hand, the citizens of Bor are content with their involvement in decisions that are not so significant. Consequently, this paper aims to explore the reasons behind the varying relationships between citizens and authorities in these distinct environments. It seeks to understand why, when given the opportunity to participate, citizen engagement dwindles in larger cities, leading to increased mistrust in institutions, while people in smaller cities recognize the importance of even small steps in collective action for the future development of their communities. In addition to examining the relationships between stakeholders and past urban development patterns in Serbia, the paper addresses the question of the public interest in the service of city development, along with the policies and reviews that offer guidelines for the successful implementation of participatory processes.

KEY WORDS: Citizens, public interest, distrust, local government, stakeholders, urban development
Introduction

Social activism, as a fundamental expression of the citizen’s freedom, is one of the most prevalent topics today and represents a consequence of the natural course of civilization, which should have universally enabled democratic functioning of society by now. As such a phenomenon in the fields of politics, economics, and human rights is somewhat utopian, there is a constant effort by society to express its opinions and beliefs, placing its basic right – to the space in which they live – above all else.

Park spoke of this as an ongoing attempt by humans to reshape their environment according to their own judgment and desire. If the city is the world that man has created, it is the world in which he is now sentenced to live (Park 1967), which means there are indirect consequences of human (dis)engagement in urban processes and city planning, and any lack of interest in formative periods can have self-destructive effects in the future.

Participatory concepts in urban planning are gaining increasing importance worldwide. However, despite the global recognition of participatory process as a crucial step in achieving the common interests of citizens and authorities, we witness the absence of adequate practices that demonstrate its effectiveness. In the larger part of Serbia, the lack of trust in institutions is a common issue and is increasingly discussed in non-academic circles. Citizens attempt to express their dissatisfaction through the media and on the streets, but the broader public remains deprived of a true picture of reality.

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between citizens and stakeholders, as well as to define the issues related to distrust and the credibility of the tools provided to citizens for their involvement in decision-making. Are participatory processes merely a formal recognition of residents’ rights to define the agenda for the development of the physical (and indirectly, the social) environment in which they live? Is the method itself, as implemented in Serbia, sufficiently effective, or does it pose a social paradox by creating rivalry among stakeholders (active participants)? Through examples of participatory processes at the local government level and a comparative analysis of these processes in two cities in Serbia, the position of participants will be clarified, as well as the pre-existing attitudes of the population regarding the effectiveness of participation. By studying the implementation of participation methods and many influencing factors, it will be determined to what extent and in what ways these processes differ between larger and smaller cities in a country that has recently undergone a transition from socialism to a democratic society. Drawing upon current policies, reviews and theories that contain guidelines for successful implementation, key steps toward achieving the public interest will be explained.
There are different terms used to refer to citizen involvement in public decisions: citizen engagement, public participation, civic participation, etc. When defining participation, the OECD recommendation refers to stakeholders, grouping together both citizens and any interested and/or affected party (OECD 2022).

Some researches contend that participatory processes had already gained significant prominence, alongside terms like “sustainability” and other popular development phrases, by the mid-1980s (Maričić et al. 2018). In Serbia, however, this practice is still in its infancy. The term “participation” is often associated with the question of public interest, as this process is expected to be one of the mechanisms for its realization. However, there is a challenge when it comes to defining and understanding public interest in Serbia, as well as in most Eastern European countries, both during the socialist era and afterward, during the transition and the subsequent establishment of democracy. What is common to all post-socialist countries is urban planning practices with uncertain outcomes, accompanied by specific “rules of the game”. The transition period that followed the collapse of socialist states brought with it a limited understanding of these concepts, highlighting the inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy of the social, political and economic state of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and Serbia (Đokić and Graovac 2022). Transition, therefore, “bridged” certain stages in society’s maturation through the process of modernization. Additionally, interest in culture became diluted, and the identity formed and maintained through cultural values became inert.

The concept of public interest can be broadly viewed in two ways: strong and weak. The strong version of public interest is hierarchically placed above individual interests, acknowledging their differences while overriding them based on moral superiority. Accordingly, public interest is the general interest of society as a whole, attributed to the public, understood as a distinct entity. On the other hand, the weak version represents personal, individual interests recognised as the only legitimate ones, and public interest is formulated in each specific case as their result, achieved through public agreement (Hejvud 2004).

