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DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY – THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE CASE OF THE BELGRADE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY[1]

ABSTRACT
In this paper, we examine whether it is possible to improve democracy by encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in political decision-making and if participation in deliberative institutions can make citizens more competent decision-makers. By using qualitative data, we analyze the discussion from the Belgrade citizens' assembly (CA) focused on the topic of expanding the pedestrian zone in the city center. The CA was organized in Serbia for the first time, as part of a research project aimed at promoting and advancing innovative democratic practices in the Western Balkans. The goal was to encourage the involvement of citizens in discussions of public interest. Our hypothesis was that, through the process of participation and deliberation in CA, ordinary citizens can make reasonable and informed choices, increase their knowledge of the issue discussed, and become more motivated to participate in political decision-making on the local level. Our qualitative content analysis suggests that deliberation had a positive impact on participants' knowledge of the chosen topic of the assembly. It also shows that citizens used exhaustive explanations rather than brief statements, could differentiate the good arguments from the bad, and more often appealed to general rather than private interests. Participants in the assembly reported a significant increase in interest in political decision-making that affects their lives, as well as a sense of being informed about politics. Finally, we wanted to draw attention to the challenges and open questions that remain, namely those that concern the impact of a deliberative body on political decision-making in the real world.

KEYWORDS
deliberative democracy, citizens' assembly, public deliberation, democratic legitimacy, political engagement

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Introduction

Democracy is expanding across the world, and yet its principles and institutions are becoming increasingly detached from their original *raison d'être* – "rule of the people, by the people, for the people", as defined by US President Abraham Lincoln in one of the best-known speeches in human history. Even when political leaders are chosen by the people, they sometimes transform democracy into its polar opposite. Inconsiderate actions of political elites and media manipulation support each other and undermine the very idea of "rule of the people". Democracies, especially those with authoritarian and populist leaders and governments, have become places where ordinary citizens are almost entirely alienated from the process of political decision-making. Consequently, there is a decreased voter turnout (Solijonov 2016), a lack of citizens' interest in political decision-making and democratic institutions (Brennan 2016), apathy among the population (Greenberg 2010), and a sense of disconnection with decisions made by elected representatives (Parvin 2018). This seriously undermines the effective functioning of democracy and calls into question the very legitimacy of democratic outcomes.

Advocates of theory known as *deliberative democracy* (Bohman 1998; Cohen 1989; Dryzek 2000; Gutmann, Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996; Manin 1987) claim that this approach offers solutions for the democratic crisis. Although the content of deliberative ideals has developed during the years, there is a general understanding that "deliberative democracy is grounded in an ideal in which people, of equal status and mutual respect, come together to discuss the political issues they face and, based on those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives" (Bächtiger et al., eds., 2018: 21). Deliberative approach supporters are optimistic about citizens' capacity to make sound decisions and argue that citizens can become more competent, more interested, and more active through the process of deliberation (Landemore 2012; List et al. 2012; Fishkin 2009; Fishkin, Luskin 2005). They claim that if citizens are given the chance to be involved in genuine forms of public high-quality deliberation, they will be enforced to be more involved in the political life of the community and thus significantly contribute to the value and legitimacy of democratic outcomes (Manin 1987; Cohen 1989; Bohman 1998). This position requires the absence of coercive power in the discussion, that citizens have a voice in political decision-making, equal freedom to express their opinion, mutual respect for each other (for different arguments and claims), and an argumentative explanation of their positions (good reason-giving). Additionally, citizens should form their opinion while taking into account the opinions of others and the general interest (Bächtiger et al. 2018; Cohen, 1989; Mansbridge et al. 2017; Steenbergen et al. 2003).

This paper aims to examine the possibility of practical realization of deliberative democracy expectation through deliberative *mini-publics DPM* (Elstub 2014, Fishkin et al. 2000, 2005, Gerber et al. 2018). They serve as a sample of the population that can represent the existing diversity of opinions and

attitudes about policy issues under discussion that can be found in society as a whole. In order to include various socio-demographic categories, this group of citizens can be selected randomly or through selective sampling - to additionally secure the representation of those people who are particularly influenced by the issues under discussion. Various DPM, such as deliberative polls, citizen assemblies, citizens juries, town meetings, are conducted around the world. DMP serves as a mechanism that enables citizens to participate in the process of collective decision-making. Although they can differ in design, they are all motivated by the deliberative democracy ideal of inclusive participation in the political life of the community.

We analyze the first CA held in Belgrade in November 2020[2]. This is done through our process observations, which we personally attended, and through the audio recording of the group discussion in the CA. This was a particularly challenging experiment for the deliberative practice, since in Serbia vast majority of people hardly have any understanding of the possibility of civic participation through non-partisan forums, and thus have underdeveloped political motivation and competence for participation in political life (Fiket et al. 2017; Đorđević, Fiket 2022; Fiket,Ilić, Pudar Draško 2022)[3]. The aim is to examine the efficacy of CA and its capacity to support good deliberation and encourage citizens to participate in political decision-making in given conditions.

To do so, we will first discuss the central claims of deliberative democracy, as opposed to the economic theory of democracy and its empirical findings. Then we will present the possibility of empirical realization of certain deliberative ideals listed in the literature, and their evolution in light of practical concerns of today's democratic societies, characterized by deep disagreement and complexity of social problems and political decision making. We will then focus our examination on the question of whether the assumptions about the benefits of public deliberation have been supported by our findings from this specific CA. We will describe how the assembly affected the empowerment, participation, and deliberation of the assembly's participants. We used the qualitative method because we were interested in the content of the discussion.[4] Using the speech analysis we will investigate whether the participants were respectful to each other, especially to those with whom they disagree; if they were giving brief, simple, and loosely associated statements about certain issues (or used more argumentative and reasoned claims); if their ability to make judgments and weigh arguments and reasons was high or low and prone to making errors, which would, in turn, diminish their ability to be self-critical and to impartially consider the interests of others. We also wanted to see

2 For the exhaustive and precise information on the design and choice of the term citizens' assembly for Belgrade DMP see Fiket, Đorđević in this volume.

