

DELIBERATION AMID DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: INSIGHTS FROM CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Stefan SURLIĆ¹, Ljiljana KOLARSKI²

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) in fostering deliberative democracy and resisting authoritarian tendencies in the Western Balkans, a region facing significant democratic backsliding. Analysing three assemblies held in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro between October 2023 and February 2024, with 133 participants, the study investigates citizens' willingness to participate and their satisfaction with deliberations on critical societal issues. While CAs remain primarily organised by civil society organisations and face limited institutional support, they have demonstrated significant potential to enhance citizen participation and bridge societal divides. The findings reveal high levels of citizen engagement, with participants articulating perspectives that often challenge dominant political narratives. Notable examples include fostering inter-ethnic dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina and producing actionable recommendations on disinformation in Serbia. However, CAs' influence on formal policymaking is constrained by entrenched political structures, resistance from elites, and funding uncertainties. Despite these challenges, CAs serve as vital platforms for deliberation, offering a corrective to the deficits of traditional governance in hybrid regimes. This study highlights the transformative potential of CAs in building democratic resilience, emphasising their role in advancing deliberative practices and challenging authoritarian norms in fragile political contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:
3.1.2025

Revised:
16.4.2025

Accepted:
2.5.2025

KEYWORDS

Citizens' assemblies;
deliberative
democracy;
deliberation;
Western Balkans.

Cite this article as: Surlić, Stefan, and Ljiljana Kolarski. 2025. "Deliberation Amid Democratic Backsliding: Insights from Citizens' Assemblies in the Western Balkans". *The Review of International Affairs* LXXVI (1194): 239–264. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_ria.2025.76.1194.4

¹ Assistant Professor, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: stefan.surlic@fpm.bg.ac.rs, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4174-9889>.

² PhD candidate, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: ljiljana.kolarski11@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1370-5387>.

Introduction

In an era marked by the worldwide resurgence of illiberalism and democratic erosion, the concept of Citizens' Assemblies emerges as a beacon of hope for fostering deliberative democracy and safeguarding against authoritarian tendencies. Nowhere is that more relevant than in the Western Balkans, a region grappling with significant challenges to its democratic institutions amidst shifts towards illiberal governance. This paper delves into the role of Citizens' Assemblies in supporting democracy-building efforts, with a particular focus on their application and impact within the context of the Western Balkans.

Citizens' Assemblies in the region are a relatively recent phenomenon, primarily initiated and facilitated by non-governmental organisations and supported by international institutions. Their implementation, starting in Serbia in 2020 and extending to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, has demonstrated a growing interest in deliberative democratic practices. However, their influence on formal decision-making processes remains limited, often hindered by resistance from entrenched political structures and a lack of institutional support. Despite these limitations, the emergence of Citizens' Assemblies highlights a promising deliberative culture in a region characterised by democratic backsliding, offering a platform for inclusive dialogue and alternative perspectives.

The primary objective of this paper is to critically examine how Citizens' Assemblies function as a mechanism for promoting deliberative democracy and resisting illiberalism in the Western Balkans. In pursuit of this objective, the research question driving this study is articulated as follows: Why do citizens' assemblies have an impact through their implementation even in hybrid regimes or regimes where authoritarian tendencies are strengthening? Methodologically, this paper adopts a qualitative research approach, utilising a literature review, case study analysis, and empirical evidence to elucidate the efficacy and implications of Citizens' Assemblies within the three Western Balkans countries.

The findings reveal significant insights through an examination of three Citizens' Assemblies convened in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro from October 2023 to February 2024, involving 133 citizens from diverse backgrounds (European Partnership for Democracy n.d.). Despite their limited policy influence, these assemblies showcase citizens' eagerness to engage in deliberative democracy and their capacity to address sensitive societal issues. Notably, participants often articulated perspectives diverging from dominant political narratives, demonstrating the potential of Citizens' Assemblies to challenge established norms and introduce alternative viewpoints.

By focusing on the applicability and effectiveness of Citizens' Assemblies in contexts marked by democratic backsliding, this research underscores their potential to foster a more robust and inclusive democratic ethos. While challenges persist, the experiences of Citizens' Assemblies in the Western Balkans highlight their role in cultivating deliberative practices and mitigating the threats posed by authoritarianism. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on contemporary illiberal practices, emphasising the importance of citizen participation in advancing democracy within the region and beyond.

The advent of Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) in the Western Balkans represents a relatively recent but significant development in democratic practices within the region. The first of these assemblies emerged in 2020 in Serbia, specifically in the cities of Belgrade and Valjevo, as part of the European project titled "Active Citizenship: Promoting and Advancing Innovative Democratic Practices in the Western Balkans", coordinated by the Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society (Aleksić 2020). These assemblies convened 45 randomly selected citizens to deliberate on pressing local issues, including the expansion of pedestrian zones in Belgrade's city centre and addressing the acute air pollution in Valjevo. Unique to these initial efforts was their online format, a necessary adaptation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, marking a novel approach to democratic engagement in the region.

In 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina hosted its first citizens' assembly in the city of Mostar, organised by the Council of Europe and the City of Mostar (GradiMO n.d.). Bringing together 48 citizens from diverse ethnic groups, the assembly focused on the long-standing challenge of improving local governance in a deeply divided city. The Mostar CA exemplified the capacity of these assemblies to foster inclusive dialogue across ethnic lines, offering recommendations that emphasised social cohesion and governance reforms.

The same year witnessed the first citizens' assembly in Montenegro, held in the capital city of Podgorica with support from the European Parliament and the Parliament of Montenegro (Meija 2023). This assembly gathered 53 citizens to deliberate on the pervasive issue of corruption, further demonstrating the region's growing embrace of deliberative democratic practices. In Serbia, the evolution of CAs continued with a 2023 assembly organised as part of a regional project funded by the European Union and led by the European Partnership for Democracy (European Partnership for Democracy n.d.). This assembly focused on combating disinformation and brought together 40 citizens representing a diverse cross-section of society, selected based on criteria such as age, gender, region, and education level. Throughout the assembly, participants developed twelve recommendations aimed at improving media literacy, promoting ethical journalism, and increasing transparency in media ownership.

These initial citizens' assemblies represent pivotal moments in advancing participatory governance across the Western Balkans. While these assemblies have demonstrated the potential of CAs to foster democratic engagement and inclusive decision-making, significant challenges remain. Securing sustainable funding is a pressing concern, as it threatens the long-term viability of these initiatives. Additionally, the absence of formal decision-making power and resistance from entrenched political structures often hinders the full implementation of the recommendations. Despite these obstacles, the ongoing experiences of CAs across the region underscore their capacity to enhance democratic practices and contribute to the broader evolution of participatory governance. However, the limited recognition and data on CAs within these contexts highlight that much work remains to solidify their role as effective tools for citizen engagement in the Western Balkans.

