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CITIZENS' GROUPS AS LOCAL DEMOCRACY ACTORS IN SERBIA**

Resume

The aim of this paper is to highlight the role citizens' groups as democracy actors at the local level of governance. The author uses the statistical data analysis method and available findings related to the local elections' results in Serbia between 1992 and 2022. In the introduction, the author identifies the main assumptions of local democracy as the basis of a broader, society-wide democratization. The importance of local self-government and elections for the lowest instance the vertical organization of power is also addressed. The paper points to the normative framework regulating the establishment and action of citizens' groups on the political stage. In the central part of the paper, results of citizens' groups are analyzed for each election cycle, along with their participation in coalitions and exercise of local authority. The conclusion seeks to answer the research question raised and to provide some recommendation for the empowerment of citizens' groups as authentic local democracy actors.

Keywords: local democracy, local elections, citizens' groups, democratization, local political actors, local authorities

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THE LOCAL DECISION-MAKING LEVEL, THEORY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND “MINOR” POLITICAL ACTORS

In the circumstances of globalization, technological progress and an unlimited flow of information, local political actors and local politics, *in genera*, re-enter the centerstage. These diametrically opposite processes are defined in theory as fragmentation (Rosenau 2003) or as glocalization. On the one hand, these processes lead to the consolidation and transfer to the supranational levels of decision-making, with the simultaneous displacement of policy toward local communities. In developed countries, the focus of reform processes has been on decentralization, which inherently has an inclusive effect on numerous political actors and, through strengthened participation, leads to the re-legitimization of the democratic order (Matić 2012a, 7). Anomalies in the functioning of democracy were noted already in late (Huntington, Watanuki, and Crozier 1975), but the momentum of reforms followed with the end of the Cold War and the strengthening of interdependence. Some authors, like the Nobelist Douglas North, who researched the issue of fiscal decentralization, showed that the total local costs in established democracies have grown to 30% of the total public expenditure by the 2000's (North et al. 2009, 10). These expenditures tend to be the highest in those states whose citizens have expressed the highest level of satisfaction with democracy and a positive attitude to life, coupled with a high degree of social capital (primarily Scandinavian countries). These cases confirmed that in the circumstances of continuous democratic development of local authorities, the central, state authority, relieved of a number of tasks, can also function far better (Matić 2012a, 21). If we look at Serbia and its degree of decentralization and local autonomy in fiscal, political and administrative terms, it is possible to conclude that, by its formal institutional arrangement, Serbia ranks highly and holds the 13th position out of 39 European countries (Marinković and Gajić 2022, 466). This high position, viewed through the lens of political practice, seems undeserved, since local divisional units and councils are heavily dependent on their party headquarters and, in the large majority of cases, ruling coalitions are replicated from the central to the local level (Stojanović 2022).

In broadest terms, local democracy can be defined as a phenomenon that empowers the participatory potential of citizens in politics. It

enhances citizens' influence on policymaking, not only through the election process, but also through direct participation in government. Essentially, this achieves two political goals. First, local policies are more aligned with the interests and aspirations of citizens, thus avoiding the so-called implementation gap, while, on the other hand, citizens themselves feel more satisfied due to their participation in decision-making (procedural utilitarianism) and public debates (for more details on citizens' assemblies and democratic mini-publics as forms of deliberation, see Fiket, Ilić, and Pudar Draško 2022; Anđelković 2023).

Elections are the very “heart“ of democracy, whether they take place at the central, regional or local level. In that context, local elections regulate the system of representation, distribution of power and articulate the collective interests in local communities (Evans 2010, 396; Matić 2012b, 33). According to Marko Mijatović, the distinguishing feature of local elections is that they are the closest to citizens and therefore, citizens best fulfill their interests and everyday needs at this level (Mijatović 2016). By their nature, local elections are fertile ground for election system reforms and a prelude to broader, national-level reforms. In many cases, those reforms did not yield the expected results; thus, for example, the lowering of the electoral threshold from 5% to 3% did not result in greater representativeness or have any impact on the effective number of parties in local assemblies (Kaličanin and Perišić 2023, 189). That experimenting with electoral reforms took place at the local level in Serbia is best evidenced by the fact that the first-time implementation of the proportional system in 2004 was also the only time when the Herr-Niemeier quotient for transposing votes into mandates was applied, with the electoral threshold of 3% (Lončar 2022, 199). At the very beginning, general norms that regulate the status of citizens' groups within the institutional framework in which they act will be presented.