3 For a more detailed description of the hybrid regimes and context in which the first CA in Serbia took place see Fiket, Đorđević in this volume.

4 For the result of quantitative data collected in Belgrade CA see a paper by Đorđević, Vasiljević (see Fiket,Ilić, Pudar Draško, and Đorđević,Vasiljević in this volume).

if the decisions made by participants of CA were adopted by majority vote or unanimously. Finally, we will present our opinion on the possibility of deliberative practice to bring the solution to the problems of civic incompetence, lack of interest, and knowledge about political decision-making.

Deliberative Democracy as a Remedy for the Democratic Deficit?

There is a growing challenge of political polarization that undermines democracies' foundations across the world (Carothers, O'Donohue, eds., 2019; McCoy et al. 2018). Ideologically extreme political parties and interests use public disposition and willingness to be polarized and exploited through demagoguery and powerful media manipulation for the sake of partisan interest. Considering all possible benefits that political elites can have from the current state of affairs, it seems that our best hope can be found on the other side – with the ordinary citizens. (Dryzek *et al.* 2019). But the question is if ordinary citizens are competent enough to use that power adequately.

For a very long time, research in political science yields quite pessimistic conclusions about citizens' knowledge, competence, motivation, and tolerance for different opinions – all of which are needed to participate in tenable democratic decision-making (Achen, Bartels 2016; Caplan 2011; Carpini, Keeter 1996; Downs 1957; McCoy et al. 2018; Sunstein 1999; Zaller 1992). Claims that peoples' votes are arbitrary and meaningless (Riker 1982), that citizens are uninformed, biased and disinterested, blind to reasons for or against any alternatives (Ahlstrom-Vij 2019), can feed arguments that the elitist approach to democracy is best we can hope for. The elitist view rest on a small number of people who possess the intellectual abilities and education necessary to engage in public policies (Lipset 1960; Meyer 1974; Schumpeter 1942). Democracy is thus a mere mechanism, with no intrinsic value, that allows peaceful competition among elites for the formal positions of leadership within the system. They dictate their views and are not controlled by the citizens. Being a class of passive followers, citizens' only role is to avoid serious disasters when they see that politicians act in a problematic way (Schumpeter 1942).

The historical successor to this approach, usually labeled as "economic" theory of democracy (cf. Downs 1957) due to its intercorrelation with social choice theory, puts the expression of one's preferences as both the methodological starting point and the ultimate output of one's democratic participation (Riker 1982). Given this rather limited viewpoint, and empirical findings on citizens' bounded capacities, it is no wonder that various theorists became pessimistic regarding democracy's long-term benefits and its tendency to produce sound decisions. In the second part of the 20th century, however, this approach was theoretically dominant, and its central institution of democracy – voting – is still the prevailing practice in contemporary societies.

But over the past half-century, a silent revolution in democratic theory and practice has been occurring over the past half-century – the emergence of a new approach to democracy called deliberative democracy. In the early formation

of the deliberative ideal in the 1980s, deliberation was always contrasted with democratic models that have traditionally relied on the idea of competing elites, private interest maximization, aggregation, and the strategic practice supported by voting and bargaining (Cohen 1989; Gutmann, Thompson 1996; Knight, Johnson 1997; Habermas 1984, 1996). It is a form of democracy where public deliberation, rather than occasional voting, is central to the process of justification of the laws, decisions, and principles that apply to the community. Here, deliberation is conceived as an ideal form of discussion in which participants gather and discuss their problems and disagreements, give reasons to their views, listen and show respect to each other, motivated by the desire to make the best collective decisions (Bächtiger et al. 2018; Benhabib 1996; Besson, Marti 2006; Bohman, Rehg 1997; Elster 1998; Macedo 1999). Although deliberative democracy involves a broad spectrum of ideas, we can say that its ultimate aim is to give legitimacy to political decisions, by creating procedures that allow the said decisions to be a result of enlarged civic inclusion, publicly expressed reason, mutual understanding, and tolerance.

In other words, whereas traditional models of democracy concentrate on the aggregation of individual preferences, made by individuals or political elites, deliberative democracy focuses on creating a sense of public reason (Rawls 1993, 1997). This form of democracy puts communication that involves evaluating and reflecting on reasons, values, and interests (i.e. careful considerations of alternatives) regarding matters of common concern, at the center of politics and political decision-making. During the process of deliberation, participants value the opinions of the persons in the group with superior arguments rather than those with superior status (Polleta, Gardner 2018: 69). By doing so, deliberative democrats seek to transform current systems of governance – which are often associated with power asymmetries, social exclusion, and mutual distrust – and develop the greater trust of citizens in political institutions, enabling them to understand political issues more fully and making them more willing to participate in the political life of their community (Bohman 1996; Dryzek 2000; Fishkin 1995; Habermas 1996). In that way, political decisions are best created, and are thus more legitimate, through a process of public deliberation, which will decrease the democratic deficits that are currently experienced in most democracies.

The first generation of deliberative democracy theorists had a highly idealized understanding of the process of deliberation that ends in a rationally motivated consensus to which everyone can agree on (Rawls 1993, 1997; Habermas 1995, 1996; Cohen 1989, 1997). The question is then if this deliberative ideal – which presupposes ideal equality, mutual respect, purely rational arguments, thoughtful and informed decision-making, and calls upon the general will and a common interest (rather than a private and selfish one) – is just a utopian notion that has nothing to do with real-world politics?

Although the word "utopia", etymologically speaking, means "a place that does not exist", we can think about it another way – as a "world of possibilities". Thus, the theory and practice of deliberative democracy can be seen as

a possibility to come up with more legitimate and more informed democratic decisions. It can be perceived as a way to improve our democracies and make them work better. Deliberative experiments can show us the benefits of collective decision-making and ordinary citizens' participation in political life, but also the capacities and shortcomings of democratic practices, citizens, and political experts' decision-making.

But Is Deliberative Democracy Really Working?