Despite the challenges, these countries are at a critical juncture where democratic innovations could foster greater participation, bridge societal divides, and demonstrate that even amidst authoritarian tendencies, democratic initiatives persist, with citizens willing to engage on critical societal issues. By focusing on these nations, this research aims to provide insights into how CAs can challenge prevailing assumptions about widespread apathy, showing that individuals are, in fact, prepared to participate in discussions on politically significant topics. Ultimately, this contributes to a broader theoretical understanding of how deliberative democracy can be sustained in fragile democratic contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Conceptual Foundations of Citizens' Assemblies

Robert Dahl (1989) first introduced the concept of mini-publics in 1989, proposing that a small, demographically representative group of citizens could come together to learn about and deliberate on public issues, thereby influencing decision-making. This idea, grounded in democratic principles and social science, has since evolved into various participatory innovations worldwide—including citizens' juries, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, and citizens' assemblies—each tailored to address diverse topics from electoral reform to complex social challenges, including contemporary issues such as climate change (Elstub 2014; Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014; Chwalisz 2017).

In response to the myriads of challenges democracy has faced in recent decades, a pressing need for the development of innovative democratic mechanisms has emerged. Innovative democratic mechanisms, often referred to as "democratic innovation", are specifically developed to enhance and expand citizen participation in the political decision-making process (Smith 2009, 5).

Among all the above-mentioned forms, citizens' assemblies represent the most recent iteration and potentially the most radical and democratically robust of all the mini-public types developed to date (Escobar and Elstub 2017, 3). These assemblies represent an institutionalised mechanism that provides citizens with the space to participate in an open discussion with their fellow citizens on a certain topic (Electoral Reform Society 2019, 1). The more comprehensive definition of citizens' assemblies is that they constitute a deliberative forum wherein a stratified sample of individuals, selected through (random) sampling techniques, convene to engage in structured dialogue and collective decision-making processes concerning matters of societal import while at the same time making conclusions and recommendations directed to the decision-makers.

Despite the diversity of viewpoints on how mini-publics should be designed, as they are combined with the varied political, cultural, and organisational contexts in which they operate, the assumption is that a one-size-fits-all standard can exist along with distinct integrity challenges (Parry, Curato, and Dryzek 2024). The process unfolds in three phases: first, participants familiarise themselves with the issues over several weekends; next, randomly selected citizens hold local public hearings to gather opinions; finally, they deliberate on the evidence, form a final proposal, and vote on the outcome (Elstub and Escobar 2017).

The design of a citizens' assembly should be structured around fundamental principles that ensure its effectiveness and legitimacy. These core principles include representative inclusion, deliberative process, and systemic efficacy (Merkel, Milačić, and Schafer 2021, 11). The deliberative process—facilitated by independent experts—fosters critical reflection, informed decision-making, and mutual respect among participants. As highlighted by Paulis and Pospieszna (2024), these assemblies can act as “learning schools for democracy”, enhancing political knowledge, civic efficacy, and interest, even in environments marked by democratic backsliding.

In the case of mini-publics or citizen assemblies, the question of legitimacy is most frequently raised regarding their capacity to engage in deliberation and make decisions on specific issues. Most often, the legitimacy of mini-publics depends on micro-level design choices—such as participant recruitment, modes of engagement, and the formulation of recommendations—which collectively influence both input and throughput legitimacy (Harris 2019). Conventional arguments for descriptive representation, which emphasise the democratic legitimacy of non-elected participants, fail to account for its crucial function in fostering diverse interactions that facilitate the formation of well-considered and interpretative opinions within the deliberative process (Khoban 2021). “In many respects, the key point of mini-publics is precisely to be different from other elements of the political system—not to present a challenge to other

processes and institutions, but to help the overall system to function better” (Pow 2023, 27).

Hybrid regimes, characterised by a combination of democratic and authoritarian elements, often display a facade of electoral processes while subverting institutional checks and balances. In such contexts, traditional representative systems fail to inspire citizen trust or engagement, exacerbating democratic disenchantment (He and Warren 2011; Fiket, Ilić, and Pudar Draško 2022). Moreover, liberal democracies have fallen into an intense circle in which citizenship feels insufficiently respected, causing it to withdraw from the public sphere, which, in turn, produces a weakened democracy in which citizenship is increasingly unrecognised (Fiket 2019, 9).

Deliberative democracy has emerged as a significant theoretical response to these challenges. It emphasises reasoned discussion, inclusivity, and collective decision-making, offering mechanisms such as citizens’ assemblies to bridge gaps between governance and citizen engagement (Bohman 1998, 401). By prioritising public discourse among free and equal citizens, deliberative democracy addresses the perceived deficits of electoral systems and enhances legitimacy through rational consensus. However, its success depends heavily on the socio-political context, particularly in hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions are frequently co-opted (Fiket and Đorđević 2022).

Additionally, addressing the global decline in trust and engagement with conventional processes like elections necessitates the development of a system of citizens’ assemblies, which presents significant potential for enhancing citizens’ participation (Venter 2023). Based on the example of Poland, Paulis and Pospieszna (2024) highlight that deliberative mini-publics can shape citizens’ perceptions in a polarised political environment. Especially in the case of Ireland, research findings indicate that citizens who are “dissatisfied” and believe that things are not going well are more likely to participate in citizens’ assemblies. However, that does not necessarily mean they view CAs as the only means of change (Walsh and Elkind 2021). Jain and Dienel (2024) argue that citizens’ assemblies are indispensable in urgent times and that their ad-hoc use requires CAs to become an integral part of the political decision-making system before a crisis arises.

Thus, the shift towards exploring a more active citizen engagement in democratic processes is imperative for several reasons. Firstly, traditional electoral systems, while fundamental to democratic governance, may fall short of adequately representing the diverse interests and perspectives within society, particularly in contexts marked by polarisation and disenchantment with political institutions. Secondly, active citizen engagement fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the populace, reinforcing the legitimacy

of democratic governance structures and enhancing social cohesion. Moreover, by promoting dialogue and deliberation among citizens, innovative democratic mechanisms have the potential to generate more inclusive and effective policy outcomes, thereby addressing pressing societal challenges and strengthening the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of authoritarian threats.

Contextual Analysis: Hybrid Regimes in the Western Balkans and Deliberation

The global struggle to transition from post-socialist systems to democratic governance has been fraught with complexities, particularly in regions like the Western Balkans. These transitions often carry the weight of hybrid regimes, the erosion of civic trust, and authoritarian tendencies, presenting significant barriers to democratic consolidation. In the Western Balkans, democratic backsliding manifests through restrictions on freedom of speech, curtailment of political pluralism, and the weakening of institutional checks and balances, mirroring broader global trends in democratic erosion.

Authoritarian tendencies often emerge in contexts where political institutions are fragile and economic or social crises provide fertile ground for the centralisation of power. In the post-Soviet context, the interplay of institutionalised ruling party structures, coercive power, and state economic control has served as partially interchangeable mechanisms by which autocratic regimes resisted the challenges of the post-communist third wave (Way 2010, 229). The absence of a vibrant political and economic society in regimes is further complicated when a leader—claiming democratic legitimacy—can override institutions such as the legislature and judiciary and fails to meet basic rule of law standards (Linc and Stepan 2001).