This paper will seek to answer several research questions: Are citizens' groups, as “small actors” capable of actively participating in local policymaking, independently or in coalitions? Are citizens' groups that primarily feature prominent local figures more recognizable at the local level than national political actors? Has the passage of time led to the strengthening or to the weakening of their position in the political life of local communities in Serbia? What is the scale of their influence on the strengthening of local democracy in Serbia, which ultimately leads to wider social democratization? Several research methods are used in this paper, including the theoretical method in order to define

and explain the basic concepts of local democracy, local political actors and local level of decision-making. In the central part, statistical data obtained from the National Statistical Institute and preliminary election results published in the media will be analyzed. Based on this analysis, relevant conclusions, findings and recommendations will be drawn in the final part. The paper has a broad temporal scope, covering the period of thirty years (1992-2022) in order to follow the trajectories in citizens' groups' actions. The latest election cycle 2023-2024 is excluded from the analysis, as it is viewed as a single electoral process that is not finished yet, given that the local elections in late December 2023 were held in 65 local self-government units and that in more than half of them, they will be held in the spring/summer this year.

Citizens' groups are specific political organizations, acting primarily within the local political arenas. From a comparative view, citizens' groups act in numerous political systems, but there are also different forms of institutional regulation that govern their influence in the political sphere. According to the regulations and legislation currently in force in the Republic of Serbia, to establish a citizens' group, it is necessary for at least ten natural persons to enter into an agreement on the creation of a citizens' group and have it certified by court. Unlike a political party, political movement or a citizens' associations (NGOs), citizens' groups are not registered with the Serbian Business Registers Agency and thus, do not have the same legal status. Political movement is very similar to a political party, but the main differentia is that it is not based on shared ideology (members of political movement do not share same ideology, but gaining of political power is common goal). Citizens associations (NGOs) do not actively participate in political life, but are a corrective factor in policy and advocacy processes. In that sense, a citizens' group is more an informal organization which cannot participate in legal transactions, given its lack of status as a legal entity and clearly defined seat, seal and bank account. Nevertheless, although informal organizations, citizens' groups are important actors at the local level and are primarily focused on the promotion of certain local policies. Due to the existence of a large number of citizens' groups, simple rules and procedures for their registration, which are far simpler than for other political organizations, a decision was adopted last year that prevents citizens' groups from joining pre-election coalitions. During the previous election cycles, it turned out that citizens' groups achieved significant election results in local communities and played a significant

role in the formulation of local policies. Some of citizens groups have also existed on national level, given the fact that streamlined procedure facilitate their access to the political arena. Some of examples are “Enough is Enough” (DJB), and the latest is “We – The Voice from the People” (Mi-Glas iz Naroda) which took part in last electoral cycle and passed the threshold for approximately 2%. These citizens groups are excluded from the sample, since the scope of this research is limited to local level citizens groups.

ANALYSIS OF CITIZENS' GROUPS' ELECTION PERFORMANCE IN SERBIA, 1992-2022.

In the first local elections after the introduction of political pluralism and multi-partyism in Serbia, held in 1992, citizens' groups nominated a total of 3455 candidates, which made up one-eighth of all candidates. These elections were based on a two-round majority system and showed low voter interest in the constitution of local authorities, given the low turnout of only some 30% of those registered in the voter list in the second round. In these first local elections, citizens' groups profiled themselves as important political actors in local communities and citizens showed a great interest in political involvement through this type of informal political organizing.

In the 1996 elections for local councilors, 65 parties, 27 coalitions and a large number of citizens' groups proposed candidates for a total of 7670 councilor seats in 188 local self-government units. They even managed to win the majority of votes in two municipalities in the north of Vojvodina – Ada and Bački Petrovac, and to form the local government independently.