Those who advance the theory of deliberative democracy (Cohen 1989; Bohman, Rehg 1997; Bohman 1998; Elster 1998, Macedo 1999; Freeman 2000) believe that power belongs to all citizens and should be exercised equally over everyone. Therefore, it is necessary for all people to strive to find the conditions by which they can live together, based on arguments reasoning, and mutual respect. And yet, it seems that wide disparities in wealth and power, education and abilities, available free time and personal interests for certain issues, as well as the diversity of opinions and perspectives, are at odds with the basic tenets of deliberative democracy. This is not, however, a reason to completely reject the idea of deliberative democracy. Theorists of deliberative democracy see it as a goal to which we aspire, an ideal that will probably never be achieved; it is, nevertheless, an ideal that can and should serve as a guiding principle (Fishkin, Luskin 2005; Landemore 2012; Mansbridge et al. 2017).

The highly idealized understanding of the process of deliberation advocated by the first theorists of deliberative democracy faces practical challenges on different fronts. Can we really demand the use of strictly "rational" arguments in the deliberation process? Or we should expand the idea of what counts as communication rationality, in order to be more inclusive for diverse citizens and their diverse perspectives, value pluralism, identities, conflicting interest, biases, and imperfections? Is there room in the public sphere for appropriately limited self-interest? Is it possible for all citizens to participate? Theorists of the second generation of deliberative democracy strived to solve the difficulties that the utopian model brought with it, taking a more realistic approach to deliberative democracy and stressing plurality as an ideal (Bohman 1996; Gutmann, Thompson 1996, 2004; Young 1996, 1999; Dryzek 2000; Goodin 2008; Mansbridge et al. 2017; Parkinson, Bächtiger 2019).

Second-generation theorists of deliberative democracy acknowledged the complexity of contemporary societies, value pluralism, the failure to reach consensus, and the need for voting after the deliberation process[5]. They also recognized and took into account various forms of communication and private preferences, the number of people in political communities, and socio-economic inequalities, thus adapting the original deliberative position to real political circumstances and demands. By going beyond a strictly normative theory,

5 Not only because of mere practical urgency to make political decisions at some finite time but also because not all (moral) disputes can be solved by agreement.

deliberative democracy entered the field of empirical examination and tried to solve the difficulties that the traditional and utopian model had brought for practical possibilities of deliberation. For example, an ideal of equality that presupposes that each participant has an equal effect on the deliberative outcome, later theorists interpret as simply "equal opportunity of political influence" (Knight, Johnson 1997: 292). The idea of using exclusively rational argument is seen as too demanding and reserved for a small group of people. There are many important forms of human communication other than reason-giving, more usable to members of relatively marginalized groups and people with less formal education. Story-telling that involves personal experience rather than abstract arguments and rhetoric that can involve humor are some of the most relevant ones (Young 2000). Emotions can also be a significant element of good reasoning in matters of public concern, as is the emotion of compassion (Nussbaum 2001) or empathy (Neblo 2015).

The request for consensus was also mitigated or abandoned. Later theorists found that agreement is often impossible, even under strictly constructed principles (Bohman 1995, 1996; Gutmann, Thompson 1996, 2004). Some have gone a step further, arguing that the full consensus, where everyone accepts the same outcome for the same reasons, is unnecessary and even undesirable (Dryzek 2000). And if consensus cannot be reached, the deliberative procedure needs to be supplemented by a voting procedure (Cohen 1997). This time, however, the input information for the aggregation mechanism are not preferences based solely on particular, selfish interests (as in the free-market economy). Instead, they are formed during active public deliberation, by taking into account the interests and needs of other members of society (Bohman, Rehg, eds., 1997).

Later theorists of deliberative democracy aimed to show that deliberation should not be reserved for a small circle of privileged or educated, who can meet the strictly prescribed conditions set by first-generation theorists, but that deliberative practice should encompass various forms of communication and be part of a wider democratic life. They wanted to emphasize the role that public discourse plays in a democracy and to restore citizens' trust and motivation to participate in political decision-making. This has been described as an "empirical turn" in the era of deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2001).

The findings from numerous empirical studies of deliberation are different or rather inconclusive (Carpini et al. 2004; Fishkin, Luskin 2005; Janssen, Kies 2005; List et al. 2012; Ryfe 2005). Some findings of deliberative practice, embodied in various deliberative institutions, reveal empathetic listening more than persuasion, story-telling more than making formal arguments, and focusing on the personal dimension of issues more than on common good (Dryzek 2007; Polletta, Chen 2013). Participants tend to make (and find persuasive) simple statements of fact or opinion, using more informal form of argument that is less complex than formal, logical models described by the first theorists (Meyers, Brashers 1998). Some findings support deliberative group's ability to reach a decision, arrive at recommendations, or identify areas of agreement and disagreement (Mansbridge et al. 2006), while others claim that exchange

of reasons occurs only after deliberation participants get to know and trust each other, by sharing personal stories about how the specific problem affects them (McCoy, Scully 2002). At the same time, deliberation is claimed to increase knowledge and level of information (Fishkin, Luskin 2005; List et al. 2012), preference structuration (List et al. 2012), and efficacy (Min 2007) which leads to increased political engagement (Harder, Krosnick 2008); and to decrease group polarization under certain conditions (Sunstein 2002) and biases in individual reasoning (Mercier, Landemore 2012). Despite the listed ambivalence of empirical results from deliberative practice, these findings are not as nearly as pessimistic as those obtained outside of deliberative institutions (through polls and questionnaires).