Additionally, Levitsky and Way (2010, 28) have highlighted how hybrid regimes sustain themselves by maintaining democratic façades while undermining core democratic principles, and such tendencies are often bolstered by the manipulation of electoral processes, control over the media, and the marginalisation of political opponents, creating an uneven playing field that perpetuates authoritarian control. It is worth mentioning that authoritarian regimes are typically marked by the presence of formal institutions resembling democratic structures, the concentration of power in a single leader or a small group with significant governing authority, and a constrained level of political pluralism (Linz 2000, 43).

In the Western Balkans, regimes commonly manipulate electoral processes, control media narratives, and marginalise opposition parties to consolidate power. Kapidžić (2020) provides further insight into these dynamics,

emphasising that these illiberal practices are part of a broader trend in Southeastern Europe, where weak institutions and inherited governance practices preserve executive dominance, patronage, and informality. Despite holding regular elections, the Western Balkans remain competitive authoritarian regimes because they lack the substantive rule-of-law attributes essential for genuine democracy (Kmezić 2020).

Historical and geopolitical factors further intensify these authoritarian trends. Leaders in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro frequently instrumentalise ethnic divisions, ideological narratives, and wartime legacies to entrench their authority and deepen societal polarisation (Staletović and Bieber 2024). Hybrid regimes exploit the façade of democratic structures to suppress dissent and curtail civil liberties, often with tacit or indirect support from international actors (Pano 2023). Moreover, external influences such as Russia and the UAE contribute to state capture and illiberal governance through opaque business dealings and strategic investments (Prelec 2020). Democratic backsliding is occurring despite earlier assumptions that the region would permanently abandon authoritarian frameworks (Cohen and Lampe 2010).

This erosion of institutional safeguards creates fertile ground for disinformation to thrive, as weakened democratic structures are less capable of countering the manipulative tactics used to polarise and mislead the public. Therefore, coupled with increasing political polarisation, the spread of disinformation has contributed to a significant decline in public trust and the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. All the aforementioned factors have contributed to the characterisation of the political landscape in the Western Balkan countries as hybrid regimes—systems that exhibit a combination of autocratic and democratic features, with a growing tendency towards authoritarianism (Freedom House 2024, 3).

The Western Balkan countries that are central in this case study (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro) were chosen as a case study because they share a complex political history marked by legacies of war, post-socialist transitions, and a prolonged struggle to establish stable democratic governance. Several scholars on transitions have demonstrated that consolidating democracy is impossible without taking into account the historical context, the institutional behaviour of actors, and the history of warfare (Pop-Eleches 2007; Way and Levitsky 2007; Zakosek 2008) when analysing the complex trajectory between authoritarianism and democracy. Each country illustrates different facets of democratic development in the Western Balkans, from Serbia's backsliding towards authoritarianism and Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnic divisions and complex governance structure to Montenegro's ongoing political reconfiguration. The shared experience of post-conflict reconstruction, combined with the varying degrees of EU integration and internal democratic

deficits, makes these countries ideal for examining the role of Citizens' Assemblies as a tool for deepening democratic participation.

However, achieving representativeness remains a challenge, as politically active individuals are often over-represented, potentially limiting the broader societal impact of these initiatives in hybrid regimes. The political environment can either enhance or undermine these principles. The risk of assemblies being co-opted or rendered performative is significant, as evidenced in studies from Serbia, where deliberative innovations occasionally reinforced disillusionment with local democracy instead of mitigating it (Fiket, Ilić, and Pudar Draško 2022). Yet, participatory initiatives in Serbia have also shown potential for democratisation, especially when linked to grassroots movements and conflict-orientated issues (Fiket and Đorđević 2022).

Despite reservations about the effectiveness of citizens' assemblies in authoritarian regimes, it is evident that deliberative practices can serve as a tool against the contemporary use of vertical/horizontal, rational/irrational, and agitation/integration authoritarian propaganda (Hinck, Hawthorne, and Hawthorne 2018). Unlike the divisive policy frames employed by authoritarian regimes, mini-publics adopt depolarising frames that encourage citizens to reflect on issues while considering diverse perspectives and interests (Richards 2018). Moreover, the conducted citizens' assemblies demonstrated a reduction in populist behaviour among participants (Jacobs 2024). In the following sections, we will demonstrate through the results that citizens' assemblies provide empirical support for their theoretical significance, even within the framework of hybrid regimes.

Methodological Framework

This case study examines three citizens' assemblies held between October 2023 and February 2024 in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro as part of the EU-funded project *Combating Disinformation in the Western Balkans*. Since the media landscape in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro is shaped by political influence, financial instability, and evolving digital consumption habits, the citizens' assemblies were organised in response to the growing threat of disinformation that undermine democratic processes, distort public perception, and erode trust in institutions. The primary objective was raising awareness and educating participants on how to identify and report disinformation. Through structured deliberation, the assemblies provided a platform for citizens to engage in discussions, build consensus, and develop strategies for combating disinformation in their respective countries.

The methodological framework of citizens' assemblies was designed to facilitate informed, democratic deliberation on combating disinformation, where a representative group of citizens gathers to develop policy recommendations. The assemblies engaged 133 citizens from diverse backgrounds in structured deliberations on strategies to counteract disinformation in their respective countries.

Participants were selected through a democratic lottery³ to ensure a diverse range of views, reflecting the broader population in terms of age, gender, education, income, and ethnic background. It is also important to note that the selection criteria for participants should be tailored to the specific context and objectives of the research. In all three citizens' assemblies studied, the primary selection criteria included age, gender, region, and education. However, in the case of Montenegro, employment status was added as a criterion, though no specific rationale was provided for its inclusion. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnicity was introduced as an additional criterion, reflecting the diverse ethnic composition of these countries. The adjustment of selection criteria in these cases highlights the need to account for local contextual factors when designing such participatory initiatives.

To facilitate high-quality discussions, citizens were divided into small groups of 9 to 12 participants, led by experienced facilitators who guided the conversation towards consensus-building on the challenges of combating disinformation and formulating actionable recommendations. To ensure the citizens' assembly was informed by the most relevant and up-to-date knowledge, a carefully selected group of experts and decision-makers participated in the expert panels. The experts and decision-makers were selected based on their relevant expertise and experience in media, disinformation, and policy-making to ensure that the assembly's discussions were informed by diverse and well-rounded perspectives. Academics were chosen for their deep knowledge of the media landscape, disinformation trends, and their ability to provide evidence-based analysis. Their role was to help citizens understand the broader context of disinformation and answer questions

³ A democratic lottery is a method of selecting participants for a citizens' assembly or similar democratic processes in a way that ensures representation from a diverse cross-section of the population. Rather than relying on voluntary sign-ups or expert nominations, a democratic lottery randomly selects individuals from a predefined pool of eligible citizens to participate. The goal is to achieve a representative sample that mirrors the broader population in terms of key characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, and region, ensuring that the assembly reflects a wide range of perspectives and experiences. This approach enhances the legitimacy of the process by minimising bias and providing equal opportunity for citizens to be involved in decision-making on public matters.

that arose during the deliberations. On the other hand, decision-makers, such as members of parliament, ministry staff, and representatives from regulatory bodies, were included to offer practical insights into potential policy responses and the feasibility of implementing measures to combat disinformation. The inclusion of both academics and decision-makers ensured that the assembly had a comprehensive understanding of the issue, combining theoretical knowledge with real-world policy implications. This diverse representation was essential for grounding the assembly's recommendations in academic research and practical, actionable solutions.