In the following local elections in 2000, held in a significantly changed political environment as radical political changes occurred at the republic and federal levels of government, citizens' groups managed to achieve a slightly better result than in the previous elections. They won a total of 258,877 votes or about 5,8% which eventually gave them 310 mandates in 93 municipalities. A large number of citizens' groups also participated in the first local elections held under the proportional electoral system in 2004, which were not held in parallel with the presidential and parliamentary elections. Because of this split timing of national and local elections, local campaigns were primarily dominated by topics related to local community issues. This contributed to citizens'

groups achieving significantly better results than in previous elections. In total, they won 9,9% of the votes, but they participated in the distribution with a total of 542 council seats, which was a better election result by 232 council seats compared to the previous elections. An even better indicator of their growing strength at the local government level at the time is the number of heads of municipalities from their ranks. Given that this was the only election cycle of direct voting for mayors and municipality presidents, it clearly demonstrated the fact that influential individuals who come from the ranks of citizens' groups can play an important role in local government formation and achieve very high election results. Namely, in terms of the number of municipal presidents, citizens' groups ranked second and their candidates won the positions of municipal presidents in no less than twenty-seven municipalities. Collectively, they participated in as many as one third of coalitions that formed the municipal governments.

In the local elections held in 2008, there was a notable increase in trust in political parties and coalitions, as well as a decline in trust in citizens' groups. Citizens' groups nearly halved their performance relative to the previous elections and won a total of 5.9% votes, but still managed to participate in the distribution of mandates with 459 seats (7.3%) in 77 municipalities. The reasons for this decline in trust in citizens' groups can be found in the fact that in this election cycle, mayors, i.e. municipal presidents, were elected indirectly and that strong candidates coming from citizens' groups in such a changed institutional context did not manage to push them toward a better election result.

In the local elections that followed in 2012 and were held in a changed political environment after the tectonic change of government at the national level, citizens' groups succeeded in achieving a result that was close to that they achieved in the previous elections. Collectively, they managed to rank third after winning 6.1% of votes or 434 mandates in total in all local self-government units.

In the 2016 local elections, local movements and citizens' groups continued to record fairly good results, despite the fact that local campaigns featured topics championed by large political parties, which are inextricably linked to broader national issues. This is a direct consequence of the concurrent holding of parliamentary and local elections. Nevertheless, citizens' groups in some local communities passed the threshold and managed to win mandates in local assemblies. One such example is the Assembly of the City of Kraljevo, in which two citizens'

groups managed to win council seats, one with 5 mandates (5.9% of the votes), while the other gained four mandates (5.45% of the votes) (Krug Portal 2023). In the City Assembly of Niš, one citizens' group managed to win mandates. It is the citizens' group "Truly for Niš – Momir Stojanović", which participated in the local parliament with three mandates based on 5.1% of the votes won. In the elections for local representative in the City of Čačak, citizens' group "For more progressive Čačak – dr. Aleksandar Radojević", won slightly below 7% of the votes, which was transposed into 6 mandates. This also re-confirms that prominent individuals and citizens' groups who advocate for local policies can record fairly good election results.

Local elections in 2020 were held in an atmosphere of election boycott by the large majority of opposition parties due to an uneven playing field in terms of election conditions. These elections for local authorities were marked by a changed institutional context, with electoral threshold lowered from 5% to 3%. Yet, a large number of citizens' groups again participated in this election cycle. In some cases, they managed to achieve notable election results and in some, even win a majority in local assemblies (Kojić 2020). For example, in the municipality of Ražanj, election victory was scooped by a citizens' group led by the municipality president, Dobrica Stojković. Despite the above-mentioned opposition's boycott, in the Municipality of Topola, citizens' group gathered around the municipality president Dragan Jovanović prevailed, receiving slightly more than 36% of the votes, while the dominant national SNS party won 32%. In the Municipality of Svilajnac, citizens' group "Predrag Milanović – Svilajnac keeps its future" ("Predrag Milanović – Svilajnac čuva svoju budućnost") which won 44.13% votes, transposed into 23 mandates in the local assembly which has a total of 47 seats. Another citizens' group list "For a better Svilajnac" ("Za bolji Svilajnac") achieved a notable election result after winning ten council seats (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020). Similarly, in the city of Šabac, one citizens' group list managed to receive seven mandates, in the election process that lasted three months in Šabac due to continuous repeat voting at certain polling stations.