The (non)possession of factual knowledge is very different from citizens' competence to solve political problems, once that information and knowledge are presented to them[6]. Most of the existing studies (e.g. Luskin 1987; Delli Carpini, Keeter 1996; Caplan 2011) cannot show a causal link between the inability of people to answer certain types of political questions and their alleged political incompetence, namely the inability to make the sound choices about issues that affect their lives. This is in part because the design of factual political questionnaires mirror elitism, measuring a type of knowledge relevant for political commentators, but not necessarily the only one suitable to good political choices (Lupia 2006). It is precisely the process of public deliberation that is crucial for citizens to gain new information, revise their views, assume different viewpoints, and collectively develop new ways to comprehend the issues they discuss. The mentioned research does not affect deliberative democracy at all, because they were "measured" in a different way and under different circumstances. Many deliberative institutions work as intended by their designers. They promote carefully organized and scientifically constructed conditions, supportive institutional features, such as balanced information materials, experts on multiple sides available for questioning, facilitation, and sessions with different actors, as well as necessary deliberative norms. Deliberative institutions that are well-designed and well-supported are proving conducive to surprisingly high levels of deliberative quality as well as to opinion change driven by argument rather than by undesirable group dynamics (see e.g. Gerber et al. 2016; Siu 2009, 2017; Warren, Pearse 2008). Various examples with deliberative experiments show that ordinary citizens can contribute to finding solutions to political problems, even those specifically technical (Fishkin, Luskin 2005). This is achieved by implementing institutional designs that compensate for well-known cognitive and emotional biases and give effects that are in line with theory assumptions, as intended by their designers (Warren, Pearse 2008; Siu 2009; Mercier, Landemore 2012; Fishkin et al. 2012; Gerber et al. 2018).

6 There is a clear difference in citizens' competence in the pre-deliberative and post-deliberative phases (Fishkin, Luskin 2005; Fishkin 2009)

The most promising approach for empirical research would therefore seem to be to continue trying to discover the conditions in which deliberative democracy does and does not work well while paying more attention to the question of to what extent the unfavorable conditions could change.

There are various institutional bodies and practices through which we can exercise democratic deliberation. Citizens Assembly (CA) is just one of them. A CA is a body formed by a random selection of citizens, who would not otherwise interact, to deliberate on important issues of public concern. Robert Dahl foresaw the potential of such institutions when he proposed "restoring that ancient democratic device and use it for selecting advisory councils for every elected official of the giant polyarchy – mayors of large cities, state governors, members of the US House and Senate, and even the president" (Dahl 1990: 123).

Experimental Design – Belgrade Citizens' Assembly

Belgrade has been under intensive reconstruction for years. One of the many things that this reconstruction includes is the expansion of the pedestrian zone in Belgrade city center. It has been announced that the anticipated expansion will include about twenty streets around an area already closed to motorized traffic. In the public sphere, different arguments *for* and *against* this project could be heard from various activists and experts. City officials have already announced a plan to reconstruct the city center, despite the various actions, meetings, and protests of unsatisfied citizens, who opposed the expansion of the pedestrian zone in the city center. There was no clear, detailed, and transparent official information about urban change planning. None of the public officials answered the questions and demands of the citizens. For that reason, the issue of expansion of the pedestrian zone in the Belgrade city center was chosen as the deliberation topic of the CA.

Due to the unfavorable epidemiological situation caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, members of the Scientific Committee who organized the CA in Belgrade decided to move the event fully online, using the Zoom platform**.** The Belgrade assembly was attended by citizens from different demographic categories. In terms of age, there were 34.38% of citizens aged 16-30, 56.25% aged 31-60, and 9.38% were over 60 years old. There were 40.63% male and 59.38% female participants. In terms of education, 3.13% of the participants had only primary education, 37.5% had a high school degree, and 59.38% had a college or university degree.

CA included a total of 32 participants[7] divided, with the help of neutral moderators, into four smaller groups with eight participants in each. In each group, there were six-seven "ordinary" citizens, that is, representatives of the population that is *particularly affected* by the possible expansion of the pedestrian

7 The planned sample was 40 participants, but due to the epidemiological situation and online discussion, that number was reduced to obtain sufficient diversity in the sample and enough space for conversation among all participants.

zone – people who live or work in the city center – and one-two "active" citizens (see Fiket, Ilić Pudar Draško 2022), representatives of organizations that have already publicly expressed their views regarding the expansion of the pedestrian zone in the city center project. On the whole, there was 78.13% "ordinary citizens" and 21.88% "active" citizens. Additionally, representatives of the sensitive groups were included[8] (those whose lives and work would be more affected by the extension of the pedestrian zone): parents with small children (up to 10 years), people with physical disabilities, retirees, owners, and workers in facilities located in a defined zone, and workers and managers of cultural institutions (both public and private) such as museums, libraries, galleries, and other cultural institutions.

The "citizens' jury" of both active and ordinary citizens had the chance to hear arguments from various *independent experts* and *political decision-makers*, and ask them questions in return. The CA included three discussions with two panels in between (one with experts, the other with decision-makers). Citizens' task within each group was to exchange arguments and sort through different (and often conflicting) claims, and eventually come up with recommendations for public officials to implement.

Weeks before the debate, the participants received carefully designed and balanced briefing materials that informed them about a variety of perspectives and beliefs in order to familiarize them with the discussion topic. During deliberation, participants were encouraged to explore, comprehend, change, and develop their perspectives, as well as to better assess the perspectives of others. The experts who provided additional information were carefully selected to offer different viewpoints, ideas, and thoughts on the issue discussed. The citizens looked at the relevant facts and values from multiple points of view. They critically assessed the available choices through discussion in which all equally participated, and ultimately worked through the underlying disagreements, antagonisms, and difficult choices inherent to complex political problems. After that, they had the opportunity to question the *political decision-makers*, and to make their own proposals regarding the expansion of the pedestrian zone. In the final, decision-making phase, participants made some conclusions about what they heard and learned during this process. There was no need to pressure participants in the CA to produce a false sense of consensus (agreement). In addition to the positions agreed upon, voting was held to capture all of the participants' opinions, ensuring that both minority and majority perspectives were heard.[9]

8 Participants were selected by stratified random sampling. Although the random sampling can ensure the equal chance of all citizens being elected, oversampling some marginalized groups can increase the likelihood that their voice is heard (James 2008)

9 Even though deliberative democracy is based on a mechanism very different from the *pure* aggregative approach that relies on a system of collecting individual votes (regarded as a private act of expressing individual will or preferences) the two are not mutually exclusive. They can be combined in the political decision-making process and both are very important if applied in a particular order – public deliberation must precede votes aggregation. The reason is that deliberation can support citizens to

The First Discussion

Given that the deliberation process should provide a free space for expressing attitudes, exchanging opinions, asking questions, gathering information, and working together on the policy proposal, we wanted to examine whether this democratic mechanism made this possible. To get answers to some of the questions about the deliberative practice, we will use citizens' statements from the group discussion we had a chance to follow.