During the citizens' assembly, participants raised a wide range of questions to media experts and decision-makers, aiming to deepen their understanding of disinformation and explore potential solutions. Questions for media experts focused on the nature and mechanisms of disinformation, such as distinguishing fake news from disinformation, identifying reliable sources, and methods for recognising sophisticated disinformation. Participants also enquired about the role of institutions in combating disinformation, questioning the effectiveness of existing regulatory bodies, the independence of media regulators, and the adequacy of current laws and sanctions. Further questions addressed international experiences, seeking examples of successful disinformation combat strategies from other countries. Lastly, participants asked decision-makers about the effectiveness of institutions like the Press Council and the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM), including questions about accountability, transparency, and the enforcement of penalties. These questions were raised to ensure that recommendations for combating disinformation were informed by academic insights and practical policy considerations while also addressing concerns about the effectiveness and accountability of existing institutional frameworks. Additionally, the outcomes of these discussions were used to formulate concrete recommendations for policymakers, ensuring a more coordinated and effective response to the challenges of disinformation.

To evaluate the impact of the citizens' assemblies and gather feedback from participants, the study employed a quasi-experimental design⁴ by dividing citizens into two groups: a treatment group and a control group. The treatment group comprised individuals who actively participated in the citizens' assemblies. These participants completed pre- and post-assembly questionnaires designed to assess various relevant variables related to the topic of the assembly. In contrast, the control group, which was demographically matched to the treatment group but did not attend the assembly, completed

⁴ A quasi-experimental design is a research method where subjects are assigned to groups using a non-random method; researchers often don't have control over the treatment (pre-existing treatment), and control groups are not mandatory.

identical questionnaires during the same timeframes. The purpose of having both groups is to compare the outcomes and determine whether attending the citizens' assembly had a measurable effect on participants' perceptions and attitudes towards disinformation. By using a control group, researchers can isolate the effects of the assembly from other external factors, ensuring that any changes observed in the treatment group are directly attributable to the experience of attending the assembly, rather than other influences.

Citizens' Assemblies Data

Table 1: Empirical data of the citizens' assemblies

Criterion	Serbia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Total
Number of participants	45	39	49	133
Men	22	18	24	64
Women	23	21	26	70
Age: 18-34	10	10	32	52
Age: 35-64	23	25	14	62
Age: 64+	12	4	3	19
Region: North	23	17	14	54
Region: Center	12	14	24	50
Region: South	10	9	12	31
Education: Elementary school	11	8	9	28
Education: High school	24	23	25	72
Education: University	10	9	16	35
Employment: Employed	0	0	0	0
Employment: Unemployed	0	0	0	0
Ethnicity: Serbs	13			13
Ethnicity: Bosniaks		20		20
Ethnicity: Croats			6	6
Ethnicity: Albanians				0
Ethnicity: Other (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians)				0
Experts	4	4	3	11
Moderators	4	4	5	13
Facilitators	4	4	5	13
Decision makers	0	5	5	10
Recommendations	12	18	15	45

Source: Authors.

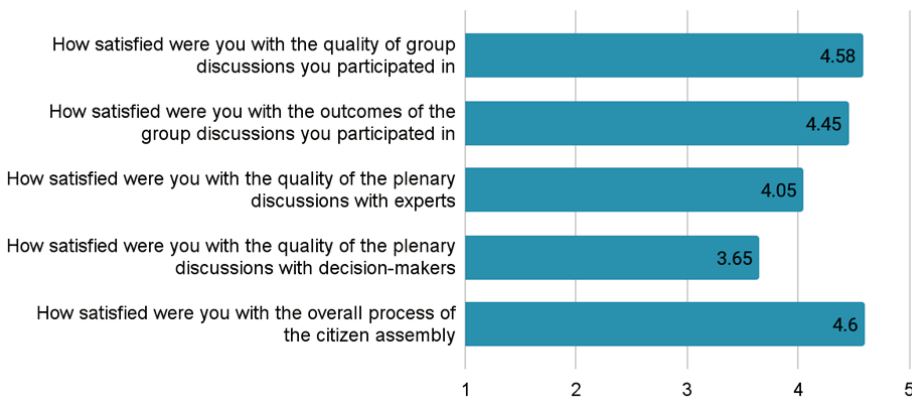
The contribution of this paper lies in its focus on citizens' assemblies in the specific context of the Western Balkans, an area where this form of democratic innovation is relatively new and currently marginal. Unlike many existing studies that explore citizens' assemblies in established democracies, this paper examines their emerging role in a region with distinct political challenges. Specifically, we aim to demonstrate that despite the limited policy impact of citizens' assemblies and the absence of a tradition of their organisation in these societies, all participants in these sessions expressed satisfaction with their participation and a unanimous willingness to participate in similar initiatives in the future. This finding underscores the potential of citizens' assemblies to foster civic engagement and deliberation, even in contexts where democratic practices are still evolving.

Results and Discussion

Participant Evaluations of the Citizens' Assembly on Combating Disinformation in Serbia

The Citizens' Assembly on Combating Disinformation in Serbia was designed to address the growing challenge of disinformation and its impact on democratic processes. By bringing together participants from diverse backgrounds, the assembly aimed to foster informed discussions, enhance understanding, and generate actionable insights to combat this pressing issue. This section evaluates the outcomes of the assembly based on participant feedback, highlighting key successes, areas for improvement, and implications for the design of future assemblies.

Figure 1: Participant Satisfaction with Key Aspects of the Citizens' Assembly

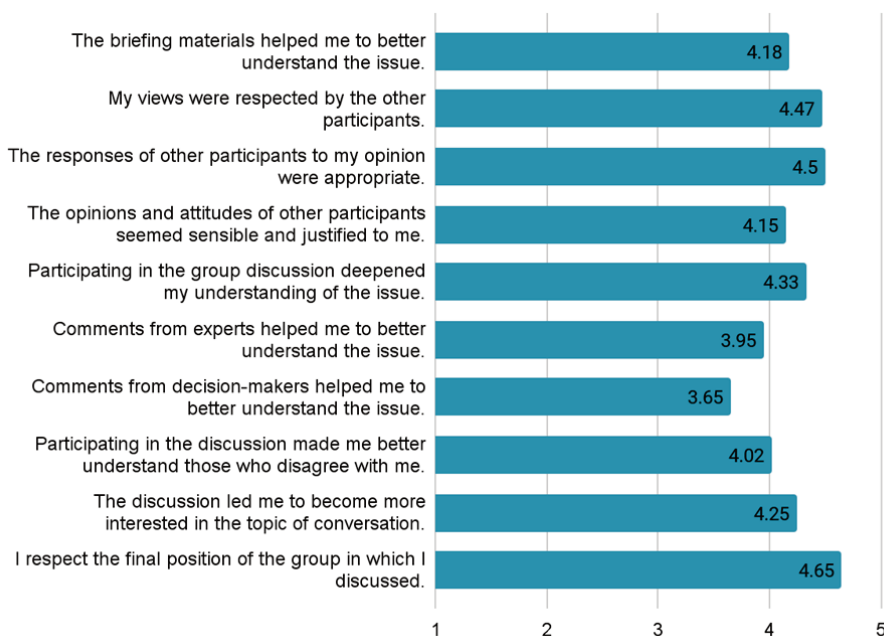


Source: Authors.

Participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the overall assembly process, as reflected in an average rating of 4.6 out of 5 (on a scale where 1 indicates “extremely dissatisfied” and 5 signifies “completely satisfied”). The assembly succeeded in creating an inclusive and engaging environment where participants felt respected and valued. This is evident from the high ratings for the respect shown by others (4.47) and the appropriateness of responses to their opinions (4.5). Furthermore, participants demonstrated strong agreement with the final group position, assigning it the highest average rating of 4.65, which underscores the collaborative and consensus-driven nature of the discussions.

The assembly effectively deepened participants’ understanding of disinformation, with group discussions receiving a positive average rating of 4.33. Participants noted that the collaborative and deliberative nature of these discussions significantly contributed to their comprehension of the issue. Preparatory materials provided before the assembly were also highly rated, with an average score of 4.18, indicating their role in facilitating informed dialogue. Additionally, the assembly succeeded in sparking interest in the topic, as reflected in a rating of 4.25 for heightened interest in the subject matter.

Figure 2: Participant Reflections on the Deliberative Quality and Learning Experience in the Citizens’ Assembly

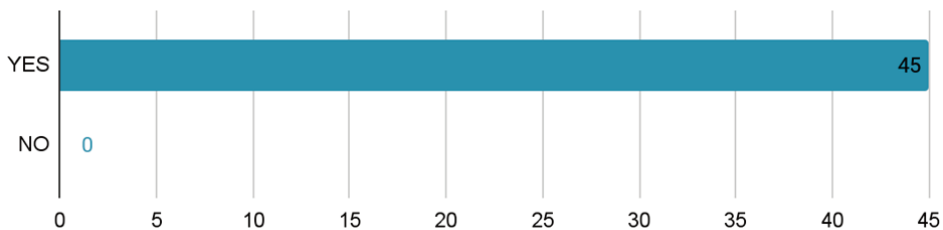


Source: Authors.

While the assembly received strong overall evaluations, the contributions of media experts and decision-makers emerged as areas for potential improvement. Participants acknowledged the value of expert insights, assigning an average rating of 3.95. However, some participants criticised the lack of direct and practical answers to their questions, particularly regarding international best practices for combating disinformation. The high volume of questions—approximately 40 within a 90-minute session—may have limited the depth and specificity of expert responses, pointing to the need for better time allocation and focus on future assemblies.

Feedback regarding decision-makers, particularly the representative from the broadcast regulator, was more critical. Participants cited vague and noncommittal responses, leading to an average rating of 3.65, the lowest among all aspects evaluated. While participants valued the opportunity to engage directly with decision-makers, the perceived ineffectiveness of these interactions suggests a need for clearer, more actionable contributions in future assemblies. The assembly also succeeded in promoting empathy and mutual understanding among participants. The deliberative discussions were rated 4.02 for their ability to help participants better understand perspectives different from their own. This reflects the assembly's success in fostering constructive dialogue and bridging divides, a critical component of addressing polarised societal issues like disinformation.

Figure 3: Would you participate again in a citizen's assembly?



Source: Authors.

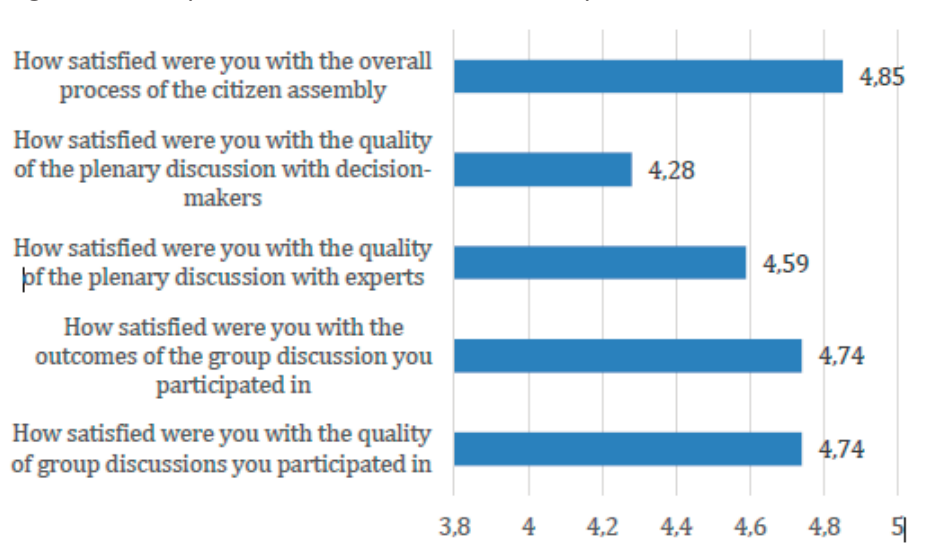
A particularly significant outcome was the unanimous willingness of participants to participate in future citizens' assemblies. This strong endorsement underscores the perceived value of the process and highlights its potential as an effective mechanism for addressing complex societal challenges and promoting democratic engagement.

Participant Evaluations of the Citizens' Assembly on Combating Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Citizens' Assembly on Combating Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) provided a platform for deliberation on one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary ethnically divided societies. Participants expressed overwhelmingly positive feedback about various aspects of the assembly, as reflected in their responses to the evaluation survey. The assembly's design, inclusivity, and organisational quality received the highest praise, with an average rating of 4.85. That suggests that participants found the process well-structured, transparent, and successful in meeting its objectives.

Participants rated the quality of group discussions particularly high, with an average score of 4.74. These sessions were seen as engaging, productive, and conducive to meaningful dialogue. That reflects the success of the assembly in fostering a deliberative environment. Similarly, plenary discussions with experts received a positive average rating of 4.59, indicating that participants valued the insights provided by subject-matter experts. These contributions were perceived as credible and instrumental in shaping participants' perspectives on the problem of disinformation.