In Serbia, planners are legally obliged to articulate public interest in the urban space through spatial and urban plans. This public interest should emerge from a social consensus and be based on adopted values and principles set forth in strategic plans and legal frameworks, including constitutional provisions (Đokić and Graovac 2022). When it comes to conceiving specific spatial interventions, the role of planners becomes highly sensitive because they are obligated to implement strategic decisions
and plans and promote participatory processes through the collaborative involvement of institutions and stakeholders. In this process, conflicts of interest often arise when planners are reluctant to involve citizens in defining the starting points. This is mainly done even for larger plans with dominating areas of public use (even those of the higher importance), when the involvement of the citizens is very random and in most cases limited to conducting the surveys. Limiting the participation of citizens to a single activity and a single technique in this step of decision-making can hardly lead to a legitimate decision and consensus-building (Kostreš 2019). As a result of such decisions, many actions taken by institutions do not receive public approval, even though all legal procedures have been followed. These decisions are the very cause of a growing disparity in interests, which in turn fosters a deepening distrust in institutions.

**City of Novi Sad – Citizen Engagement via the Participatory Platform**

Novi Sad serves as the capital of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and is the second-largest city in the Republic of Serbia. With a population of 368,967 residents, it ranks as the second-largest university city in Serbia, boasting 14 Faculties at the University of Novi Sad (Grad Novi Sad 2010). In 2021, Novi Sad also earned the title European Capital of Culture, during which a significant number of cultural events, including concerts, exhibitions, and other similar activities, were organised.

Taking these data into account, it becomes evident that Novi Sad is on a level playing field with other European cities. In 2021, an online participatory platform named “Tvoj Grad“ (“Your City”) was launched. When this platform was introduced to the public, it seemed like the beginning of a new practice that, following the example of European and global local authorities, encourages joint decision-making that serves the local community. The portal states that it is the “first platform of its kind in the region“, so expectations were high. As an introductory statement, there is an explanation of why it is important to participate in the planning processes, as a kind of encouragement for citizens to get involved in determining priorities in the allocation of the city budget (Tvoj Grad 2021).

Currently, there are 5,290 registered participants on the platform (less than 1.5 % of the total population of Novi Sad) actively engaging in discussions (Tvoj Grad 2021). Therefore, the response rate is low, and it can be observed that project proposals exclusively concern municipal issues and micro-level solutions, such as the purchase of new waste containers, tankers, hydrant networks, as well as the renovation of open-air swimming pools, community centre buildings, the improvement of shared courtyards, etc. (Tvoj Grad 2021).
City of Bor – Public Involvement in a Survey

The second city analyzed in this paper is Bor, a small town in eastern Serbia with a population of 41,280 residents (Grad Bor 2019). In 2019, Bor, along with 44 other municipalities and cities in Serbia, participated in the “Property Tax Reform” Programme, which aimed to support local tax administrations in increasing property tax collection. In this initiative, Bor ranked fifth among the participating municipalities. As a result, the city received financial resources from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with direct involvement from Bor’s residents in the allocation process (Grad Bor 2019).

By participating in a survey conducted as part of the programme, citizens had the opportunity to directly influence how the funds collected from property taxes would be used. In the survey, 212 citizens chose from a list of areas (healthcare, industry, education, etc.), which one they considered most in need (Grad Bor 2019). Subsequently, they were given the chance, through a second survey, to make decisions regarding the final allocation of funds. Since healthcare was identified as the area in greatest need, the decision was made to purchase an ultrasound machine for the women’s healthcare department at the Bor Health Center (Grad Bor 2019).

Results and Discussion

Looking at the two previously described examples side by side, raises the question of what factors influence citizens’ engagement when it comes to decision-making. In the case of Novi Sad, it is evident that the level of contribution is low, despite the many challenges the local community has faced over the years. The real issues revolve around ongoing and intensive urbanisation that is not being properly managed, resulting in infrastructure, communal and environmental problems. Consequently, the discussions initiated on the “Tvoj Grad” Platform often do not address the core issues that citizens would be keen to participate in. In a larger and more diverse environment like Novi Sad, there is greater inertia and less desire for change. Factors like lack of time, personal issues, the fast pace of life and distrust in institutions due to previous negative experiences contribute to the lower level of citizen engagement in decision-making. As mentioned earlier, there is a certain level of resentment towards the system, which results in even small problems remaining unresolved.