At the beginning of the discussion, some participants explicitly supported the idea of pedestrian zone expansion, others were more cautious and skeptical, while some were strongly opposed to it. Nevertheless, from the initial and spontaneous reactions of the citizens in the first group discussion, it immediately became clear that they had a problem with the *legitimacy* of the project decisions. "The problem is the way this is done, not whether it should be done. I'm not sure I have a clear position on whether I need a wider pedestrian zone or not", one participant said.

The problem of legitimacy is usually closely related to distrust in government decisions, which, as previously stated, undermines democratic rule. Moreover, citizens have the feeling that their interests are not taken into account. "I don't trust this government, so I guess that certainly affects my attitude. But, on the other hand, procedurally, I don't see who consulted the citizens, the users of that space, the people who live there, work there... I don't understand how the public interest was determined. That bothers me a lot more. Everything is justified in the name of citizens' interest, but nobody asks the citizens anything about anything".

Regardless of the dissatisfaction with the way the local government treated the citizens in the process of transforming the city center, further discussion among participants led to the recognition of certain advantages and arguments in favor of expanding the pedestrian zone. In the first place, they highlighted the potential environmental benefits. Specifically, they pointed to the improvement in the local ecological environment, stressing that traffic rerouting would reduce noise and air pollution in some streets. Some participants pointed out that it also contributes, in the long run, to the promotion of cycling, pedestrian, and public transportation at the expense of motor vehicles. "We who live and work here experience psychological harassment due to the behavior of certain drivers and the way they park their cars. Those who work here come and go and that's it; the pedestrian zone would be good primarily for the health of the people who live in this part of the city". Further arguments for this intervention were the possibilities for the creation of urban green spaces and tourism (economic) development.

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comprehend the addressed problems, to better understand their interests and the interests of others, and then to come up with more informed decisions – either through collective agreement or through an individual vote (Bächtiger et al., eds., 2018: 21).

We can see how inclusive deliberation between diverse groups of people can bring new perspectives and make them *rethink* their previous views in light of new information. While initially almost everybody accepted arguments about tourism benefits and noise reduction, one participant urged others to *reconsider* what appeared to be obvious benefits. She said: "In my opinion, if we say that the expansion of the pedestrian zone is accompanied by economic and tourism development, and an increase in catering facilities, entertainment facilities, and so on, the issue of noise is being introduced again: it will not be reduced but increased. On the other hand, the benefits would indeed be the reduction of exhaust gases, cleaner air, especially if it is accompanied by the expansion of the green zone". And immediately, the other participants replied: "I live there. The noise coming from the traffic when you open the window in the evening is nothing, it's like white noise. But when drunken people pass by and scream and shout and go waiting for the bus on the bridge, believe me, it's a lot louder".

When the moderator asked for citizens' opinions about who would surely benefit from this project, participants made a distinction between public and private interests, i.e. the interests of certain groups. Most of the citizens agreed that the project will surely benefit young people and caterers. One participant said: "Young people will benefit more than old people. We already have a problem with the ambulance in the existing pedestrian zone. It all needs to be well organized in order to be beneficial for everyone, not just young people. Also, it will benefit people who have a property in the city center, but live somewhere outside the center; because they will be able to rent the property in the center to tourists". Another participant agreed: "Young people will benefit the most... those who are coming to the city center purposefully for fun and parties... there would be no danger of being hit by a car if they get drunk. Secondly, as far as caterers are concerned, it may be alright for those who own cafes and restaurants, but for those who run hotels, it could be catastrophic. Would a foreigner who comes here for a business trip want to walk three kilometers with his luggage to get into one of the many hotels in this area? It would not help the most profitable branch of the hospitality industry. I don't think it's good at all. Older people will have nothing to do here. And not just old people. Our city center is not designed as a part of Berlin around, for example, the Brandenburg Gate, where you don't have a lot of housing. Here, it's a different story".

The debate makes it clear that there is a concern that the center will become inaccessible and difficult to traverse for people with limited mobility (older people and people with disabilities, parents with small kids, etc.), and that the ecological benefit argument is limited and unconvincing. As one participant said: "Increasing the pedestrian zone will not necessarily increase green areas, as we have seen so far in the previous projects in the city".

In debating about whether this project could contribute to the cultural and historical identity of the city, some participants claimed that it will be harder to get to the museums, theaters, and galleries. As one said: "It will be difficult for older people, who visit museums and theaters more often, to get to them. And for disabled people too. So, it doesn't contribute, on the contrary".

Other participants responded that there is always a way to make things work: "Something like that small electric vehicle that already operates in the pedestrian zone can be used for transport. There's no need for massive means of transportation such as buses and trolleybuses".

Participants of the assembly agreed that the issue is not only complex but also nontransparent to citizens. That is why they did not feel comfortable having or giving a clear answer to the specific question of whether they are for or against the expansion. They agreed that the general plan is obscure and that it is unclear how it will affect the already problematic functioning of traffic and lack of parking spaces, as well as what the idea behind the expansion is, who benefits from it, whose life would be made more difficult, and what is the government's vision of Belgrade in the future. As one participant said: "It seems to me that this is why all of us have a problem with this specific issue. We start from a hypothetical situation – if the problem of traffic would be solved... But, the traffic is not the only problematic aspect of this project. That is why it is so difficult for us to imagine an ideal situation, and we are very skeptical about a functional solution".