In the elections held in 14 cities and municipalities in 2022, citizens' groups managed to record a good election result in some self-government units. For example, in the Municipality of Kula, two citizens' groups "Critical mass – for victory" („Kritična masa – za pobjedu”) and "Kula citizens and our city – united for the victory of Kula" („Kuljani i

naš grad – ujedinjeni za pobedu Kule”) collectively won more than 20% of the votes and four mandates each, leaving behind even large political parties that act at the national level (Matić 2022). And in the Municipality of Kladovo, one citizens’ group also achieved a notable election result. It is the citizens’ group “Movement for Kladovo – Borislav Petrović” („Pokret za Kladovo – Borislav Petrović”) that had a near one-third support of the electorate and won 30.5% of votes and nine mandates. Also, in the elections in Majdanpek, two citizens’ groups managed to enter the local parliament. These are citizens’ group “I refuse to give” („Ne dam”) that won three mandates based on the 10.48% support within the electorate and citizens’ group “It can be different” („Može i drugačije”) which received two mandates with 8.04% of the votes. In the local elections held in 2022, as many as three citizens’ groups managed to pass the threshold and enter the distribution of mandates in Medveđa. The biggest surprise was the citizens’ group “Medveđa can do better” („Medveđa ume bolje”), a first-time participant in the elections, which won 20.5% of the votes and managed to get five mandates in the local parliament. Citizens’ group “For Medveđa” („Za Medveđu”) won 7.29% of the votes, i.e., two mandates, while the citizens group “For the development of Medveđa” („Za razvoj Medveđe”) managed to pass the electoral threshold and win one mandate. In the Municipality of Sečanj, one citizens’ group managed to enter the distribution of mandates. It is the citizens’ group “Vukašin Baćina – for a better Municipality of Sečanj” („Vukašin Baćina – za bolju opštinu Sečanj”) which won slightly over 11% of the votes, transposed into two mandates (Matić 2022).

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIZATION OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND THE ROLE OF CITIZENS’ GROUPS

If we look at all election cycles, citizens’ groups achieved good overall results given that they are not represented at the national level. Collectively, the total number of candidates they nominated in the local elections was always among the top five. Also, looking at the results of all previous local elections, their success in achieving remarkable results is also evidenced by the fact that nearly one out of ten councilors came from their ranks (Jovanović and Matić 2020, 714). This success of citizens’ group is a clear indication that citizens largely aspire and tend to participate in democratic processes at the local level of government,

while also striving to engage politically outside the classic channels of political representation, such as political parties. In addition to those individuals who seek non-partisan political engagement at the local level, situations that party dissidents, as well as individual party factions participate in them have not been uncommon, either. In many local communities, they were often an antithesis of party monopoly and partocracy at the local level of government. Although in some communities, they succeeded in winning the majority in local assemblies, they often tipped the scales, thus boosting their coalition potential. This position frequently gave rise to political defectors within their ranks as a result of exposure to various pressures by dominant political parties in their local environments. These pressures typically came from large parties and party groups in order to constitute majorities in local assemblies. Overall, citizens' groups acting at the local and regional level and primarily advocating for specific local policies in numerous areas enjoy some support of the electorate. They draw their strength mainly through the actions and visibility of prominent individuals in their local communities. Considering that, in their action, they mainly advocate for specific local policies, unlike political parties who act primarily at the national level, citizens' groups are the main promoters of local democracy and local development. Over a longer period of time, it is also possible to observe the trend of constant decline of trust in political parties, which in turn paves the way for citizens' groups' actions. Election legislation reforms aimed at personalizing the local-level elections could certainly contribute to the additional empowerment of citizens' groups, since it transpired that, in the case of direct elections of mayors/municipal presidents in just one, 2004 election cycle, citizens' groups or individuals from their ranks gained strength and took charge in as many as twenty-seven local self-government units. Personalization of elections at the local level would definitely enable citizens to become more politically involved through citizens' groups. At the local government level, citizens' vote was not in unison with that in the national elections, i.e. in some local communities, it was these local actors who won. Even when they did not have such a conclusive election result, citizens' groups were often 'tip on the scales' and achieved significant coalition potential, thus becoming important actors in local politics and participating in the constitution of local governments in some local self-government units. This confirms the thesis that citizens' groups are indeed important actors in local political arenas, with potential to participate in local policymaking