Figure 4: Participant Satisfaction with Different Aspects of the Citizens' Assembly



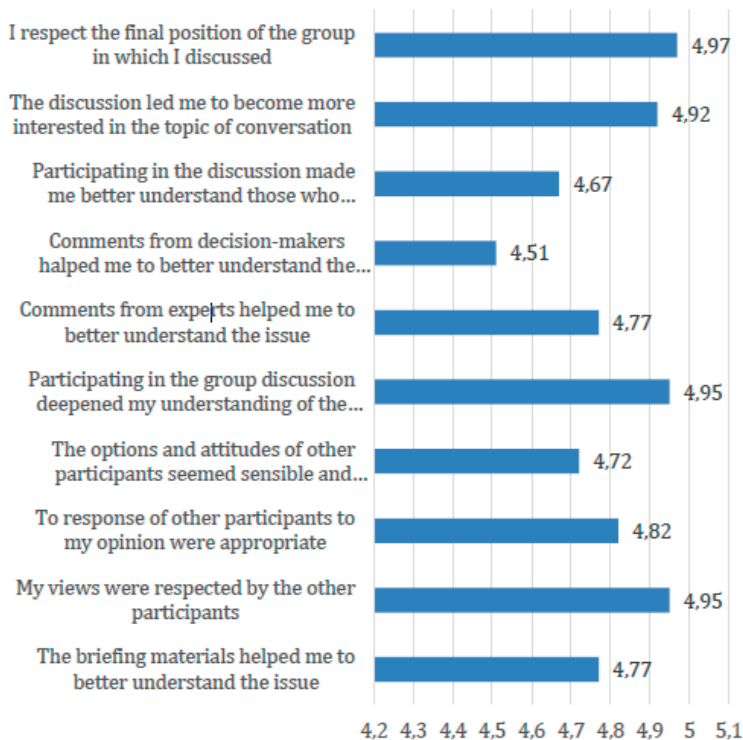
Source: Authors.

One of the most notable outcomes of the evaluation was the exceptionally high level of respect participants felt during the assembly. With an average

rating of 4.95, participants overwhelmingly reported that their views were respected and valued by others. Additionally, participants were highly satisfied with the way their opinions were addressed, reflected in an average rating of 4.82. That indicates a constructive and inclusive atmosphere that fosters meaningful exchanges of ideas.

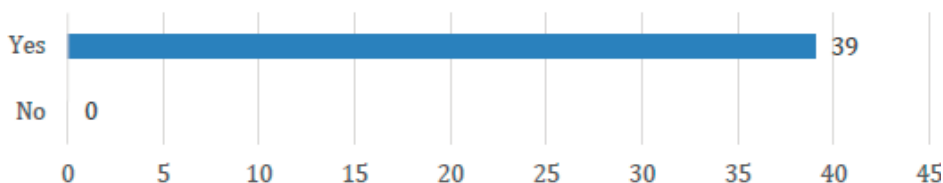
Participants also noted the importance and validity of diverse perspectives, as reflected in the average rating of 4.72. That demonstrates that the assembly successfully created a space for acknowledging and integrating differing viewpoints, contributing to a richer and more nuanced discussion. Participants reported a heightened interest in the topic of disinformation, as evidenced by an average rating of 4.92. That indicates that the assembly not only informed participants but also succeeded in capturing and sustaining their attention. Furthermore, discussions helped foster mutual understanding, with an average rating of 4.67 for improving participants' ability to empathise with those holding differing views.

Figure 5: Participants' Reflections on Learning, Respect, and Group Dynamics in the Citizens' Assembly



Source: Authors.

Figure 6: Would you participate again in a citizens' assembly?



Source: Authors.

The fact that every single participant expressed a desire to participate again in a citizens' assembly represents a significant result. This unanimous positive response implies a high level of satisfaction, perceived value, and positive experiences throughout the civil assembly process. Participants not only found value in the current experience but also expressed a strong willingness to engage in similar initiatives in the future.

Participant Evaluations of the Citizens' Assembly on Combating Disinformation in Montenegro

The evaluation of the Citizens' Assembly initiative in Montenegro revealed a significant increase in participants' awareness of political processes and government policies following their involvement in the Citizens' Assembly. Before participation, many respondents expressed moderate to low levels of knowledge about democratic processes. For instance, only 17% rated their awareness as "high" (score of ten), with the majority assigning themselves a moderate score of five (19.1%). Post-assembly, the percentage of highly informed participants rose to 21.3%, accompanied by incremental increases across other high-score categories. That indicates that the assembly succeeded in equipping participants with a deeper understanding of democratic processes.

Participants also reported an increased willingness to engage in civic activities. Attendance at public debates, for example, rose from 78.7% before the assembly to 89.4% afterwards. Similarly, the inclination to join collective actions with local representatives increased from 87.2% to 91.5%, while participation in civil society activities grew from 74.5% to 83%. These shifts reflect a growing sense of empowerment and readiness among participants to actively contribute to democratic processes.

One notable outcome was the heightened critical perspective on Montenegro's democratic processes. Participants identified significant barriers to political participation, such as corruption, the arbitrariness of political elites, and a lack of institutional accountability. Many expressed scepticism about the

authenticity of Montenegro's democratic framework, describing it as largely "illusory". Furthermore, participants developed a more critical and distrustful attitude towards the media and their reporting. The assembly increased awareness of the pervasive impact of fake news and disinformation, fostering a more discerning approach to media consumption. This shift underscores the role of citizens' assemblies in promoting media literacy as a foundational component of democratic engagement.

The assembly also influenced participants' satisfaction with opportunities for civic involvement. Initially, 23.4% believed there were sufficient opportunities for participation, a figure that slightly declined to 21.7% in the final evaluation. Conversely, the percentage of those who believed there were insufficient opportunities increased from 55.3% to 60.9%. Despite these perceptions, participants showed increased readiness to engage in specific activities, such as attending protests (70.2% to 83%) and signing petitions (91.5% to 93.6%). Notably, participation in political parties increased from 29.8% to 38.3%, reflecting a gradual shift towards institutional engagement.

Participants identified numerous obstacles hindering greater citizen involvement in democratic processes. Chief among these were safety concerns stemming from perceptions of corruption and political arbitrariness. Many respondents also highlighted societal apathy and a lack of trust in the political system as critical barriers to engagement. These findings emphasise the importance of addressing systemic issues to create an enabling environment for meaningful citizen participation.

The Citizens' Assembly in Montenegro demonstrated its capacity to inform, empower, and engage citizens in democratic processes. Participants not only became more knowledgeable but also more critical of existing political and media structures. Importantly, they expressed an increased willingness to participate in civic activities, highlighting the assembly's role in fostering democratic resilience. These findings reinforce the potential of citizens' assemblies as tools to counter illiberal trends and strengthen deliberative democracy in contexts of political fragility.