While considering the legal aspect of the problem, one of the participants, who supported the expansion of the pedestrian zone from the beginning, said: "In the media, I saw some people complaining that they did not participate in the making of and developing this project. Looking at it as a lawyer, I can say that authorities are not obliged to include them. However, I believe that for the sake of greater legitimacy, citizens who live in these streets should have been invited to participate in decision-making. I think that citizens should have been more involved, and this is my main argument against this project".

One of the active citizens, whose organization was already publicly engaged on the issue, said: "I completely agree with what was said earlier. First of all, this is too vague a procedure for carrying out such a major intervention in the city". In reply to the statement that there is no legal obligation for public debate, she answered: "It is only because the planning document is missing. There is a simple procedure and a hierarchy of plans. The project cannot rely on strategy, the strategy is not binding, not in the way that plans and planning documents are. This project does not rely on anything, it came out of nowhere and the authorities use this legal loophole that public debate does not have to be organized, but in fact, the legitimacy of such an intervention must be realized in conversation with citizens, as the [the name of the previous speaker] nicely said... I do not agree with [other participant's name[10]] and think that it is *possible to find a solution for different needs* [emphasis added]. It is only necessary to map those needs together with the citizens. Secondly, I also think that the long-term impact of such an unplanned intervention in the city center is very dangerous, difficult to see from this perspective... Those properties, the value of which will rise, will lead to unseen segregation. Only restaurants that can

10 She was referring to the citizen who earlier in the debate said that it is impossible to satisfy everyone's needs.

pay the high prices and people who can pay the rent will remain. It will thus contribute to the tragic segregation of citizens in Belgrade, which I think is a disastrous outcome".

Other participants went even further in deepening the understanding of the issue at stake. One participant said that if somebody makes such interventions in the city center, it does not matter if you live or work *there* – the focus should be on how it affects other parts of the city. "I once heard from an expert that in a big city, if something is done in one area it has a domino effect on the entire city", she said.

The first discussion revealed that for the majority of citizens, the idea of a wider pedestrian zone *would have been* acceptable if there had been a prior public debate; and if the plan for the city development in the following period had been more transparent. Most of the citizens agreed that those missing steps would have made the project more acceptable. At the end of the first discussion, citizens agreed that they *would* back the project *if* it included ease of movement for those with mobility problems, allowed access to ambulances and fire trucks, as well as if it provided solutions for parking and regulated dining establishments. They also all agreed that the involvement of the citizens in the first, planning phase is not enough and that continued participation is necessary.

Panel with Experts

After the first discussion, citizens from all four smaller groups were brought together in the first plenary session with independent experts. During the panel, there was a lively dialogue between the participants and experts, both on camera and in written communication (chat). They were given an opportunity, through their group representative[11], to ask questions they previously agreed upon. Citizens presented specific issues related to the expansion of the pedestrian zone, became familiarized with experts' views, and heard new information, clarifications, and possible suggestions during a short time.

In the group we followed, the key topics and questions that stood out were sorted into three groups. The first included the question about how should participatory planning process look from beginning to end, and what mechanism would allow project monitoring and modification in line with citizens' experiences. The second group of questions was related to traffic issues and possible solutions: How to solve the possibility of fire trucks and ambulances in the pedestrian zone? How exhaustive should a new traffic rerouting plan be in order to avoid the negative consequences (i.e. traffic jams, etc.) of making a pedestrian zone in the city center? What vehicles would be most suitable for

11 During the discussion participants easily agreed on a representative who will communicate their views and ask questions on which they had previously agreed. There was no need to vote on the most important questions since they ranked them in order of importance based on consensus.

the transport of persons with disabilities and the elderly? How should parking zones for authorized vehicles for residents and people who drive to the pedestrian zone from other parts of the city be regulated, controlled, and monitored? Are there any alternative locations for the underground parking garage, planned to be built in the University Park (urban green space)? Would the new pedestrian zone disrupt traffic in other parts of the city? The third group of questions was about the cost-effectiveness of the project; its financial aspect. Is it responsible from the financial aspect to reconstruct the already repaired Republic Square and install tram rails at the Slavija Square?

We argue that these questions and their range demonstrate 1) citizens' motivation and will to better understand the different aspects of the project in question, and 2) that a deep comprehension of the issue in question emerges after deliberative discussion. Furthermore, the answers and the information the citizens received from experts were to be used for further joint work on their final proposals which were distributed to the decision-makers.

The Second Discussion

The discussion with the experts resulted in useful information and suggestions. "I heard that we need to discourage the use of cars in the city center by, for example, raising parking prices, which would make people use public transport more or to walk. I think it should be done if we want to avoid traffic jams", one participant said.

Another participant stated: "It was very interesting to hear people from different industries, each of them expressed their opinion on this topic and for me, it brought an expansion of knowledge... It was interesting what they were talking about, the Paris model... The introduction of a car-free day in the wider center would be acceptable for me, even an extension to two days, on the weekend, as a pilot project".

One participant replied that he believed such an example existed in Belgrade in the past, with pedestrian-friendly Saturdays: "But people still walked on the sidewalks, where they normally walk, they didn't use streets. So we need to raise people's awareness. That's the only way we can do it. And maybe we could test certain ideas not by doing something and then abandoning it if it doesn't work, because that's expensive, but rather by trying out ideas on certain days of the month". Others disagreed. They argued that one or two days are not enough to see all the possible consequences; when life goes on, various situations happen all the time.

One participant also noticed that, regardless of expertise, it is impossible that one single person could resolve a long series of difficult problems: "It's great that we had a chance to hear these people, but I noticed that their opinions also differ from each other, and I especially think that they didn't take into account, except for two of them, concrete examples of something happening in practice that can bother people. Everyone else started from their general perspective, but there is no common position". Another participant replied

that she agrees with the objectives and that a one-day experiment is a *pro forma* simulation that would not give any reliable indicators. She agreed that it has to be done for a longer period if we want to test how it works. In reply to a participant with whom she disagreed, she said: "I understand the argument about expensiveness. To do this simulation, we do not have to completely replace the public transport route, but to increase the intensity of the trolley at a specific period, as a representative of public transport that is already there. This simulation can be as close as possible and it must last for some time". During the expert discussion, participants heard a valid argument in favor of the idea of slow-traffic streets which they found valid, stating that it is beneficial for all actors in traffic to change their habits.