in some local communities. Local self-government reforms and a higher degree of decentralization that would enable cities and municipality to organize themselves autonomously would additionally strengthen the role of citizens' groups and prominent individuals in the political system. Although Serbia has not yet reached such a high level of decentralization, citizens' groups have proved to be an important factor in local policy creation, thus contributing to the democratization of the local-level decision-making. Separate timing of national and local elections could also contribute to the further empowerment of citizens' groups, as local election campaigns would be dominated by the topics that are primarily related to local community development. In that case, individuals organize through citizens' groups and independent from party centers would have an even greater influence on local policymaking. They would become even more important as actors in the promotion of democratic values and ideals. One of the key disadvantages of the simultaneous slating of elections at all levels in the vertical organization of government is reflected in the financial and infrastructural imbalance between the regime and opposition. This imbalance in the material and organizational capacities hinders the opposition's position in the political race, making their position unequal compared to the ruling party's/parties' (Bursać and Vučićević 2021). However, the separation of parliamentary and local election terms in Serbia could lead to lower turnout and abstinence, since there is still no clear awareness among the citizens about the importance of local policies, as well as an overwhelming presence of topics of national importance (Matić 2020). This can also be the result of campaigns that are still largely dominated by national topics in Serbia. On the whole, citizens' groups have in many towns and municipalities profiled themselves as actors with an important role in the formation of local authorities, which shows that citizens are very interested in addressing issues that are present in their local communities and voting for those political options that are present only at the local level of government. Since by its very nature, the local self-government is closest to citizens, this confirms the thesis that citizens' groups acting at the local level can be one of the motors of democratization and the creation of a "robust" democracy that would ultimately lead to a greater political participation also at the local level of government (Barber 2004). Although in terms of formal prerequisites and institutional design, Serbia can be ranked among the European states with a medium level of local autonomy, other political system characteristics, primarily election rules with

closed election slates and one electoral unit largely promote partocracy and dependence of local committees from their party centers on national level. The territorial organization system also supports this thesis, since the entire vertical organization in Serbia is based on the relations between central and local authorities, while administrative regions are a pure form of deconcentration and branches of national administration, with no autonomous competences. The creation of another form of regions, based primarily on economic grounds and reasons, would further strengthen the position of independent candidates and citizens' groups.

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ГРУПЕ ГРАЂАНА КАО АКТЕРИ ЛОКАЛНЕ ДЕМОКРАТИЈЕ У СРБИЈИ**

Сажетак

Рад истражује питање група грађана и њиховог политичког позиционирања на локалном нивоу власти у Србији. У раду се, најпре пружају основне теоријске претпоставке везане за локалне изборе, локалну демократију и локални ниво власти у Србији. У централном делу рада проучавају се резултати група грађана на локалним изборима у протекле три деценије. Показује се да оне могу бити значајни чиниоци у формирању локалних власти и у појединим ситуацијама и њени носиоци. Притом се долази до закључака да истакнути појединци у локалним заједницама могу чинити окосницу промена у локалним парламентима. Као један од великих структуралних дефицита и недостатака, учача се истовремено одражавање локалних и парламентарних избора. То води ситуацији да грађани у највећој мери гласају за оне листе за које се опредељују и приликом гласања на националним изборима. Ипак, то није нужно униsono гласање и многи локални кандидати добијају одређени ниво подршке на изборима. Закључује се да групе грађана могу бити мотори демократизације локалног нивоа власти у Србији пошто су окренуте првенствено ка локалним политикама и питањима локалних заједница. Такође се утврђује да институционални оквир, пре свега изборни систем, територијална организација и једноstepена децентрализација погодују јаком утицају националних политичких партија и на локалном нивоу. Упркос оваквом институционалном дизајну, групе грађана су током три претходне

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декаде показале отпорност и у многим локалним срединама задржала јака политичка упоришта.

Кључне речи: локална демократија, локални избори, групе грађана, демократизација, локални политички актери, локалне коалиције, локалне власти

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