Conclusion: Benefits and Drawbacks of Citizens' Assemblies

In the political contexts of countries that remain distant from fully consolidated democracies, the impact of citizens' assemblies as a democratic innovation is both promising and subject to significant constraints. A significant advantage of citizens' assemblies, even within hybrid regimes, is that civil society organisations frequently assume leadership in organising these initiatives. It illustrates that these organisations can actively contribute to fostering citizen

engagement and raising public awareness despite the constraints of a hybrid regime. Another notable strength is the citizens' willingness to participate. Given that citizens' assemblies represent a relatively recent form of democratic innovation in the Western Balkans, initial scepticism is to be expected. However, in all three assemblies conducted under this research, the participation rate was 100%, with every invited citizen taking part. Additionally, post-assembly surveys indicated unanimous support for future participation. This demonstrates that citizens' assemblies facilitate informed decision-making by enabling participants to acquire deeper insights into the issues at hand. In some cases, such as the assemblies held in Bosnia and Herzegovina, these forums also served as mechanisms for bridging ethnic divides and fostering constructive and peaceful dialogue between Serbs and Bosniaks. Moreover, citizens' assemblies are valuable for creating synergies by integrating the perspectives of decision-makers, civil society organisations, experts, academics, and citizens into a cohesive and collaborative process. This integration fosters mutual understanding and cooperation by allowing different actors to share their knowledge, perspectives, and concerns in a constructive setting. Decision-makers gain direct insights into citizens' priorities and experiences, which can help shape more effective policies. Experts and academics contribute evidence-based knowledge, ensuring discussions and recommendations are grounded in facts rather than misinformation or political bias. Civil society organisations act as intermediaries, advocating for citizens' voices and facilitating dialogue between the public and institutions. Meanwhile, citizens play a crucial role by providing firsthand experiences and expressing their needs, ensuring that the proposed solutions align with societal realities. This collaborative approach enhances policy legitimacy, builds trust between institutions and the public, and increases the likelihood of implementing well-informed and broadly supported measures.

While citizens' assemblies have the potential to foster greater public engagement, enhance political legitimacy, and address issues of governance from a grassroots perspective, their ability to effect tangible change in hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes is limited by several factors. Firstly, in regimes where democratic backsliding is prevalent, the formal recommendations of citizens' assemblies may lack the necessary political backing for implementation. Without the support of political elites, citizens' assemblies risk being relegated to advisory roles with little influence on actual policymaking. Decision-makers often exhibit resistance and tend to disregard the recommendations of citizens' assemblies, as the outcomes of these assemblies may challenge existing political agendas or policy preferences, leading to a reluctance to implement changes that could disrupt the status quo. The recommendations of citizens' assemblies are sometimes perceived as lacking legitimacy or authority, particularly if the

assemblies are viewed as disconnected from formal political institutions or electoral processes. Additionally, decision-makers may question the representativeness of citizens' assemblies, considering them too small or not fully reflective of the broader population's views. Lastly, there may be institutional inertia or political costs associated with adopting citizens' recommendations, especially if they require significant reforms or face opposition from powerful interest groups.

While citizens' assemblies have the potential to foster public engagement, enhance political legitimacy, and address governance issues from a grassroots perspective, their ability to effect tangible change in hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes is constrained by several factors. In Serbia, during the period when citizens' assemblies were organised, public debates were also held on two key laws—the Law on Electronic Media and the Law on Public Information and Media. The recommendations from the citizens' assemblies were formally presented in these debates and submitted to the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications. However, no response was received, reflecting the government's lack of interest in supporting or acknowledging citizen-driven recommendations. This lack of engagement was further evident in the absence of decision-makers at the citizens' assemblies in Serbia. In Montenegro, the response was somewhat more positive. Members of Parliament attended the citizens' assembly, signalling initial interest. However, beyond their presence, no concrete actions were taken to implement the recommendations.

The most promising example comes from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where not only did members of Parliament attend the citizens' assembly, but a meaningful follow-up was initiated. As the majority of recommendations focused on media literacy, two roundtable discussions were subsequently organised in Tuzla and Banja Luka. These gatherings brought together representatives from cantonal ministries of education, school directors, teachers, the Communications Regulatory Agency, and the Ombudsman to discuss the introduction and improvement of media literacy education in high schools. This case demonstrates how, with institutional engagement, citizens' assemblies can serve as a catalyst for further dialogue and policy discussions, even in challenging political environments.

This raises concerns about the durability and institutionalisation of these mechanisms, as their outcomes may be dismissed or co-opted by dominant political actors who seek to maintain power. The sustainability and institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies are contingent upon funding, which, particularly in the Western Balkans, is predominantly project-based. Consequently, once a project concludes, the continuity of organising future citizens' assemblies becomes uncertain, as does the implementation of the

citizens' recommendations. It is also important to point out that the impact of citizens' assemblies in less democratic contexts is often constrained by the absence of a robust civil society and independent media, which are critical for ensuring transparency and accountability. In such environments, the dissemination of the outcomes of citizens' assemblies may be limited, reducing their ability to generate public debate and hold decision-makers accountable.

However, despite these challenges, the mere existence of citizens' assemblies in authoritarian-leaning contexts can be viewed as a significant step towards democratisation. By creating spaces for deliberation, inclusion, and informed decision-making, citizens' assemblies have the potential to introduce new norms of participation and consensus-building, which could gradually influence the political culture. In some cases, they may also serve as a form of "pressure from below", signalling a public demand for greater inclusivity and responsiveness from governing institutions. Thus, while the immediate impact of citizens' assemblies in such contexts may be limited, their long-term significance lies in their capacity to nurture deliberative practices, challenge authoritarian norms, and contribute incrementally to democratic resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: An earlier version of this paper, titled "Democracy Defenders: Citizens Assembly Engagement in the Western Balkans", was presented at the Annual Conference Social Science 4 Democracy Democratic Backsliding in the Era of Permanent Crises, held from June 26–28, 2024, at Roma Tre University in Rome, Italy.

References

- Aleksić, Radomir. 2020. "Active Citizens in Belgrade and Valjevo: Citizens' Assemblies", *Foundation BFPE for a responsible society*, December 28, 2020. <https://en.bfpe.org/in-focus/development-and-decentralization-focus/active-citizens-in-belgrade-and-valjevo-citizens-assemblies/>
- Bohman, James. 1998. "The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy". *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 6 (4): 400-425.
- Chwalisz, Claudia. 2017. *The People's Verdict: Adding Informed Citizen Voices to Public Decision-Making*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield; Policy Network.
- Cohen, Lenard J., and John R. Lampe. 2010. *Embracing Democracy in the Western Balkans: From Postconflict Struggles toward European Integration*.

- Washington, D.C. and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1989. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Electoral Reform Society. 2019. "What Are Citizens' Assemblies?", *Electoral Reform Society*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/What-Are-Citizens%E2%80%99-Assemblies-Briefing-June-2019.pdf>
- Elstub, Stephen. 2014. "Mini-Publics: Issues and Cases". In: *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases*, edited by Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Escobar, Oliver, and Stephen Elstub. 2017. "Forms of Mini-publics: An Introduction to Deliberative Innovations in Democratic Systems". *New Democracy*, May 8, 2017. <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/2017/05/08/forms-of-mini-publics>
- European Partnership for Democracy. n.d. "Combatting Disinformation in the Western Balkans", Accessed December 15, 2024. <https://epd.eu/what-we-do/programmes/cdw-b-combatting-disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/>
- Fiket, Irena, and Biljana Đorđević. 2022. "Promises and Challenges of Deliberative and Participatory Innovations in Hybrid Regimes: The Case of Two Citizens' Assemblies in Serbia". *Filozofija i društvo* 33 (1): 3-25.
- Fiket, Irena, Vujo Ilić, and Gazela Pudar Draško. 2022. "Failed Expectations: Can Deliberative Innovations Produce Democratic Effects in Hybrid Regimes?". *Filozofija i društvo* 33 (1): 50-71.
- Fiket, Irena. 2019. *Deliberativno građanstvo*. Beograd: Akademska knjiga i Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju.
- Freedom House. 2024. *Nations in Transit 2024: Confronting Democratic Decline in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*. Washington, DC: Freedom House.
- GradiMO. n.d. "Citizens' Assembly of Mostar", Accessed December 13, 2024. <https://mostargradimo.ba/en/home/>
- Grönlund, Kimmo, André Bächtiger, and Maija Setälä, eds. 2014. *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Involving Citizens in the Democratic Process*. Colchester, UK: ECPR Press.
- Harris, Clodagh. 2019. "Mini-Publics: Design Choices and Legitimacy". In: *Handbook of Democratic Innovation and Governance*, edited by Stephen Elstub and Oliver Escobar, 45-59. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