All participants agreed that during the next session they should propose to decision-makers a longer period of project simulation, which will be constantly followed by feedback from citizens. They also agreed that transparency in decision-making will consequently give legitimacy to democratic decisions. As one participant said: "It should certainly be transparent so that citizens can see it on the Belgrade city's website, the whole project, budget, and work-planning. That way, people would be informed about what is happening in their city".

Another participant said that because older people don't use the internet as much, it may be better if they received all information on a combined utility bill, through certain local media or any other available means in order to communicate with as many interested people as possible.

But one of the participants pointed out that this is exactly the problem and that *very few people are interested at all*. Opposing the assumption that people are unconcerned and unenthusiastic about political issues, another participant replied: "This is a very important point... But I think that people, in general, do have an opinion; they just don't have any faith that they can influence something, decisions... And it is demotivating for all of us to participate in something if we think we have no influence... This must not be an isolated event, but a new completely different approach to decision-making. It has to be established for all processes, so that we, as citizens, can slowly build our confidence to participate in such courses, to acquire knowledge but also to believe that our involvement makes sense... We should keep in mind that this is a long process in which the culture of participation in political decision-making is slowly changing. The government must also make an effort to constantly commit to such a practice...".

Additional concerns were raised by the fact that even the experts did not have a complete insight into the plan either. One participant remarked that everybody is skeptical about whether the mass inclusion of citizens in decision-making may really take place: "Nobody knows exactly what will happen. We are all confused even about the exact outlines of the pedestrian zone, what streets are the boundaries, no one said that exactly". Participants came to an agreement that it is exactly this non-transparency and ambiguity that makes all of them wonder what kind of interests are there at stake, regardless

of whether there are any or not. "That led to the ambivalence about this project", a participant said.

One of the participants said that they need to think about what they want to do *in principle*, and they all unanimously agreed that they want some solutions for traffic problems in Belgrade, not necessarily a new pedestrian zone: "There are some disagreements among us about what that solution should be. But I have the impression that we all very much agree in principle and on some ultimate goal – we all agree on the idea of ecologically sustainable mobility. It may be something we have a consensus about in this group. To pave everything and turn it into a pedestrian zone is a hasty solution that ignores all other problems".

Then another participant replied that maybe it would be more effective to *stimulate* families to act in support of this goal, educate children, organize "green weekends" and smaller events, where people would be encouraged to deal with environmental issues, walk, ride a bicycle, etc. She said that we need a positive approach, not a negative one. Few other participants opposed this idea, saying that, unfortunately, education is a more difficult and longer process than the introduction of some disincentives. But, in the end, they agreed that both approaches could be combined to achieve maximum efficiency.

Before the panel with decision-makers started, participants from the group agreed about the final questions and proposals for public representatives. They wanted *to know more about* the explanations, arguments, reasons, and studies in favor of the expansion of the pedestrian zone, the expected benefits of the expansion, traffic and mobility problems, project funding, and to find out if the pedestrian zone meets the residents' needs. "Decision-makers are not the ones who live and work there, they are not under pressure. Somebody made certain decisions, and citizens have the right to ask why", a participant said.

The atmosphere among the participants was very positive, everyone agreed with the questions that the representative would present in their name to decision-makers. There was clear and visible enthusiasm as citizens looked forward to hearing the reactions to their questions, and they could hardly wait for the next session.

Reflection on Plenary Session with Decision-Makers

After the session with politicians, citizens realized that the plan to expand the pedestrian zone was about to be implemented and that everything had already been decided. Since the time and circumstances did not allow decision-makers to answer all of the citizens' questions and suggestions, there were opposing reactions among citizens to the plenary discussion with decision-makers. Moral, motivation, and enthusiasm have suddenly fallen concerning the possibility that citizens can influence urban events in any way. "It is clear that it's all just a farce... Everything has already been decided and it will always be so. Nobody asks citizens about anything", a participant said (see Fiket, Ilić, Pudar Draško 2022).

But at the end of the discussion, one participant, an active citizen, concluded in a more positive light, stressing that a platform and initiative like this emphasize the importance of participatory democracy: "It is as terrible for me as it is for you. But that doesn't affect my view that this whole process makes sense, it's just obvious that someone else has to be in the place of the decision-maker for this to work. That's my feeling. I just think that we shouldn't tie these things together, because as far as I understand, the initiator of this whole process is not the government, but the Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory. As much as what we have just heard is devastating to me, it speaks about this government and this particular project, but I still think that this process through which we, people who didn't know each other, went through today was great".

They all thanked each other and agreed on their final proposals. Immediately after the assembly, the proposals were presented to all participants to vote on[12].

The design of the assembly itself foresaw those options and proposals with the most votes will be delivered to the relevant political representatives as recommendations and communicated to the media. The goal is to encourage police representatives to take into account the suggestions of citizens, formed as a result of the informative and inclusive debate, when making political decisions regarding the regulation of traffic mobility in the city center.