On the other hand, the citizens of Bor have had positive experiences in their interactions with the authorities, which resulted in their requests being fulfilled and a new ultrasound machine being purchased. Although the participation rate in the survey was also low in this case, the stakeholders involved were satisfied and the goal has been achieved. The
likely reason for this lies in the necessity of acquiring medical equipment, which needs to be affordable, for even the most vulnerable segments of the population. Moreover, in a small community like Bor, there is greater transparency, people know each other, and the process behind every agreement is well-known. Citizens feel that they are significant and they are aware that even small decisions lead to specific outcomes. This was a right-minded example in improving the capacity of municipalities to collect property tax, which should not be considered as a step in meeting formal requirements in a transitional country, but as an essential contribution that shows that it is possible to use tax revenue to fund citizens’ priorities in accordance with good governance principles (Vračarić et al. 2022).

Conclusions from some examples in developed countries, such as Van Empel’s, in which he presented four key steps essential for increasing the effectiveness of public participation (Empel 2008), can serve as a good basis for reconsidering the implementation of participatory processes in cities in Serbia. According to Empel, it is primarily necessary to: 1. Identify stakeholders and find motivation for their participation; 2. Identify conflicts of interest among different participants in the process (are there conflicts of interest, and are they based on personal interests?); 3. Evaluate participants’ satisfaction levels regarding their objectives (are they satisfied with the process, either through recognising their own contributions or respecting other perspectives/arguments?); 4. Assess the conditions set for the participation process (is the community well-informed and able to freely address (independent) expert opinion?).

In Serbia, there is a popular saying „the wolves are full, but the sheep are in number”, which signifies an outcome in which both sides are satisfied (a win-win situation in English). Such an approach should be used as a model for implementing participatory processes in urban planning, where by introducing a field for open citizen suggestions, each participant’s proposal would compete to be rewarded in a certain way, and the City would receive free, genuine suggestions adapted to the real needs of the citizens. This would motivate citizens to participate more actively and, over time, it might transition from small issues like communal problems to major investment questions. In the ongoing transition, not yet complete, most people in larger cities in Serbia, who are sceptical and disappointed, may not be fully aware of their role and are willing to act only when personally threatened or motivated through rewards.

Conclusions

Although it is not the same sphere of engagement in these two cases, there is a noticeable difference in the communities’ reactions and the results of the participatory processes. This leads to thinking about changing the approach to the participatory process to encourage citizens to become more actively involved. The example of Bor, a small commu-
nity, serves as a good indicator that when citizens have motivation and a genuine (often necessary) need, decisions are made very easily, and they are satisfied with the outcome. However, when it comes to decisions with outcomes that are not immediately visible, or visible only in the near future (like the example of Novi Sad), citizens are not motivated to make a change. Therefore, in order to alter the current social, economic, and cultural situation in Serbia, systemic solutions are needed that will encourage citizens to get involved without creating additional conflicts with other stakeholders.

Active and rewarded participation of community members would not only cultivate trust but would also elevate participation rates and support data precision. Incorporating citizens in direct planning commonly results in a feeling of ownership of the research findings. This sense of ownership can play a crucial role in the effective execution of recommendations by decision-makers, as the community is more inclined to endorse and back initiatives they have actively contributed to shaping.

Footnotes

[1] The term is used in a broader context, signifying “an inhabitant of a particular place”. This can encompass a village, town, city, region, state, or country, depending on the context. It does not carry the more narrow connotation of “a legally recognised citizen of a state”. In this broader interpretation, it is synonymous with individuals or people (OECD 2022).

[2] The term “process” is deliberately used because public participation is indeed a process, lengthy and consisting of multiple phases, and it does not occur in a single moment.

[3] Any interested and/or affected party, including institutions and organisations, whether governmental or non-governmental, from civil society, academia, the media, or the private sector (OECD 2022).

[4] According to the Law on Planning and Construction, that regulates the conditions and modalities of spatial and urban planning and development in the Republic of Serbia, public participation is one of the principles of the development and use of space (Kostreš 2019).


[8] The research was conducted as part of The Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy (GCUDS) project in Christchurch City, New Zealand.
Recently, the Serbian government launched a campaign under the slogan “Take the receipt and win” with the aim of combating the informal economy. The campaign works by making every scanned receipt a potentially winning one, with the grand prize – an apartment. Despite the entire process being digitised and initially unfamiliar to a large number of citizens, the response from the people has become incredibly positive in a short period of time (Uzmi račun 2023).

References