- He, Baogang, and Mark E. Warren. 2011. "Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development". *Perspectives on Politics* 9 (2): 269-289.
- Hinck, Robert S., Hayley Hawthorne, and Joshua Hawthorne. 2018. "Authoritarians Don't Deliberate: Cultivating Deliberation and Resisting Authoritarian Tools in an Age of Global Nationalism". *Journal of Public Deliberation* 14 (2).
- Jacobs, Kristof. 2024. "Have a Little Faith in Deliberation? Examining the Effect of Participation in a Citizens' Assembly on Populist Attitudes". *Contemporary Politics* 30 (4): 512-533.
- Jain, Angela, and Hans-Liudger Dienel. 2024. "Deliberative Democracy in Times of Crisis: The Capability of Citizens' Assemblies to Overcome Societal Polarization". *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 37 (3): 681-686.
- Kapidžić, Damir. 2020. "The Rise of Illiberal Politics in Southeast Europe". *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20 (1): 1-18.
- Khoban, Zohreh. 2021. "Interpretative Interactions: An Argument for Descriptive Representation in Deliberative Mini-Publics". *Representation* 57 (4): 497-514.
- Kmezić, Marko. 2020. "Rule of Law and Democracy in the Western Balkans: Addressing the Gap Between Policies and Practice". *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 20 (1): 183-198.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Linz, Juan J. 2000. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 2001. "Toward Consolidated Democracies". In: *The Global Divergence of Democracies*, edited by Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, 93-112. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mejia, Mauricio. "Strengthening democracy in Montenegro through Citizens' Assemblies", *Medium*, December 14, 2023. <https://medium.com/participo/strengthening-democracy-in-montenegro-through-citizens-assemblies-4b2c7040ee53>
- Merkel, Wolfgang, Filip Milačić, and Andreas Schafer. 2021. *Citizens' Assemblies- New Ways to Democratize Democracy*. Vienna: FES Regional Office for International Cooperation.
- Pano, Doriana. 2023. "Hybrid Democracies of the Western Balkans". *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development* 10 (1, S1): 59.

- Parry, Lucy J., Nicole Curato, and John S. Dryzek. 2024. "Governance of Deliberative Mini-Publics: Emerging Consensus and Divergent Views". *Policy & Politics* (published online ahead of print 2024): 1-23.
- Paulis, Emilien, and Paulina Pospieszna. 2024. "Deliberative Mini-publics as Learning Schools for Democracy? Examining Deliberation Impact on Dissatisfied and Radical Participants of a Citizens' Assembly in Poland". *Democratization* 31 (1): 1-24.
- Pop-Eleches, Grigore. 2007. "Historical Legacies and Post-Communist Regime Change". *The Journal of Politics* 69 (4): 908-926.
- Pow, James. 2023. "Mini-Publics and the Wider Public: The Perceived Legitimacy of Randomly Selecting Citizen Representatives". *Representation* 59 (1): 13-32.
- Prelec, Tena. 2020. "The Vicious Circle of Corrosive Capital, Authoritarian Tendencies, and State Capture in the Western Balkans". *Journal of Regional Security* 15 (2): 167-198.
- Richards, Robert C., Jr. 2018. "Deliberative Mini-Publics as a Partial Antidote to Authoritarian Information Strategies". *Journal of Public Deliberation* 14 (2).
- Smith, Graham. 2009. *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizens Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Staletović, Branimir, and Florian Bieber. 2024. "Western Balkans". In: *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization*, edited by Aurel Croissant and Luca Tomini. London: Routledge.
- Venter, Francois. 2023. "Consulting Citizens: Addressing the Deficits in Participatory Democracy". *South African Journal on Human Rights* 39 (4): 251-273.
- Walsh, Colm D., and Johan A. Elkind. 2021. "The Dissatisfied and the Engaged: Citizen Support for Citizens' Assemblies and Their Willingness to Participate". *Irish Political Studies* 36 (4): 647-666.
- Way, Lucan. A., and Steven Levitsky. 2007. "Linkage, leverage, and the post-communist divide". *East European Politics and Societies* 21 (1): 48-66.
- Way, Lucan. 2010. "Resistance to Contagion: Sources of Authoritarian Stability in the Former Soviet Union." In: *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World*, edited by Valerie Bunce, Michael McFaul, and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 229-252. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zakosek, Nenad. 2008. "Democratization, State-Building and War: The Cases of Serbia and Croatia". *Democratization* 15 (3): 588-610.

DELIBERACIJA U USLOVIMA DEMOKRATSKOG NAZADOVANJA: UVIDI IZ SKUPŠTINA GRAĐANA NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu skupština građana (SG) u podsticanju deliberativne demokratije i suprotstavljanju autoritarnim tendencijama na Zapadnom Balkanu, regionu koji se suočava sa značajnim demokratskim nazadovanjem. Analizirajući tri skupštine održane u Srbiji, Bosni i Hercegovini i Crnoj Gori između oktobra 2023. i februara 2024. godine, sa ukupno 133 učesnika, studija ispituje spremnost građana da učestvuju i njihovo zadovoljstvo deliberacijom o ključnim društvenim pitanjima. Iako SG uglavnom organizuju organizacije civilnog društva i imaju ograničenu institucionalnu podršku, pokazale su značajan potencijal za unapređenje učešća građana i prevazilaženje društvenih podela. Nalazi pokazuju visok nivo angažovanja građana, pri čemu učesnici često iznose stavove koji dovode u pitanje dominantne političke narative. Među značajnim primerima ističu se podsticanje međuetničkog dijaloga u Bosni i Hercegovini i formulisanje konkretnih preporuka u vezi sa dezinformacijama u Srbiji. Ipak, uticaj SG na zvanično donošenje politika ograničen je zbog ukorenjenih političkih struktura, otpora elita i neizvesnosti u finansiranju. Uprkos ovim izazovima, SG predstavljaju važne platforme za razmenu mišljenja, nudeći korektivne mehanizme za nedostatke tradicionalnog upravljanja u hibridnim režimima. Ova studija ističe transformativni potencijal SG u izgradnji demokratske otpornosti, naglašavajući njihovu ulogu u unapređenju deliberativnih praksi i suprotstavljanju autoritarnim normama u nestabilnim političkim kontekstima.

Ključne reči: skupštine građana; deliberativna demokratija; deliberacija; Zapadni Balkan.