A Result of the First Citizens' Assembly

Entrusting complex policy decisions to institutions such as the CA involves certain trust in the competence of citizens to make reasonable choices, as well as confidence that deliberation and the process of learning new information may be the cure to ordinary citizens' incompetence and political apathy. It is usually difficult to discuss controversial issues with strangers or people who think differently. However, our findings from the Belgrade CA support the view that ordinary citizens can make reasonable and informed choices, especially when they realize that institutional projects align with their values. The quality of the participants' responses was also very high and there was a positive impact on participants' knowledge (compare to Đorđević, Vasiljević 2022). They used arguments and reasoning to express their opinions and conclusions rather than short and unsubstantiated statements. Participants in the online

12 Each group send their final proposals to all participants. All were asked to rank maximum three proposals: proposals received 3 points for first choice, 2 for second, and 1 for third. Based on independent individual votes, there was a strong preference for keeping the trolleybus, as the cleanest form of urban public transportation in the city in environmental terms (46% of all participants in the CA voted for it). Informing citizens about all the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed project, as well as plan simulations stand out as a basic precondition for trust in decision-makers (39% participants). The announced expansion of the pedestrian zone was perceived mostly negatively, as something that would cause big problems for life and mobility in the city. Micro pedestrian and slow traffic zones are seen as a more relevant and comfortable solutions for a number of different needs (35% of all participants voted for this proposal).

deliberative CA presented reasons more often than personal stories, although they did do that as well. Deliberation also allowed the group to set apart the good arguments from the bad, and to deepen their understanding of the problem that was discussed. We could see that participants more often appealed to general than private interests. During the discussion, they often referred to other groups (older people, people with disabilities, people with small children) with respect and empathy rather than advocating for their own group. While considering the issue of pedestrian zone expansion, citizens in the CA showed a great amount of respect towards the group as a whole and to other participants' arguments, and made no interruptions during the discussion (compare to Fiket,Ilić, Pudar Draško 2022 in this volume). Additionally, in the analyzed debate, we found no evidence that the most informed member (active citizens) led the decision-making process for other members.

Concerning the issue of motivation, we can conclude that deliberation and careful institutional design can motivate people to participate in politics. Before the panel with decision-makers, we saw that, as a result of their participation in the CA, participants in the assembly showed and reported a significant increase in interest in political decision-making that affects their lives, as well as a sense of being informed about politics (see Fiket, Ilić, Pudar Draško 2022 in this volume). We could also see how the diversity of CA participants, as well as the method of their selection, which was conducted with the help of various experts from different fields relevant to the issue under discussion, can lead to more creative decisions than those reached by professional politicians – the political elite. Their closed approach to policy-making which ignores the diverse views that citizens hold, and their general aspiration to secure or expand their own interests, undermines democracy and has fewer chances of benefiting the community.

Conclusion

Considering the vast literature on deliberative democracy practice, it is a real pity that deliberative practice has so far been neglected in Serbian institutions. We could see the encouraging results of CA held in Belgrade. Using the method of qualitative content analysis, our findings from this particular CA demonstrated the capacity of institutional design to empower ordinary citizens to participate in local political practices and led to better understanding of discussed topic. Although the Belgrade CA was conceived as a scientific experiment rather than a real institutional deliberative body (the result of deliberation was not intended to produce binding decisions), we gained some important insights regarding democratic decision-making processes and citizens' abilities. The conditions under which deliberation took place, the inclusion and equality of participants in the CA symmetrically distributed power that enabled people affected by collective endeavors to participate in political practices.

However, deliberative democracy bodies often lack significant influence on policy-making or electoral politics. Despite the wide scholarly interest in the

work of those bodies, to date, their role has been fairly marginal in real-world political decision-making. Although some theorists and practitioners expected that deliberative bodies initiated by universities or foundations and informal groups could influence political decision-making through the media and their impact on the wider public (Fishkin et al. 2000; Goodin, Dryzek 2006) without government backing, most deliberative events have little or no effect on public opinion and the decision-making process. Therefore, it became clear that in order to show its full potential and genuinely influence public policy, deliberative bodies need to collaborate with regular governmental institutions.

New problems require new solutions. We must not see deliberative democracy practices as a naïve hope, but as a feasible mechanism that allows full recognition of the real capacities and limitations of citizens, experts, politicians, and political processes. Although the scope of this study is limited, we can recognize how deliberative bodies such as CA constitute democratic arenas for broadly representative groups of people to learn together, listen and respect one another, deal with complex issues, and make an effort to find common ground on solutions. The design of CAs and other mini-publics can be understood as a set of encouragement systems that promote certain behaviors and dispositions amongst participants over others. Through these and similar institutions, inclusive deliberation and participation prevent the authoritarian rule of a small group of the political elite and politically active people, increases the legitimacy of political decisions, and ensures that the people with different socio-economic backgrounds will be more fairly represented in the political life of the community.

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Deliberativna demokratija – teorija i praksa: slučaj građanske skupštine održane u Beogradu

Apstrakt

U ovom radu ispitujemo da li je moguće unaprediti demokratiju podsticanjem običnih građana da učestvuju u donošenju političkih odluka i da li učešće u deliberativnim institucijama može da učini građane kompetentnijim donosiocima odluka. Koristeći kvalitativne podatke, analizirali smo diskusiju koja se odvijala unutar građanske skupštine (GS) održane u Beogradu, koja je za temu imala pitanje proširenja pešačke zone u centru grada. Ovo je bila prva GS u Srbiji, organizovana kao deo istraživačkog projekta usmerenog na promovisanje i unapređenje inovativnih demokratskih praksi na Zapadnom Balkanu. Cilj je bio da se podstakne uključivanje građana u rasprave od javnog interesa. Pretpostavke od kojih smo pošli su bile da, kroz proces učešća i odlučivanja u građanskoj skupštini, obični građani mogu doneti promišljene i informisane izbore, povećati svoje znanje o temi o kojoj se raspravlja i postati motivisaniji da učestvuju u donošenju političkih odluka na lokalnom nivou. Naša analiza sadržaja diskusije unutar GS sugeriše da je deliberacija pozitivno uticalo na znanje učesnika o temi skupštine. Pokazano je da su građani tokom rasprave koristili iscrpna i složena objašnjenja, a ne kratke izjave, da su bili u stanju da razlikuju dobre od loših argumenata i češće se pozivali na opšte nego na privatne interese. Učesnici skupštine su iskazali značajno povećanje interesovanja za političko donošenje odluka koje utiču na njihove živote, kao i osećaja informisanosti o politici. Na kraju, želeli smo da skrenemo pažnju na izazove i otvorena pitanja koja ostaju – ona koja se tiču pitanja uticaja deliberativnih institucija na političko odlučivanje u stvarnom svetu.

Ključne reči: deliberativna demokratija, građanske skupštine, javna deliberacija, demokratska legitimnost, političko učešće